

What Really Matters: Top Traits of an Outstanding Language Teacher

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Abstract-

*“A true teacher is one who,
keeping the past alive,
is also able to understand the present.”*

— Confucius

William Arthur Ward offers a famous maxim: “The mediocre teacher tells. The good teacher explains. The superior teacher demonstrates. The great teacher inspires.” This study is to investigate how far this maxim has applied to the outstanding language teachers from students’ point of view. The data in this study were drawn from 224 anonymous students’ written evaluation from 19 different classes we have taught in the past 10 years. The key words that students used to describe us can be categorized as personality traits, pedagogical methods, and languages and cultures, such as patience and high expectations, good communication skills and making learning fun, a solid grasp of languages and understanding the mindset of both cultures. Our finding indicates that the outstanding teacher does not only possess some unique teaching characteristics but also know how to motivate and inspire students to achieve desired learning outcomes.

I. PERSONALITY TRAITS

“Good teaching cannot be reduced to technique; good teaching comes from the identity and integrity of the teacher.” (Parker, 2007) Everyone can be a teacher, but not everyone can be the best teacher. An outstanding teacher not only knows the importance of using an array of teaching techniques to keep students interested in learning difficult materials but also possesses some unique personality traits that can influence students’ motivation and ultimately lead students to higher and better achievements. There are several personality traits that the outstanding language teachers have in common. They are positive, funny, caring, encouraging, understanding and so on. Throughout our

students’ written evaluation, “patience” and “high expectations” are the ones that were mentioned the most.

“This teacher’s personality was a great help in the classroom.

She put everyone at ease, all the students felt comfortable in class and everyone enjoyed her teaching style. The teacher was candid and open and very helpful with any problem. I

can

honestly say she was one of the best teachers I have ever had

the pleasure of being taught by.”

— Students’ written evaluation

Steve Maraboli (2009) expressed that “Patience is a key that unlocks the door to a more fulfilling life. It is through a cultivation of patience that we become better parents, powerful teachers, great businessmen, good friends, and live a happier life.” Some students can comprehend learning materials with minimal effort, while others may require more explanations and practice that need to be repeated several times. Teachers with patience can be a great help in this situation. Patience allows teachers to foster a stress free and comfortable environment where students can overcome their anxieties over certain difficult subjects and feel more confident and encouraged to learn, which may stimulate greater interest in those students to further their learning. Greater interest in learning can bring students closer to their final goals and ultimately lead to a better life. As one of our students stated that “she had the patience to correct a student and then have the student repeat it over until they said it right and knew the correct way how to convey an idea or thought. She really knows how and when to push students to excel.”

In addition, “students defined caring teachers as those who set limits, provided structure, held high expectations and pushed them to achieve” (Irvine 2001). Teachers with positive attitudes also possess high expectations for success. One of the most commonly words used in our students’ written evaluation is high expectations. Students state that

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this teacher pushes us to try our hardest, demanding and requesting the student's best effort, and constantly challenge us. Gill and Reynolds (1999) report that students of teachers with high expectations learn more as teachers' expectations rise. Teachers' expectation levels affect the ways in which teachers teach and interact with students. In turn, these behaviors affect student learning. Generally, students either rise to their teachers' expectations or do not perform well when expectations are low or non-existent. Expectations are often self-fulfilling, and frequently come with care and consideration. When a teacher expects his/her students to try their best and work their hardest, students know that the teacher cares about them and wants them to fulfill their potential. And they tend to be motivated to do their best. As one of our students' comments "she has the highest expectations of all of the teachers. She expects us to remember words we heard only once or twice before, which is a very good thing. I believe high expectations force us to do our best."

Moreover, high expectations often come with constant encouragement. An excellent teacher doesn't simply set up high expectations for students, and let them struggle on their own. Instead, s/he constantly reminds students that they are on the right track or provides advices that they need to adjust their learning methods as well as encourage them to do their best. When students frequently get the feedback from a teacher regarding how they are doing, what and how they can improve, they know that the teacher really cares about them. Consequently, they will double their effort to meet those expectations, which in turn will motivate students to put their best effort in. As a result, they tend to excel their own goals and rise to higher expectations.

II. PEDAGOGICAL METHODS

"She put everyone at ease, all the students felt comfortable in class, and everyone enjoyed her teaching style. She was creative with classroom activities and often experimented with different methods, which made learning fun. If something was not working, it was no problem to adjust. Every class was enjoyable and interactive."

— Students' written evaluation

Some researchers claim that the typical student's attention span is about 10 to 15 minutes, but most classes last 50 to 90 minutes. It is crucial for teachers to know how to maintain students' attention span and keep them motivated until the end of class time. Based on our students' written evaluation, we do believe that the key to students' attention is through fun learning. Every student has his/her own way of learning and there is no single approach that suits all the teaching and learning situations. Different strategies used in different combinations for different groups of students can improve learning outcomes. Teachers with good subject knowledge and great enthusiasm for teaching always make learning fun by turning monotonous learning materials into interesting classroom activities and know to modify their way of teaching when it does not work out. Like our students said: "she made learning Chinese fun. She was also probably the only teacher that realized that learning this language was a challenge and we did not always understand some of the concepts right away. But she never once rushed through something simply so that it could be done. She always waited until everyone understood."

Another highlight of students' written evaluation is teachers' communication skills. Communication skills involve listening as well as speaking. Verbal communication skill is of the most importance since only through verbal communication that a teacher can pass on knowledge or explain difficult concepts. In language classes, communication requires both excellent English fluency as well as fluency of the native language one teaches. The teacher needs to be the master of both languages in order to teach effectively. In their written evaluation, one of our students summarizes the importance of being fluent in both languages: "This teacher's command of the English language was instrumental in communicating grammar and idiomatic phrases. Her English is excellent, and she is very capable of making difficult Chinese concepts understandable. Also, her ability to understand our point of view when learning a certain topic is unsurpassed, which makes her teaching very effectively."

When people hear the phrase "verbal communication", they think of speaking. However, listening is an equally important skill for this type of communication to be successful. Teachers who listen attentively to their students' questions and complaints are better equipped to meet their individual needs and adjust lessons where necessary. Communication does not only take place by means of words; *non-verbal communication* (or *body language*) is equally

important. Students are also more likely to be receptive when the teacher's body language and tone of voice indicate openness and encouragement. Teacher's non-verbal communication (or body language) often indicates that the teacher really cares about students' progress, which eventually can encourage students to strive to do the best. On the other side, the teacher also needs to be keen to student's body language to know exactly what issues students have and why they are having the issues. If the teacher really attends to the body language of their students, s/he can know when students are bored or confused. And the teacher should adjust his/her teaching accordingly. As one of our students wrote the comment: "She is the kind of teacher that every educator should strive to be. She teaches so well that it's easy to forget that her skills are uncommon. Her grasp of both English and Chinese makes it a simple matter for her to dive into a lecture on any topic we bring up. She also seems to have a thorough understanding of how students learn, or some sort of psychic connection to understand how best to approach each student."

III. LANGUAGES AND CULTURES

Language is a part of culture. When learning a foreign language, learners not just learn the words and grammatical concepts of their target language and the ability to communicate, to read, and to write in their target language. They also get to learn the culture of their target language through the learning process. As noted by Kramersch (1993), "culture in language learning is not an expendable fifth skill, tacked on, so to speak, to the teaching of speaking, listening, reading, and writing. It is always in the background, right from day one, ready to unsettle the good language learners when they expect it least, making evident the limitations of their hard-won communicative competence, challenging their ability to make sense of the world around them." One of the obstacles most of the language teachers encounter is not being able to use English to explain some difficult grammatical and cultural concepts of the target language. Instead, their limited knowledge of both languages causes confusion for some students. As a result, students may lose their motivation to learn the language. Therefore, the outstanding language teachers must have not only a solid grasp of both languages but also a good *understanding of the mindset of both cultures* in order to instruct their students efficiently and effectively.

"This teacher had the most knowledge of American life and

customs which helped in connecting with the students to help in understanding the more difficult concepts of target language."

— Students' written evaluation

Richard Felder says, "The more thoroughly instructors understand the differences, the better chance they have of meeting the diverse learning needs of all of their students." Teaching foreign students a foreign language can pose a great challenge for language teachers in understanding the culture of the students as well. True instruction begins when teachers understand their students. The most important aspect of that understanding is awareness of the different motivations students have toward learning, the different ways they approach learning (which can be the learning styles as well as culture background), and how teachers can influence both their motivations and approaches. Once teachers have better understanding of the students, they can design more effective instruction that benefits all of their students. In turn, the better students understand the strengths and weaknesses associated with their motivations and preferences, the more likely they will learn more effectively. Thus, an outstanding teacher needs to be able to explain any language concepts clearly, should have the superb ability to understand student's point of view as well as their English and Chinese mindsets. As one of our students states "the most learned, the most understanding, the most communicative teacher I've ever had. She clearly understands the Chinese and English mindset and knows where we are, what we are thinking and why we are thinking it."

IV. CONCLUSION

At Defense Language Institute where students are expected to reach beyond a four-year college graduate level after 63 weeks of intensive language learning, teachers must have patience and high expectations, know how to communicate with students and to make learning fun, and have great knowledge of the grammar of both English and target language they teach as well as have a solid grasp of the mindsets of both cultures. Teaching is learning. 10-year Chinese teaching experience not only has sharpened our teaching skills but also broadened our knowledge of both languages and cultures, which has been highly appreciated by our students. As one of our students expressed "arguable our most skilled teacher, always understood students' needs and learning styles, applied the most effective methods of

teaching, consistently maintained the attention of the entire class, had a command of both Chinese and English grammar.”

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