

THE SECRETS OF A GREAT TEACHER

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Abstract

The only two notions that make the difference between people and animals are conscience and education. As we all know it, people were equal at the beginning of their existence, knowing nothing about hate, love, the joy of life or culture. People discovered all these feelings gradually, through experience and education. We all wonder: "What makes a good teacher?". Nowadays, this question concerns all the people involved in the process of education: young teachers, old and experienced teachers, pupils, students, parents, grandparents, ordinary people and ministers. They all share an interest in this mystery. Several other questions may be added: "How were teachers 50 years ago?"; "Why are young teachers better than old teachers or vice versa?" The list may continue in various ways. Some people may argue that diligence, hard work and a realistic approach are a must for being a great teacher. Our paper shall approach and discuss such ideas as presented above.

Key words: great teacher, reflexive approach

1. Introduction

Many centuries ago, a wise man named Aristotle said that *the man is by nature a social animal*. Scientifically speaking we are animals, but the only two notions that make the difference between people and animals are conscience and education.

We all asked ourselves: "What makes a good teacher?". In several articles and studies, scholars such as Jeremy Harmer or James Scrivener have wondered about the secrets of a great teacher. Nowadays, this question concerns all the people related to the educational system: young teachers, old and experienced teachers, students, parents, grandparents, ordinary people and ministers. They all share certain questions. Several other questions may be added here: "How were teachers 50 years ago?"; "Why are young teachers better than old teachers or vice versa?".

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Some people may argue that diligence, hard work and a realistic approach are a must for being a great teacher. Our paper shall approach and discuss such ideas as presented above.

The secret of a great teacher is, as some people may say, *practice*. We need to practice teaching more and more in order to become great teachers, work more on our skills, teaching methods, teaching strategies, etc. The secret cannot be discovered in dictionaries, web pages or books. The secret of a great teacher may be revealed through words such as *hard work, ambition or desire*. Some other people might say: a great teacher is great from the very first day of his existence. Nevertheless, this mystery of education will always remain a philosopher's stone, a mystery unsolved in the minds and souls of the next generations.

2. A great teacher should be similar to a sphere

2.1. Defining the sphere

People have always tried to find the secret of perfection, the perfection of nature, the perfection of wildererness, the perfection of colors and contrasts, the perfection of our daily life and jobs. Our existence is marked by a continuous struggle to find / discover the perfection that lives around us. Nevertheless we cannot achieve or discover this perfection. As most people know and admit it, divinity is the absolute symbol of perfection. But besides divinity as a symbol of perfection there is also a well known geometrical figure, which is famous for it's perfect and peerless shape: *the sphere*. Yes, the sphere is a symbol of perfection! According to the *Wikipedia free dictionary* "the sphere is a perfectly round geometrical object, in three - dimensional space (length, width and depth)". The perfection of a sphere is also followed by us, the human beings, by young and old teachers, willing to give a better shape and quality to our work. Teachers in their struggle for control and transformation of education try to give a better appearance to their work. They slowly follow the sphere's perfect path and shape. Jeremy Harmer in the first chapter of his book "How to teach English"² describes, by means of answers to several questions, the characteristics of a good teacher. According to Harmer, a good teacher should, first of all, love his job. Although he may feel terrible now and then, he needs to put on the happy face when appearing in front of his students. A bit of dedication and passion can always yield better results, not just in teaching but also in any other situation. A great teacher, similar to a sphere has several qualities, not just professionally but also socially speaking. Here are some qualities which a good teacher should possess.

² Harmer, Jeremy (2001). *How to teach English*. Essex: Edinburgh Gate, p. 2.

A balanced personality

A teacher must be able to interact with any student, with extroverts and introverts, with hard working and lazy students, motivated and non - motivated students. He must keep his balance and calmness in any situation, no matter what happens.

The sense of justice

In the eyes of a teacher all the students have the same rights. A teacher must not create personal differences between his / her students. The professional differences are admitted because, as we know it, not all the students have the same knowledge and potential. A good teacher must have an equidistant attitude in the educational process between himself / herself and the students.

General knowledge

Students can always ask any sort of question. Of course, the teacher is not a living encyclopaedia and he cannot immediately provide any information for his students. But, ideally speaking, a teacher must know a bit of everything. A great teacher can easily speak about society, psychology, methodology, politics, history and he can easily create connections between all of these notions.

Devotion

In order to surpass all the bad moments in the classroom, a good teacher must love his / her job and the students. Even if the students are rude or not so motivated, a good teacher knows his / her objectives and what he can do for the students. If the teacher is devoted to the teaching activity, then everything may develop in a positive manner, no matter what. In order to be successful, a teacher must keep moving forward.

Participation in extra curricular activities

Scrivener³ said that in order to keep their motivation and teaching qualities wide awake, teachers may participate in conferences and teaching seminars. They may write articles in journals, books, learn new approaches to teaching or just read literature on teaching.

Good manager

A good teacher may organize easily activities in and outside the school with his students or with other teachers, without being afraid of failure.

A strong but not too strong emotional attachment to the students

³ Scrivener, Jim (2005). *Learning Teaching*. Macmillan, p.372.

First of all, a teacher is a normal person, like any other people. He eats, drinks like all the other people and students have to know that a teacher is not a half man-half God creature, but rather a normal person, well educated and trained in his field.

On the other hand, we cannot identify the specific, absolute characteristics of a bad teacher. A weak teacher is the result of a weak qualification, laziness, boredom. Of course, a bad teacher is in opposition with all the characteristics described in the lines above. A weak teacher may be also the result of lack of self confidence. Here are some characteristics of a weak teacher.

The talk-talk loop

Described by Scrivener⁴ and Harmer⁵, the talk-talk loop refers to the teacher's talking time. A good teacher shouldn't speak too much in the classroom. He should give his students the opportunity to practice and grasp the language during the lessons. When a teacher is trying to explain a particular grammar or vocabulary information he needs to pay attention to the attention of his students and to his/ her talking time. A weak teacher doesn't care too much about the students and their comprehension. A weak teacher speaks, explains different pieces of information without seeing for real the level of attention of the respective students.

Arrogance

For sure, we all dislike those teachers who see themselves as living Gods on earth. A weak teacher doesn't have the patience to listen to the thoughts of a student. He/ she listens only to what he / she really wants to hear. Students are just pawns in the eyes of an arrogant teacher. In fact, an arrogant teacher is not a teacher at all. An arrogant teacher may work better in an obscure, ordinary office, without interacting for real with several people at the same time.

No funny and positive attitude

A weak teacher does not encourage the students through the learning activity. He / she does not create a pleasant atmosphere during the English language lessons. This kind of teacher enters the classroom, sits most of the time at his desk at the front of the classroom and does his job without looking upon other aspects of the classroom. When the bell announces the end of the lesson, he leaves the classroom without saying almost anything. That is totally wrong. He/ she does not entertain the students. This kind of teacher is rather boring and static.

⁴ Scrivener, Jim (2005). *Learning Teaching*. Macmillan.

⁵ Harmer, Jeremy (2001). *How to teach English*. Edinburgh Gate: Essex.

Singing, drawing, less writing as approaches to student learning and extracurricular activities (practical review)

Generally speaking, the student's judgement regarding the teacher's status is as sharp as a knife. Most of the students are against weak or average teachers and they can easily identify the differences between a good or a weak teacher. On the one hand, "A good teacher is self-confident regarding the information taught", some may say. On the other hand, "A weak teacher seems more rigid", some might say. A great teacher is the result of educational achievements. We asked several students from the elementary and secondary school the following question: "What are the qualities of a great teacher?". They gave us several answers.

A great teacher should be honest, calm and funny. (Cristi, 4th grade);

A great teacher mustn't shout at us. He should explain all the small things. (Loredana, 6th grade);

A great teacher should be tough but nice. (Melisa, 6th grade);

With the help of a great teacher our notebooks should be clear and luminous as diamonds. (Alisia, 8th grade)

Besides the student's judgement regarding their teachers, extracurricular activities are quite important in the educational process and in the relationship between a teacher and a student. Extracurricular activities may take many forms. Taking private music lessons or taking part in scouting may be seen as a different, non-formal educational activity. According to Tom W. Cadwallader,⁶ extracurricular activities "have been shown to have a beneficial effect on academic performance and to diminish the likelihood of student's dropping out of school".

In the following lines we tried to demonstrate through a short questionnaire the importance of singing, drawing, moving, speaking as an approach to the extracurricular activities. The questionnaire was applied on more than eighty students from the elementary and the secondary school. The results may be relevant for any English language teacher.

A teacher gathered all his students outside the classroom and organized them into a circle. Then, the teacher entered in the circle. He stood near his students and was equal to them. He was having the same rights as his students. He gave his students several sheets of paper on which there was

⁶ Cadwallader, Tom, Wagner, Mary (2003). *Participation in extracurricular activities*. North Carolina Central University.

written: “What would you like to do in our lesson? Would you like to a) sing / speak?; b) draw; c) learn more practical things?; d) move more; e) write less; Do you have any suggestions?”.

About 45% of the students said that they would like to sing and speak more during the English language lessons. Speaking is useful in the classroom. More speaking and less testing is an important characteristic of the modern teaching approach. Students need to grasp the language, the grammatical patterns. By speaking, by listening more to English songs, students can develop not just their vocabulary and communicational skills but also their self confidence and the pleasure of speaking English. As Jeremy Harmer said, through speaking “ the teacher can see the progress and the participation of the students”⁷ in the classroom. But of course, a teacher needs to pay attention to his own role in the speaking activity. He needs to correct his students properly, stand back and leave the speaking part more for the students and less for his own opinions and comments. Besides the typical lessons, the teacher can organize a song competition for Christmas, Easter or other similar events. The teacher can also organize debates for the intermediate level students.

From a different perspective, 27 % of the students said that drawing is an important activity during the English language lesson. This kind of activity is more relevant for primary school students than for secondary school ones. Through drawing, elementary school students can easily learn the numbers, the seasons, animals, flowers, nouns, adjectives etc. As a sort of extracurricular activity, the teacher can organize artistic clubs for those students who are keen on drawing. It is well known that very young students have a lot of energy. They can consume this energy through movement. How can they use this energy during the English classroom, some people might ask? Drawing is related to movement, to the kinesthetic learning and intelligence. In conclusion, drawing may be a good solution to the question above.

Some other answers revealed the fact that 13 % of the students would like to write less. Some students simply do not like writing at all. They would like doing anything else instead of writing tons of pages. What can they do instead? They can move, sing, listen to songs, watch movies or cartoons in English. For young students, cartoons are a good way to learn English. For instance a teacher can organize a movie club. He can watch English or American movies with subtitles together with other students and, at the end of the movies, he may ask his students several questions in English about the movie, in order to check comprehension.

⁷ Harmer, Jeremy (2001). *How to teach English*. Edinburgh Gate, Essex, p. 88.

The option “more practical activities” was selected by only 10 % of the students. Unfortunately, as the results clearly proved, writing more is not so important in the eyes of students. As a solution to the “practical activities” problem, the teacher can organize outdoor lessons, hiking, debates outside the classroom.

Only 5% of the interviewed students said that writing is more important in the educational process than speaking. Traditional teaching approaches imply a lot of writing. Nowadays, young students do not have the patience to sit down too much and listen to a teacher. They need to develop what God gave them: strength, joy, intelligence, friendship. They need to jump more, laugh, calculate more by using their brain and not calculators. They need to remember words by using their vocabulary and their real dictionaries. A good teacher needs to pay attention to the writing skills and remember that besides writing, speaking is an essential part in a classroom activity. For instance, in order to give a better “shape” to their writing lessons, teachers can organize a creative writing contest, spelling competitions. He can ask his students to write an essay together with other students. Maybe some students do not feel comfortable writing something alone. For instance, if the teacher asks five students to write 100 words about friendship those students with low self-confidence may gain more self-confidence by writing the text together with other students. Speaking more, writing more, moving more or writing less according to the student’s needs are important aspects in the classroom and they are also good approaches to understanding student learning. From a different point of view, a teacher needs to organize and attract his students in as many extra activities as possible. These activities develop emotions, intelligence and the body of students in various ways. Speaking is more important in daily life, singing and drawing can develop the student’s imagination and more practical activities can develop not just their mind but also their body. Only in this way can education be understood and seen differently by students. Students need to develop their potential and what God gave them. In the same manner, teachers need to be aware of this fact. Unfortunately, teachers focus rather on what the students are forced to learn. The school does not have to be a place where students are forced, obliged to do something. A school needs to be a temple of education, a place where education interacts with joy and friendship.

Conclusion

Being a great teacher is not an easy mission. It requires a lot of hard work and several qualities. It seems impossible. In fact, it is rather hard. But, it is not impossible! Through the lines of this article we tried to create a brief theoretical and practical description of what it means to be a great

teacher. Besides, we have tried to describe the importance of extracurricular activities and their results as an approach to student learning. We have also described some well known defects of weak teachers and their most common mistakes during an English language course. A good teacher needs to pay attention to the needs of his / her students and listen carefully to their thoughts. In order to give a better shape / result to their work, teachers need to bring always new things in the classroom and they have to respect all the qualities mentioned in the lines above. A great teacher lives forever not just in our minds, but also in our hearts. Just like a sphere, a great teacher is smooth and has no huge imperfections. A great teacher needs to play the role of a friend in front of his students. At the same time he needs to draw a very thin border between his personal life and his professional life. Nobody wants to be too personal in his professional life or too professional in his personal life.

Before entering a classroom, a teacher needs to be aware of the fact that he is a normal person, just like anyone else. A great teacher is not just a prompter. A great teacher knows his students not just as a teacher, but also as a parent. He needs to play the role of teacher and parent at the same time. Maybe one hundred years from now the educational system will change. Students will change. Technology will certainly change. But, the clear heart and mind of a great teacher will always remain the same, beyond the sands of time.

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