



## What makes a teacher special?

**Paul Bress** *researches the qualities we should be aspiring to.*

In recent times, the focus in the ELT classroom has moved more and more towards learner autonomy, and consequently away from the teacher. The teacher is no longer the fount of all wisdom. Teachers have become 'facilitators' whose job is to create the right conditions for learning. This, combined with the increasing momentum of CALL (Computer Assisted Language Learning), could mean that teachers are in danger of becoming increasingly redundant.

As with all trends, however, there also seems to be an opposite view. Penny Ur warns of the dangers (and, indeed, hypocrisy) of forcing students to be independent; C Crouch suggests that students like teachers who put on a show; Jeremy Harmer made an important point when he said that the nurturing of learner independence makes teaching more difficult, and the teacher who is able to do this even more special.

While the role of the teacher is being discussed, though, surprisingly little has been written on what actually constitutes a good teacher. Apart from Nick Owen's article on teaching excellence (ETp Issue Thirteen), more has been written on what a good teacher isn't. There have been two articles in ETp on this subject - How to be a boring teacher, by Luke Prodromou in Issue Eleven, and The teacher from hell, by Paul Bress in Issue Eight - and Julian Collinson defines 'really rotten teachers' as people who:

- insult and patronise students over a long period of time
- see themselves as omniscient
- are extremely critical of students
- are always in 'lecture mode'
- never consider changing teaching style
- don't realise they're bad teachers (and wouldn't care anyway)

### A survey

Against this background, I was curious to find out what students and teachers considered to be the qualities of a good or, indeed, a special teacher. I had no hypothesis or preconceptions. I distributed the simplest of questionnaires, namely:

*Write down the five things which, in your opinion, make a teacher special.*

The questionnaire was completed by 40 adult students of many different nationalities, and 20 experienced teachers.

The bar charts on the next page show the six most common comments made by students and teachers, and it is interesting to note how similar the responses were, with a slight difference in emphasis.

Students (who were both articulate and keen) tended to stress the caring nature of the special teacher, while teachers focused on the ability to give individual attention. Both affirmed the importance of the teacher's role in enthusing a class, and of turning the classroom into a rich learning environment; both referred to the importance of being flexible and of

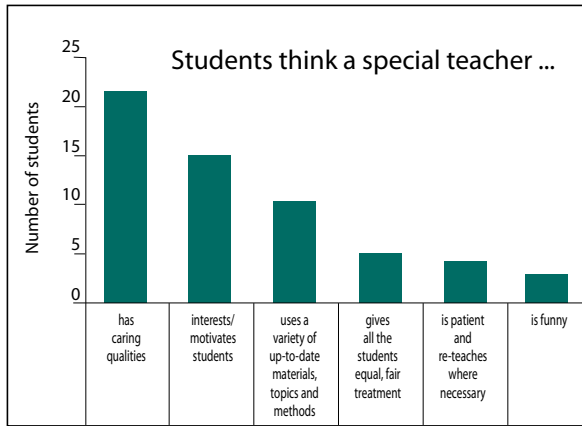
*Surprisingly little has been written on what constitutes a good teacher*

adapting the lesson when necessary. Finally, both considered humour to be important - but not as important as the previous points.

### Teaching observed

To add some weight to my research. I observed four highly experienced teacher trainers (while they taught general English) for 90-minutes each, and noted down all the aspects of their lessons which I would describe not as merely good but as special, ie the kind of teaching which goes beyond the call of duty.

Now clearly this kind of observation is qualitative and subjective rather than quantitative and objective.



Moreover, it involved just one person (me!) observing and evaluating.

However, I felt that alternative methods of gathering data would also be flawed. For example, doing something more objective, such as mapping interaction patterns, would probably have cast little light on the qualities of a special teacher. Sharing out the responsibility of subjective evaluation (eg by videotaping the teacher and showing the film to a number of observers) would put more pressure on the observed teacher and render the teaching/learning experience less authentic.

I therefore decided to carry out my original plan, with the specific aim of trying to identify any common threads of 'specialness'. I started with a blank piece of paper and, again, no preconceptions.

My conclusion was that the lessons demonstrated an ability on the part of the teachers to exemplify not only all the criteria mentioned in the results of the survey, but other qualities too. In my opinion,

the key additional qualities were:

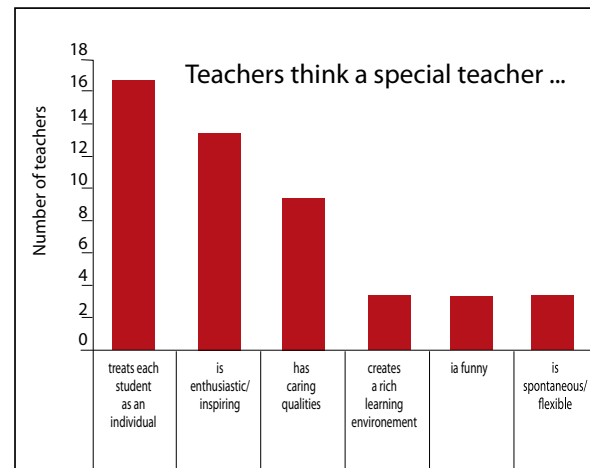
- an extraordinary clarity of communication (without being machine-like)
- an ability to make the most of every learning opportunity
- a finely-tuned sense of how to teach vocabulary
- an awareness of what is going to be difficult for students to understand or do, and the ability to preempt problems

The following traits were not quite so ubiquitous, but seemed to me to add that special quality to the teaching: flexibility of voice, profile, and pace

- the empowerment of students through praise, elicitation, and relinquishing control
- an ability to link lessons, or parts of lessons
- an ability to teach more than just language
- an awareness of the particular problems faced by students of different nationalities

Finally, there were certain qualities and practices which struck me particularly in some of the lessons I saw, eg leaving on the board a crystal clear written record of the language covered in the lesson. Clearly, different teachers bring different qualities into the classroom, and one of the elements of being 'special' is that each one of us is unique, and displays certain unique individual characteristics.

Certainly, one clear conclusion I reached was that teachers do indeed still play an important role in student learning, and that there are teachers who are 'special'.



### Recognition

At the time of writing, the UK government is considering changing the salary structure of teachers to reflect performance. In particular, the Ministry of Education seems to want to reward excellence in the classroom - so that excellent teachers do not leave the profession. Few people would argue that



there is a considerable difference in teaching ability amongst teaching staff in all institutions. But should 'special' teachers be rewarded accordingly? And if so, according to what criteria?

That particular debate is not one I want to continue here, but perhaps there are more relevant and practical ways these individual qualities could be recognised in the workplace. For example, where a particular teacher is known to be particularly good in certain respects, others could be encouraged to observe their lessons with a view to improving those aspects in their own teaching. And simply observing other people teaching on a regular basis can itself be beneficial.

The more emphasis we put on the importance of teaching excellence, and the qualities that this entails, the more likely it is that teachers will be encouraged to improve their own skills. What a difference it would make if all teachers shared that specialness which involves constantly "firing on all cylinders"; communicating clearly, maximising learning, and, last but not least, offering a genuinely caring, selfless presence.

Collinson, J 'How to be a really rotten teacher' Modern English Teacher January, 1997

Crouch, C 'Performance teaching in ELT' ELT Journal May 1989

Harmer, J 'Taming the big I: teacher performance and student satisfaction' ELT Journal October 1995

Ur, P 'The learner-centred classroom revisited' Practical English Teacher December 1990

**Paul Bress is a teacher and teacher trainer at Hilderstone College, Kent, UK. He is also an assessor for the RSA/UCLES scheme. He has published many articles, contributed to TESOL's New Ways series, and written books for Cornelson. His main areas of interest are learner independence and interdependence.**

**English Teaching Professional**

January 2000 - Issue Fourteen