

Teaching philosophy

To teacher is to touch lives!

Introduction

I learned from my teachers of 20 years as a student, most of whom influenced my life, and from my experience of being a teacher for 20 years what kind of teacher most students like and admire from those who influenced my life and from my own experience. So, my teaching philosophy is based on my observations of my teachers, my own teaching experiences at universities in China and my teaching experience at the ELC of BYU, and my cultural background. It might be, somewhat different from other cultures, but I do not think there is a big difference in basic teaching philosophy from culture to culture. I believe a teacher has certain responsibilities to teach professionally. The students, on the other hand, have their specific responsibilities to be good learners. Then, the teacher and the students can work together as a harmonious group to help each other to fulfill the goals of teaching and learning. Qualities of being a good teacher and qualities of being a good language learner, and examples will be discussed.

Qualities of a good teacher

In order to understand what makes a good teacher, we should first understand what a teacher is. A teacher, according to the American Heritage Dictionary, “is someone who teaches”. He is “someone who imparts knowledge or skill to, or to cause to learn by examples and experience.” Han Yu, an ancient Chinese ideologist said in his *On*

Teachers, “teachers are those who impart moral standards and academic knowledge to their students and disabuse/dispel doubts” (师者所以传道授业解惑也—韩愈《师说》).

Goal

A good teacher always has a goal in his professional life. It is very important for a teacher to know who he is and what he wants to achieve in his career life. It is a great help for a language teacher to be a fluent, accurate speaker of the target language, but this alone does not guarantee that he will become a successful language teacher. Teachers, like everyone else, have many talents, abilities and skills and should learn to make the best possible use of whatever talents and capacities they are blessed with. Once someone decides to be a professional teacher, it is important for him to make his career goal and try to achieve that goal throughout his career life.

Motivation

A good teacher knows why he chooses teaching as his career. He understands that not everyone can be a qualified teacher. Once he understands why he has chosen teaching as his career, he has the motivation to make efforts to be a good teacher. This motivation drives him to try his very best to help his student.

Cultivating students' learning motivation

A good teacher makes efforts to motivate his students to make study a pleasure rather than a burden, or a stressful task. He knows that learners need motivation as well. If the learners already want to learn, it means that they have intrinsic motivation. When the learners are lack of intrinsic motivation, he knows how to motivate his student by making efforts to give encouragement to those who are making real effort and as well as the top students in the class. A good teacher is patient with those with difficulties in learning and

understanding. He is always positive even when he has to correct his students. He makes them feel safe and comfortable in his presence. He helps his students build their self-confidence instead of making them lose it. He does not ever make his students lose face, or “make a student feel stupid” (Brown, 2001: 68).

Sensitivity

A good teacher knows his students individually; knowing them by names, preferably starting from the first week of the new semester. Students will be happy and would love to work together with the teacher who calls them by names the second time they have his class. A good teacher is sensitive and sensible to each of his students’ feelings, their different backgrounds and their individual needs. Challenges are good and important, but it might scare the students too. So it is important for a teacher to create some special activities that may help the students feel safe. If possible, a teacher could involve his students in decision-making, which can help the students to engage in the course more deeply. A good teacher is always sensitive to the different habits and cultural background of his students, especially if he teaches a group of international students. He is sensitive to his students’ special customs and respect each one’s culture and religion. For example, he will never ask a student from a Moslem country to tell the rest of the class anything related to pigs, and it will be even better if he does not discuss pigs in his class if he has such students.

Responsibility

A good teacher knows what his responsibilities are as a teacher and makes his students willing to take their responsibilities as well. He does not only impart knowledge upon his students’ minds, but also teaches them moral standards that will help them establish their

righteous and healthy attitudes towards the outside world and themselves. He helps his students to become good language learners who love the language they learn, the culture and customs of the language.

Expertise

It is important for a teacher to be an expert in his field and know what to teach and how to teach. But it is also important for a teacher to know that many really good language teachers are those whose own proficiency of the language is not perfect. Most foreign language teachers are non-native speakers of the target language they teach and they do have some limitations in handling the target language like the native speakers do. However, it could be true that because of their own language limitations, they usually understand their students' difficulties and needs better than the teachers of native speakers of the language do.

The foreign language teachers should also know the culture, the customs and the history of the country where the target language is spoken because "Whenever you teach a language, you also teach a complex system of cultural customs, values, and ways of thinking, feeling, and acting." (Brown, 2001, p. 64). It is not the expertise the FL teachers have in their field like the expertise other teachers have in their disciplines that set them apart from other teachers. It is the knowledge they have about the culture, the customs of the culture, the values, standards, the way of thinking and the unique behaviors of the culture that make the FL teachers different from teachers of other disciplines.

Responsive

A good language teacher is very responsive to the current trend of the FL teaching and learning processes and research throughout the world. He has the goal and the

objectives and specific focus on each class in his mind and makes every effort to fulfill them. He never goes into a class without good preparation even it is the course he has taught for many years and knows the material very well. He knows that the material is the same but the students are not, so he has to focus on different content and use different approaches to teach different students. He values his students and his peers' feedback to his teaching and makes it an opportunity for him to improve and to become a better teacher.

A good language teacher is also responsive to the needs of each of his students. Because of the different background, personalities, learning abilities and skills, students learn in a variety of ways and strategies. It makes the class even more difficult to teach when the students have various cultural backgrounds. One strategy may function well for one group of student but not work for another. One way might be acceptable to the students of one cultural background but not to the other. Therefore, the teacher needs to be aware of these differences and respond differently according to the different needs of his different students.

Humility and honesty

It is better for a language teacher to say "I don't know, but I'll find the answer for you" rather than pretending that he knows everything but gives his students wrong answer or uncertain explanations. He never tries to avoid answering his students when they ask questions that he can't answer immediately. It is preferable to admit that he does not always know all the possible answers to all the questions his students ask him.

It is also a good quality for a good language teacher to be honest with his limitations and failures. When being asked by his students if he has always been good at

the target language or successful in his teaching, it is proper to admit his previous failure rather than try to hide it. It only makes the situation worse if we fail but pretend that it never happens and never try to learn from our failures. There is a famous Chinese saying “failure is the mother of success”. Nobody is born to be a winner and most people experience failure some time in their life. It helps the students by letting them understand the failures are meaningful if we will learn from them.

Morality

A good teacher is an example to his students and never comes into the class with an untidy way or wearing clothes that is not appropriate for the class. A good teacher teaches not only what is in the textbook, but also the moral standards by showing the students his example. He will gain his students’ respect because “action speaks louder than any words” (Chinese saying).

Diversity

There should be no such sayings that one way is better than the other in language teaching. Whether a teaching principle or strategy is good or not depends on whether it helps to achieve the goal of the class and meets the students’ needs or not. A good teacher works on developing different approaches and tries to figure out which is good for a certain group of students through either practicing them in the real class or asking his students for suggestions. The class will be very boring if a teacher uses only one approach or only one activity throughout a class although it may be a very interesting activity itself. There are many good approaches, principles and strategies for FL classes but it does not mean that a teacher can use any one in any class. A good teacher spends time on working and finding certain ways work better for certain groups of students.

Flexibility

Flexibility is very important for a language teacher to make his class and teaching more meaningful and efficient. It allows the teacher to know his students' needs better and to adjust the teaching pace and content, sometimes, even teaching strategies and principles.

Flexibility also means that a teacher can change his lesson plan according to the students' special needs on a certain occasion or for the situation that he cannot control. The change may be "unexpectedly successful" (Evans, 2007, in class). For example, new information and communication technologies could be very helpful for a language teacher but it could also be a pain if it is abused. It will be very embarrassing if a teacher goes into his class without a substitute plan. He might have made a very careful lesson plan and will use the overhead projector, but finding that the over-head projector he plans to use is broken. Without the second plan of the lesson, he might be put into a situation that he would like to escape from the class immediately.

Discipline

Discipline is an important matter for all the teachers and it is worth giving some thought. A teacher should think about the following questions before he goes into the class: How do I maintain order in my class? Should I punish the misbehaved students in my class? How do I do it if a punishment is necessary? Each school has certain disciplines, but the teacher is the only one who needs to decide what to do in a certain situation. He has to think what his own attitudes are and decide what is acceptable and what is not, and then work out a way that he will react to different misbehaviors. He may draw a list of "does" and "don'ts" rules for the class and let the students know them at the very first class. It is the teacher's responsibility to make the rules thoughtful and fair and it is important for him

to let his students know why he draws the rules. When the students understand the reasons for the disciplines, it is easy for them to follow.

Again, the teacher's example speaks louder than any words. If a teacher wants his students to come to class on time, it is important for the teacher to come on time always. If he expects his students to respect him and to respect each other, it is important for him to show his respect for his students. It is not proper, nor acceptable for a teacher to speak to his students in a sarcastic way at any time under any circumstances, or to imply that his students are stupid. If he does not want his students to do certain things in the class, it is important that he never does them himself.

Assessment

Assessment is like an engine that drives students to learn and drives teachers to teach as well. An assessment does not only help the students to focus on their learning, it also helps to measure what the students have learned. Testing might be the most popular assessment but not the only way to measure whether students have learned what they are supposed to learn and how much.

A good teacher is not afraid of employing alternative assessment to make his teaching more efficient. He could use the alternative assessment procedures suggested by Huerta-Macias(2002), such as, journals, reading logs, videos of role-plays, audiotapes of discussion, works samples, and teacher observations and many other procedures to help his students to master the target language in whatever way that works the best or better for them.

A good teacher does not only develop assessment to measure what his students have learned and how they learned. He also believes it is also important for him to develop assessment to measure how well he teaches, or if he teaches what he is supposed to teach.

Conclusion

In this paper, I have covered many qualities that I believe will help teachers to be successful in being teachers and in teaching career. As I said at the beginning that I learned from my teachers and my personal teaching experience, both successful ones and unsuccessful ones, very often, I learn more from my failures than I do from my successful experiences. That is because the failures always make me reflect and try to learn something from them so that I can gain some improvement each time.

So my conclusion for this paper is that I firmly believe that a good teacher is a loving, caring, encouraging, uplifting, responsible, humble, patient, gentle, easy-going and unselfish person. He does not only impart knowledge and skills but also plants healthy seeds that will grow into useful, respectful, hard-working, knowledgeable builders of the world. He knows his goal as a teacher and he works on achieving that goal through his hard work and persistent efforts. When he aims to be a qualified teacher, he will be willing to work on developing and making all the qualities of a good teacher his own. And these qualities that he has gained through his efforts will, in return, help him to be a better teacher each day, and he will become a qualified teacher.

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