

# What makes a good EFL teacher?

by Carol Waites

**Introduction** What are the qualities and skills of an effective EFL teacher? The qualities of a good language teacher are rarely explored in appraisal reports or evaluation procedures. Teaching skills are mostly listed in detail as these are tangible factors about which teachers and managers can normally reach agreement, according to their philosophy and approach. Personal qualities or rapport, on the other hand, are usually a vague blurry category.

The multi-faceted nature of the effective teacher's qualities should not, however, deter us from exploring this area. The primary and secondary education fields have abundant literature on the effective teacher, but very little, if any, published research exists in the adult EFL area.

## Interview questions

The study was approached from three angles and the following interview questions were designed to elicit the perceptions of those actively involved in TEFLA in Switzerland. The interview questions described in this paper were:

- 1 What are the qualities of a good language teacher?
- 2 What factors affect language teacher performance?
- 3 What is important for you to have job satisfaction?

Question 1 deals with the ideal, while question 2 deals with the reality confronting teachers on a daily basis. Question 3 was asked on the basis that a happy satisfied teacher is more likely to be an effective one.

This is supported in the literature on effectiveness in primary and secondary education. According to Fullan and others (Fullan M.G. *The New Meaning of Educational Change*, Cassell: London, 1991, p117), classrooms and schools become effective when a) quality people are recruited to teaching, and b) the workplace is organized to stimulate and reward accomplishment. The two are intimately related. Professionally rewarding work-place conditions attract and retain good people.

## Respondents

Respondents were drawn from four adult language training centres with large EFL programmes:

- \* a private school providing RSA training courses
- \* a private school providing mainly in-house company EFL courses
- \* a training unit servicing staff from international organizations
- \* a training unit servicing staff from an international scientific organization

Respondents included 32 educators (teachers, teacher trainers, trainees from an UCLES/RSA CTEFLA course, programme coordinators or managers) and 30 students were also interviewed for question 1.

## Methodology

All adult educator respondents were interviewed, most on multiple occasions throughout the academic year to increase the validity and depth of the profile of their perceptions. Responses were transcribed verbatim, either using a tape recorder or from detailed notes, and the responses categorized. The researcher was also a participant observer, keeping a research journal.

## Findings

1 What are the qualities of a good TEFLA?

Figure 1 shows the top twenty responses out of a total 71 (from 376 itemized comments from 32 educators, and 91 itemized comments from 30 students). The study reveals that the most important quality was overwhelmingly sensitivity to student needs.

RESPONSE	Number of responses		
	Teacher	Student	Total
Sensitive to students	40	4	44
Sense of humour	13	9	22
Interested in teaching:			
enthusiastic about subject	22	0	22
Patient	17	4	21
Dynamic, lively style	10	10	20
Motivates, encourages Ss	16	1	17
Clear (aims, instructions etc)	16	0	16
Facilitates S participation	12	2	14
Flexible, adaptable	13	1	14
Knowledge of language	13	0	13
Varied, interesting lessons	5	8	13
Good communicator	10	3	13
Good listener	11	2	13
Friendly personality	8	4	12
Desire to improve	11	1	12
Creates a relaxed atmosphere	5	6	11
Imaginative, creative	8	3	11
Appropriate error treatment	6	5	11
Organized, prepares	9	1	10

Figure 1 The top 20 qualities of an EFL teacher of adults

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## What makes a good EFL teacher? - continued

It is also interesting to compare the teachers' and students' responses separately. Figure 2 below shows that while teachers were overwhelmingly concerned with being sensitive to students' needs, the students favoured a teacher with a dynamic, lively style, sense of humour, varied, interesting lessons, and a relaxed classroom atmosphere. Presumably, the sensitive, aware teacher would be able to provide that.

TEACHERS' TOP FIVE	Teacher / Student / place in top number of responses 20 table		
Sensitive to students	40	4	6
Interested in teaching, enthusiastic	22	0	0
Patient	17	4	6
Encourages, motivates students	16	1	9
Clear (aims etc)	16	0	0

STUDENTS' TOP FIVE	Student / Teacher / place in top number of responses 20 table		
Dynamic, lively style	10	10	9
Sense of humour	9	13	5
Varied, interesting lessons	8	5	14
Creates a relaxed atmosphere	6	5	14
Appropriate error treatment	5	6	13

Figure 2 Top five teachers' and students' qualities

The responses were then categorized, as can be seen in Figure 3. The chief dilemma was the apparent overlap between qualities and skills. At which point can a skill which is acquired become a quality? I sought the comments of the respondents. One teacher stated that: *I am amazed at the patience I have in the classroom because at home I'm intolerant, the slightest thing sets me off, but in the classroom I'm patient.*

When trainers and more experienced teachers were interviewed, they often did not mention what they classified as basic skills or techniques, which they did not perceive as innate qualities. Examples include 'good timing', 'pace', 'smiles', 'well-prepared lessons'. Clearly, therefore, some had taken the question in a broader sense. Another point of discussion concerned desirable teaching styles. Some, especially students, preferred a 'dynamic, lively teacher' while others preferred a 'calm, quiet style' or 'authoritative'. According to one respondent: *You have to be true to your personality - I remember two teachers in a course where one was very quiet and serious and he was a very good teacher, and another was dynamic and bubbly and so was she.*

And, furthermore, to what extent are we role playing, as several respondents mentioned? The 'dynamic, lively' classroom teacher may be low key and quiet in the classroom, just as the 'patient' teacher in the classroom may be impatient at home, or the 'organized' teacher may be untidy and disorganized back at her desk.

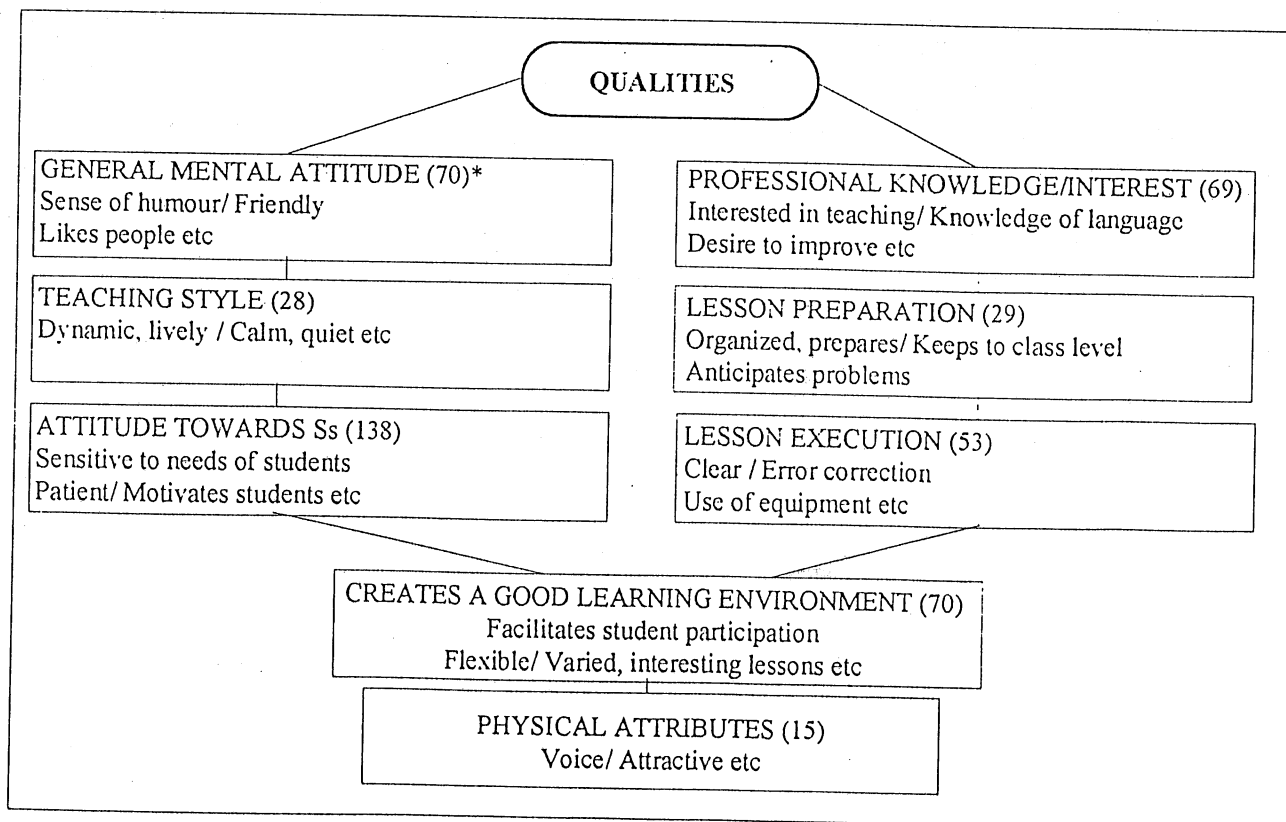


Figure 3: Qualities of a good language teacher - categorized responses (\* denotes number of responses)

## What makes a good EFL teacher? - *continued*

### Factors affecting teacher performance

The second interview question was 'what factors affect your performance?' and the top twelve factors out of 55 mentioned are listed in Figure 4 opposite.

The top factors, therefore, include the teacher's general well-being, how prepared or organized they are, and the students' motivation or attitude. If we categorize these comments, however (see Figure 5), 'Working Conditions' emerge as the most significant category by far.

FACTORS	No. of responses
* Tiredness/health of teacher	16
* Preparation/ organization	14
* Student motivation/attitude	13
* Personal problems of teacher	11
* Teacher's relationship with class	11
* Being at one with your materials	9
* Knowing the subject	8
* Pay	7
* Workload of teacher	7
* Noise, disturbance, temperature in room	7
* Location of classroom, size, layout	7
* Support of colleagues, team spirit	7

Figure 4: Top 12 factors affecting performance

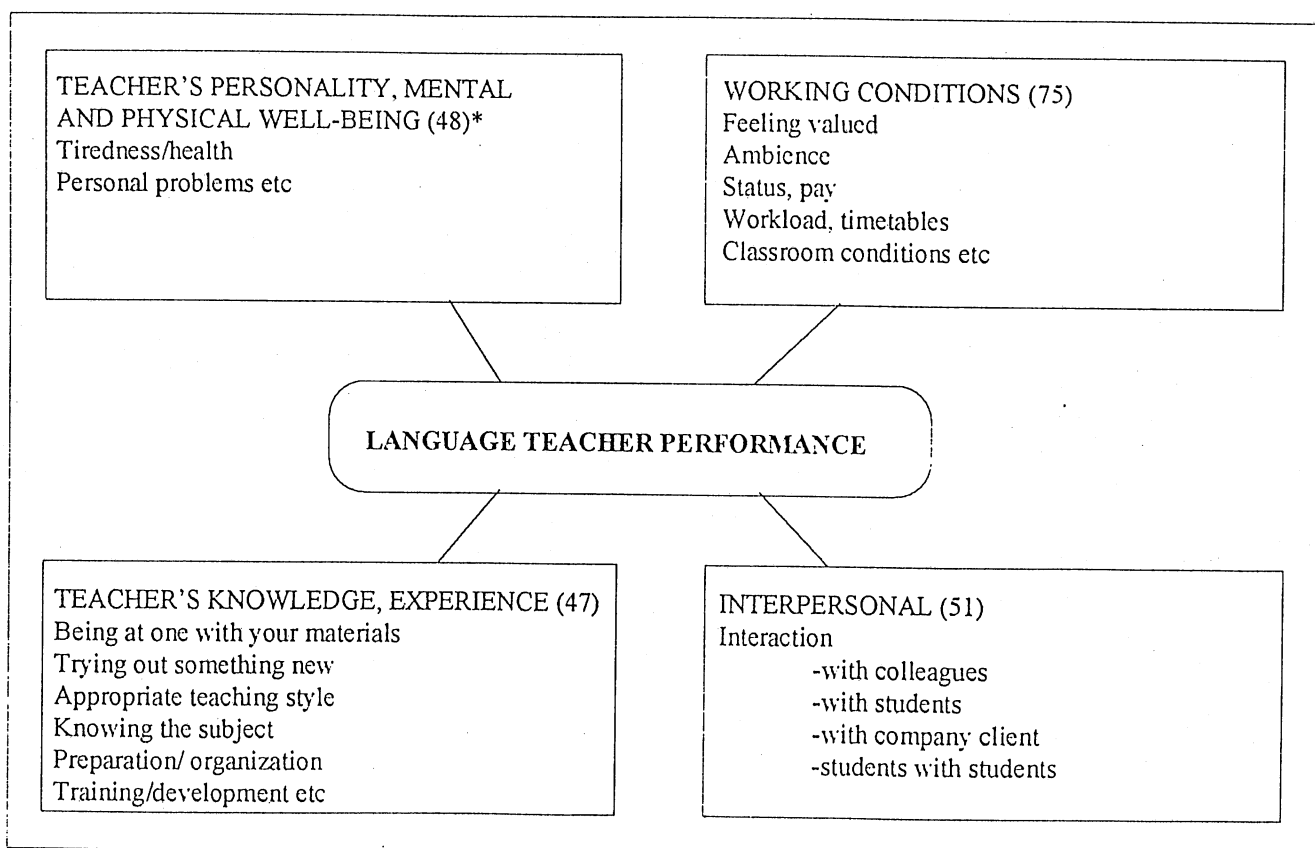


Figure 5 Categories of factor affecting teacher performance (\* denotes number of responses)

### 3 Job satisfaction

A happy satisfied teacher is more likely to be an effective teacher. The last question I addressed to educator respondents was 'What is most important for you to have job satisfaction?' The most important factor out of a total 38 factors mentioned, was that teachers value helping their students learn and succeed (see Figure 6). Teachers also enjoyed meeting a variety of people, and valued their relationship with their students as well as the feeling of a job well done and of value. Interestingly,

some people specifically mentioned pay as being of little importance, but these were either teachers with full-time well-paid positions, or teachers with a partner with a well-paid full-time position who were teaching for social contact.

The category with most responses (Figure 7) once again is 'Working Conditions', supporting Fullan et al's comment that professionally rewarding workplace conditions attract and retain good people.

What makes a good EFL teacher? - continued

* Helping students learn, succeed	17
* Variety of people, relationship with students	10
* Job well done, of value	10
* Learning, growing, inservices	8
* Pay	6
* Student appreciation	6
* Being appreciated and respected by others	5
* Being part of a team	4
* People contact	4
* Teaching's an ego trip	4
* Pay is <u>not</u> important	4

Figure 6 Job satisfaction top eleven

Model of the effective TEFLA

All the responses from the three interview questions were collated in an effort to construct an overall picture of the effective EFL teacher. Figure 8 provides a preliminary model.

Conclusion

Good interpersonal skills are the most important consideration, followed by good teaching skills and desirable personal qualities (see Figure 8). In order for the teacher to be effective, good working conditions are also a requirement, and a good teacher must be knowledgeable, interested in his or her profession and have a wish to develop.

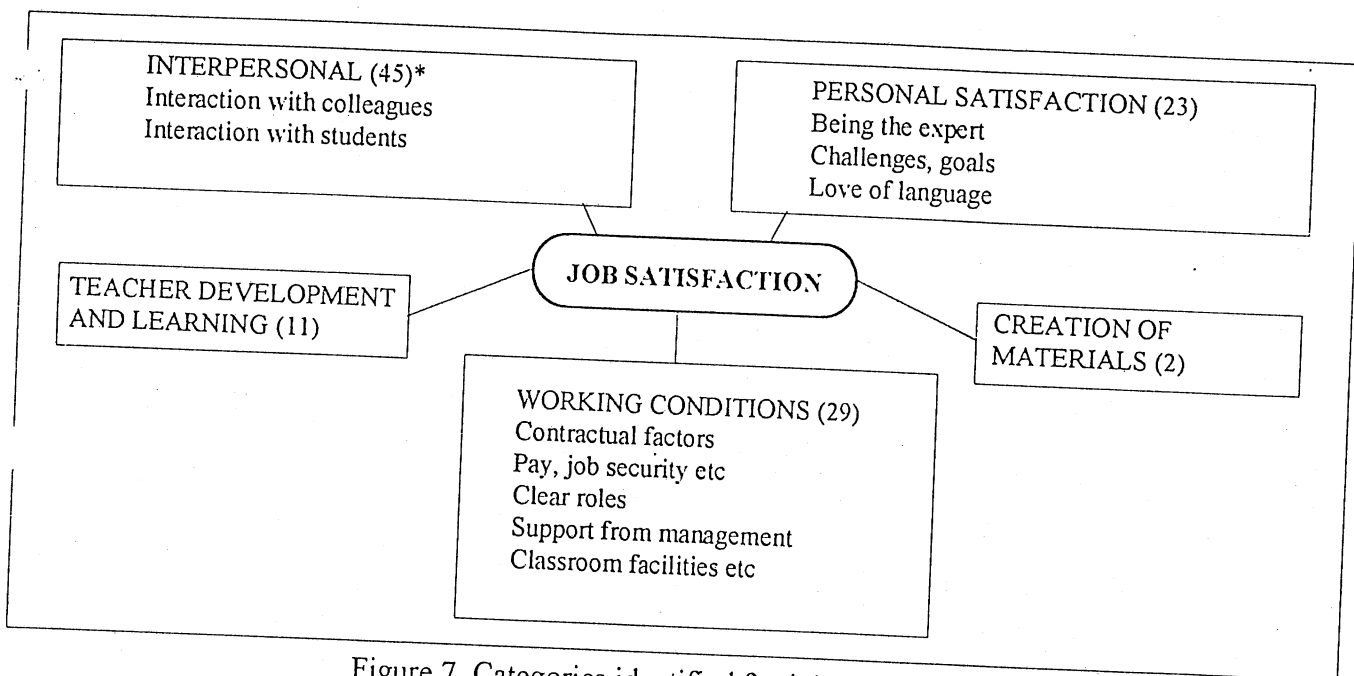


Figure 7 Categories identified for job satisfaction

Good interpersonal skills	244 responses
+	
Good teaching skills	241 responses
+	
Desirable personal qualities	141 responses
+	
Good working conditions	104 responses
+	
Professional knowledge/interest	83 responses

Figure 8 Effective Teacher of EFL to Adults

Respondents for the main part had a clear picture of what constitutes a good teacher for them. However, a comparison of the images reveals contradictions, lack of consistency

and apparently differing objectives between teachers and students. Since we are dealing with subjective traits, people's complex personalities and differing personal circumstances, this is hardly surprising, and it serves to demonstrate why assessment schemes are reluctant to nominate a stereotype or model of the ideal teacher. Therefore, while assessment and teacher appraisal schemes are understandably vague in their definitions in this area, a body of research will help us to reach a more common understanding of the elusive good teacher.

*This is a synopsis of a paper presented at the IATEFL conference in Swansea, April 1993. Carol Waites is Head of Department, Modern Languages at the Institute of Languages, University NSW, Sydney, Australia. She is currently on study leave in Switzerland researching effectiveness in TEFLA.*