Successful Teaching: Characteristics Every Teacher Should Embrace

Most people would agree that good teachers are caring, supportive, concerned about the welfare of students, and knowledgeable in their content area. Success in teaching, as in most areas of life, depends almost entirely on your attitude and your approach and effective teaching. Effective teachers have good classroom management skills as well as the successful characteristics that define what a teacher is.

I feel that nearly 95% of being a successful teacher is about attitude. The right attitude produces the right behaviors, and the right behaviors generate success. A positive attitude is a great asset in life. Life will throw many curve balls at me and especially in the teaching profession. A positive attitude will help me cope with these adversities in the best way possible. For example, I may find out on the first day of school that I am teaching Spanish 4 instead of Spanish 1 which I was told I would be teaching. This would not be an ideal situation, but a teacher with the right attitude would try to focus on getting through the first day without negatively impacting the students. Another important aspect of having the right attitude is having high expectations for my students and myself. Teachers with positive attitudes also possess high expectations for success. Teachers need strive to raise the bar for our students. If I expect less effort I will receive less effort. I must have an attitude that says that I know students can achieve my level of expectation, thereby giving them a sense of confidence and pride as well. This is not to say that I should create unrealistic expectations. However, my expectations will be one of the key factors in helping students learn and achieve. 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. Great teachers consistently challenge their students to do their best. Expectations are often self-fulfilling, and must
therefore be expressed with care and consideration. Effective teachers apparently have a talent for doing just that.

Another characteristic successful effective teachers have is consistency and flexibility. In order to create a positive learning environment my students should know what to expect from me each day. I must to be consistent every day. This will create a safe learning environment for the students, therefore, they will be more likely to succeed. Students dislike an environment in which the rules, procedures, and expectations are constantly changing and never consistent. Although consistency is the key, we all know that misfortune happens and plans have to be changed on a whim. Effective teacher are flexible enough to deal with whatever life brings them and whenever it decides to bring it. They are able to adapt to new plans or new and unexpected situations when they arise. This concept is very important in the realm of student understanding. Often times, teachers think that students understand lessons and are able to effectively produce the grammatical structures or conversation points that were taught. Many times, a teacher find out that the students really do not know the material concretely until there is a graded assignment or a quiz when it is sometimes too late. Then the teacher has to be flexible enough to be able go back and re-teach the lesson better so that the students properly understand and can successfully use their knowledge.

A good language teacher must also be competent in their content are and prepared to teach every day. This requires a lot of study and time on the part of the teacher. If I am a foreign language teacher in Spanish, I must have mastered the Spanish language and culture I am teaching and the skills it takes to teach the language. You must also have mastered the elements of English to provide your students the best language learning experience they can have. It is so important for foreign language teachers to understand the grammar of English so they can help the students connect their first language to the acquisition of their second language. I must be prepared to teach my students both English and Spanish grammar so that they can understand how the grammatical structures of the two languages are both similar and different. It is easy for students to tell if a teacher is prepared for class. Even young children know when a teacher is organized and ready for the day’s lessons. Speaking from experience, nothing frustrates a student more than to come to class and be assaulted by a teacher who has no idea what they are doing. Competence and knowledge of the content are both items that are strongly stressed by the current literature in education, especially, in second language teaching and acquisition, and by professional licensing agencies as well. In classrooms where teachers are well prepared, behavior problems are less prevalent. A well-prepared teacher is more likely to be able to take time during lessons to notice and attend to behavioral matters, and is less likely to miss the beginnings of potentially disruptive activity. If, on the other hand,
teachers have not invested sufficient time in planning and preparation, they tend to be so focused on what they are saying during lecture that they miss the early signs of misbehavior. This ultimately results in frequent disruption, waste of valuable instructional time, and student frustration. The best advice here is to always stay on top of the knowledge in your content area. The world of education is always changing and growing and so is the world of second language acquisition. The most effective and successful teachers join online forums of discussion or subscribe to magazines related to their field and go to meetings and conferences to gain professional knowledge and development.

The most important aspect of teaching is knowing your students. Teachers are helpless if they do not know their students, the learning styles of their students, or the best types of feedback their students prefer. This is crucial in a content area such as Spanish. Successful teachers need to know when their students are truly making errors or just mistakes and when to provide proper feedback for mistakes made. Some students may prefer a type of feedback called recast in which the teacher just restates what the student said in the correct way and then continue with the conversation, whereas other students may prefer a metalinguistic feedback approach where the teacher “provides comments on the proper form of the student’s remark (Brown 277)” such as “okay, but remember how we use the present perfect tense.”

The first four years of my second language acquisition I had a teacher that exemplified all of these qualities. Mr. Lute was the most effective language teachers I have had thus far. While I was in high school, I never really appreciated the effectiveness that Mr. Lute has in teaching Spanish. When I arrived at college my first year, both of the language teachers I had, treated me as if I were a child. One of those teachers was never prepared for class and was often late, cutting our learning time down by nearly 10 minutes on the average. Everyone of my teachers, up to this point thus far, have all had the highest expectations for me and most have understood my preferred style of feedback, which is as soon as possible and explicit correction. Mr. Lute was the most consistent teacher I have had as well. Every day for 4 years straight he would start the class in the same manner. When class was ready to begin he would say to us, “Hola clase, ¿Cómo están?… Hoy, vamos a repasar la lección anterior y aprender mucho sobre….” His saying this everyday added to the consistency of our classroom structure. At the beginning of every class period he would say this then we would put up the answers to the homework on the board and review them as a class. Then, either we would turn the work in or we would move on to the lesson for the day. All his lessons were pretty much structured in the same manner. For grammar lesson, he would list the rules on the board and we would copy them down. Then he would explain them and show us how they are used, such as in a T-Chart
or placement in the sentence. After that, as a class, we would make example sentences in English then translate them into Spanish using the new material from that day’s lecture. Finally, we would be assigned activities to practice the new skills and we would turn them in or review them the next day at the beginning of the period. He also had a mastery of the language. He studied in Spain for 2 complete years and could explain it to English speaking student very well since he learned Spanish as a second language as well. Two of my college professor were native speakers and could not really explain the underlying grammatical structures and when students asked about them they would reply with “I don’t know, that’s just the way it is.”

As my primary Spanish teacher, Mr. Lute measured up to the highest of these successful teacher characteristics. As the person that most inspired me to pursue a career in Spanish education, I have a great mentor to look up to and a great task to take on: to try to follow his example of successful effective teaching. One of the most important things he taught me was that the most imperative part of being a successful and effective educator is finding the teacher within me. No two teachers are alike, just as no two people are alike, and I need to find what works best for me as an instructor and use it to my advantage. Only then will I become a successful effective teacher.