

Amalia MĂRĂȘESCU

**MAIN ISSUES IN TEACHING ENGLISH
FOR SPEAKERS OF OTHER LANGUAGES**

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***BY WAY OF INTRODUCTION
WHY ARE OUR STUDENTS AFRAID OF BECOMING
TEACHERS?***

It is a well-known fact that fewer and fewer of our graduates (intend to) become teachers. The lack of decent jobs in education and the low salaries received for quite a huge amount of work are only two of the reasons for this. In an attempt to find out what other fears they might have regarding this job and to offer solutions for their overcoming those fears, I asked my students in French-English and Romanian-English to answer the question “What do you fear about being a teacher?”. The first time I did that was at the beginning of the course in English Language Teaching Methodology in 2006, to see whether the course I had prepared and was supposed to teach for the first time would respond to this problem. The second time was at the end of the course in English Language Teaching Methodology in 2012, to see whether their fears remained the same.

In 2006 the question was answered by 30 students, half of whom signed their answers. In 2012 the question was answered by 15 students, none of whom signed their answers. In 2006 the answers looked like this:

- I do not have the necessary knowledge - 18 students (60%)
- The students will have the wrong attitude towards me - 10 students (33.33%)
- I will not be able to make myself understood (when teaching or when giving explanations) - 9 students (30%)
- I am not so patient (in order to explain the lesson well to the students) - 6 students (20%)
- I will not be able to get their attention and make them focus - 6 students (20%)
- I will bore my students - 4 students (13.33%)

Most of them feared their own insufficient knowledge, which, they realized, will cause other problems: they will make a fool of themselves in front of the students. They were obsessed with the fear of making mistakes in front of the students or of not being able to answer their questions, of not being able to make themselves understood.

Regarding their character or behaviour they feared that they would not have the necessary patience to offer explanations or to deal with younger pupils; they would be boring, unable to get students' attention and to control them, would not be understanding or encouraging enough. Last, but not least, they mentioned the fear of being and speaking in public, of disappointing the students and of having none of the qualities of the ideal teacher.

Most answers were centred on themselves and on their own inability to cope with the situation. Very few were centred on the prospective students (The students will dislike me from the very beginning, The students will have the wrong attitude towards me, The students might not want to take the course too seriously), but these issues can be caused by the teacher's problems. Very little importance was given to the problem of money. Only 2 students feared the low salary.

All of them mentioned in their answers that they realized that being a teacher was a very difficult job, with a lot of responsibility, but still some of them wanted to do it.

In 2012 the answers were the following:

- I will not be able to control my students - 6 students (40%)
- The salary - 5 students (33.33%)
- The unavailable work places - 4 students (26.66%)
- I will not be able to make myself understood - 3 students (20%)
- I will not rise to the students' expectations - 2 students (13.33%)
- I will not be respected - 2 students (13.33%)
- I will not be a good teacher - 2 students (13.33%)
- I will lose control in front of my students - 1 student (6.66%)

- The educational system, in which everything can change in a second - 1 student (6.66%)
- I will not be able to understand my students - 1 student (6.66%)
- Being responsible for what happens to children when they are not in class, but still in my care - 1 student (6.66%)
- The exams - 1 student (6.66%)
- Despite all my efforts, the pupils will not see the importance of what they are supposed to learn - 1 student (6.66%)
- My students will not like me - 1 student (6.66%)

Again there are answers that are worth mentioning:

“I have no fears! I feel prepared to be a teacher. I love this job and this is all I’ve ever wanted to become: a teacher.”
(anonymous)

“Being a teacher is not an easy thing. I fear that my students will not understand what I’m trying to teach. I also fear that they might not like me. Children today are different from the child I was. They see life in a different manner. They don’t care too much about learning, but about finishing the course as soon as possible so they could go out in breaks or at home. The goal of a teacher is to make his students understand what s/he is teaching and if children don’t pay attention it is impossible for the teacher to reach this goal. I love children and they usually like me. The problem in teaching is that, when a new teacher arrives, it is difficult for the students to change / accept the new method of teaching. Another problem that I fear is that not all children express their feelings, some being shy. If a child is shy, he won’t have the courage to say if he understood or not. I fear that I won’t manage to make them get over this feeling, that I won’t make them open in front of me, that they won’t tell me what and why they don’t understand.” (anonymous)

Again, the students mentioned the three categories of problems enumerated above. But, as we can see, in 2012 they were more pragmatic. More of them feared the salary, but also the lack of teaching positions, and also the changes in the educational system. They also feared that they would not be able to control their students,

a fear probably triggered by the news seen on television, which had exposed various problems faced by teachers who had been beaten or otherwise harmed in class. Another fear triggered again by the news was probably the one connected to the teachers' being responsible for their students even when engaged in extracurricular activities, like going on trips. Most answers were again centred on themselves (*I will not be able to control my students, I will not be able to make myself understood, I will not rise to the students' expectations, I will not be respected, etc.*).

What is most interesting, in my opinion, is that none of them was afraid of not having the necessary knowledge to be a teacher, though, on the average, their level was lower than that of the students in 2006. Also, on the whole, they did not realize or did not mention explicitly how difficult the job actually is. Probably they did not see the importance of learning English Language Teaching Methodology either, because half of them failed the examination.

As for the ways in which these fears can be overcome, it is important to say that while we can do little, if anything, about the salary, the teaching positions and the too many changes in the educational system, we can help our students with their other problems.

According to Scrivener, methodology and knowledge of subject matter are important, but not the most important. It is more important to be "an aware and sensitive teacher who respects and listens to her students, and who concentrates on finding ways of enabling learning rather than on performing as a teacher." (Scrivener 2005: 22) Though we cannot ignore the theory, we need to concentrate more on the practice. In this respect, the teaching practice may not be enough. That is why we also offer to our students the so-called microteaching, classes during which they teach their colleagues not whole lessons, but just sequences of them or separate activities. It is a rehearsal for the teaching practice and it has the advantage that it is easier and less stressful for the students to start with their colleagues rather than with children they do not

know. The students take this activity seriously, especially as it is followed by a discussion about the way in which it went, as it is known that the process of learning involves: doing something, recalling what happened, reflecting on that, drawing conclusions from the reflection, using the conclusions to prepare for future practical experience. (cf. Scrivener 2005: 20) Since being in a class in the presence of a teacher and listening attentively to him / her is not enough to ensure learning, it is the teacher's job to create conditions in which the students might be able to learn.

In time, and with practice, they can learn to speak in front of an audience, or to be more patient, or to encourage their students, or to explain in a better way. They can also learn to control their students and to control themselves in front of them. They can also learn to overcome many of the other fears that they expressed. It is important, however, for them to realize from the very beginning that some of the problems they may encounter may be counteracted with things they learn from the English Language Teaching Methodology course.

“It is tempting for a teacher (or a school) to view a class as a fairly homogeneous group with a single ‘level’ and similar behaviour, preferences, interests and ways of working.” (Scrivener 2005: 62) However, learners may have different:

- reasons for needing English;
- beliefs about what a teacher can or should do;
- previous learning experiences;
- preferences for classroom methodology;
- preferences for what content to work on in class;
- speeds of working and learning;
- ability to remember things;
- difficulties or physical disabilities;
- intelligences;
- boredom thresholds;
- reactions to things, moods, habits, etc.;
- motivations;

- senses of humour, response to jokes, practical jokes, sarcasm, etc. (cf. Scrivener 2005: 63)

Learners and teachers alike may be left-brained or right-brained. They may be visual, auditory or kinesthetic. They may have one or several of the following intelligences: verbal-linguistic, visual-spatial, musical-rhythmic, logical-mathematical, bodily-kinesthetic, interpersonal, intrapersonal.

In a classroom, teachers tend to value students whose cognitive style is like theirs. When mismatching occurs, the student is likely to feel frustrated and hostile to the teacher, to the subject matter or to learning in general. The solution is to know our students and to use techniques that will help all of them. Adaptability is a key word in this respect.

Variety is another key word when we speak about teaching, since it helps us avoid boredom, which causes many of the discipline problems that a teacher may face.

It is said that good planning solves many of the problems, but still we need also flexibility since, when put into practice, the plan may prove to be not so good as we expected.

The fear of making mistakes is another to be overcome. Our students should be aware of the fact that we all make mistakes even in our mother tongue, not to mention a foreign language. We should not however, make them too often. When we do make them we should admit and correct them. But then we should also be very careful how we deal with our students' mistakes. It would be hard for them to accept a severe reprimand for a mistake that the teacher makes too.

All things considered, teaching is not an easy job. It requires of one to be sincere, serious, communicative, intelligent, close to the students, spontaneous, interesting, understanding, patient, with a sense of humour, creative, calm, appreciative of students, flexible, polite, a bit ironical, objective, supportive, encouraging, enthusiastic, a good psychologist, open-minded, convincing, determined, well-organized, well-trained, interested in his/ her job, aware of students'