

## The Great Debate.....

### *'To be an effective teacher – does it depend on personality or technique?'*

Speakers: George Pickering .... and Mikołaj Sobociński.

After a few Panel Discussions, I thought it was time for a change of format, and, having been inspired by a debate at the IATEFL World Conference in Cardiff in April, I introduced the idea at the Toruń Conference. On reflection, and having heard much positive feedback, this was clearly a shrewd decision. Those who attended it, were treated to an invigorating session, full of humour and vivid visual delights. George was the master of the OHP transparency, whilst Mikołaj preferred the usage of more modern technology in the form a lap-top. Their styles were totally contrasting, too, as George spoke to his audience as though he was talking to his friends over some beers in his local pub, liberally lacing his serious content with sparky, relevant jokes and quotes; whilst Mikołaj provoked and challenged his audience, firing a salvo of rhetorical questions throughout his talk.

Just to remind you of the process, the two speakers each presented their ideas in fifteen-minute timed slots. They then commented on their adversary's presentation very briefly, before the audience were given their chance to challenge them over issues they had raised. My role as chairman was to ensure that they kept to schedule, and to allow as many of the audience as possible to put their questions to the debaters. At one point, in order to restore some balance to proceedings, I asked George an awkward question, as Mikołaj had been on the receiving end of the audience's heated questioning. However, it must be said that both George and Mikołaj were extremely receptive to the audience, and truly welcomed all the questions asked.

George presented his arguments first, and concentrated his talk largely on personal qualities of the teacher. He asked the audience to think about a special teacher in their lives, and to think why that teacher was special – was it due to his/her methodological, or personal skills? George assertively declared that „character was as important as anything in effective teaching.” Showing the audience what he termed an 'Assertive Model', George referred to a teacher's development as drawing upon his/her own 'inner resources' for change. Three crucial features on the model, underscoring this development, were: attitude, self-belief, and state management. These characteristics formed a solid foundation for teachers to take risks, to experiment in the classroom, and ultimately progress as a successful teacher.

Maintaining a high degree of interest in one's subject was also a major factor in a teacher's development, George suggested, allying this to a personal mission regarding one's teaching, and to education in general. Further pointing out the importance of a positive attitude, the former IATEFL UK Treasurer, went on to quote a Brazilian teacher, 65 years old, who told George, that she wanted the words „learning till the end” inscribed on her tombstone, - particularly apt coming from a woman married five times!

George briefly referred to self-belief and state management, claiming that every four out of five comments people make about themselves are usually negative, and that encouragement was vitally important to enhance their self-esteem. To re-inforce the point, George stated that

learners when surveyed, invariably mention this factor as being all-important in their 'ideal' teachers: „encourage me, and I will not forget you”. In case you are wondering what George meant by state management, he essentially saw this as meaning control of one's emotions, enabling the teacher to think clearly and decisively.

Another colourful metaphorical image George presented in his talk, (a sign of things to come in his Closing Plenary the next day), was that of people being like turtles: „they only move forward when they stick their necks out!” This was related to his promotion of the concept of taking risks. „Take some risks today!” George urged his audience. He poignantly invited them to regularly think: „what can I do differently today, from what I did yesterday?”

Moving directly onto the title subject of effective teaching, George observed that as an inspector of language schools, he concluded that the best teachers were those with clear goals – what they expected from themselves, and from particular learning periods. He also felt that vision and self-evaluation – the ability to invite feedback – were crucial factors in determining the effectiveness of a teacher. To complete the package of personal qualities needed, he quoted the educationalist, Loman, who declared that „most effective teachers are those with intellectual excitement for their subject, and can communicate that to their learners.”

In closing his presentation, the Sheffield University-based ELT trainer and methodologist, suggested that the effective teacher is „someone who has a difficult moment, but responds to it and does something different, and therefore becomes a better teacher for it.” The audience was all the better for having listened to such an intriguing talk.

This was a hard act to follow, but Mikołaj was up to the task. Whereas George charmed his audience, Mikołaj proceeded to challenge it. He essentially questioned the teachers present as to their linguistic backgrounds. They may well be versed in the latest methodological techniques, he acknowledged, but what did they know about language, and specifically about the language they were teaching? What scientific theories of language learning had they read? He proceeded to ask further testing questions such as: do you listen to the linguists? do you use 'Corpus Linguistics', and encourage your students to do so? do you use Critical Discourse Analysis? The list of questions to ponder grew, as Mikołaj remorselessly hammered home his point: „what do you know about the language?” Without the necessary scientific theoretical knowledge, he intimated that teachers would forever be lacking as teachers, and therefore, far from effective.

He urged teachers to think about the cultural contexts behind language, and to reflect on the real basics of language. He pressed them to teach their students to think in a foreign language, and how to feel, how to communicate in the foreign language. „I'm the bad cop,” he declared, and „George is the good cop.” However, he added the rider, „but use your head and your knowledge, and then it is 'bad cop v. devil's advocate!’”

Finally, this locally-based lecturer from the Nicolaus Copernicus University in Toruń, went on to conclude that teachers should use the science of linguistics, or as much as they can learn, with what should be deemed their 'scientific teaching'. „Methodology helps you become good teachers”, he proclaimed, „but of what?” The connection with language was somewhat loose and contentious, he advocated.

In quick response to Mikołaj's presentation, George asked him „who would find the time to do all the reading and research that he suggested should be carried out?” Mischievously,

George went on to add that teachers with the desired personalities would not want to wade through the scientific mire!

The perfect riposte came with the suggestion that personality hides a lack of knowledge! Mikołaj also mooted that whilst it takes personality to be a happy teacher, it takes knowledge to become a successful one.

Charmed and challenged in turn, the audience now had their chance to exact some revenge. Most questions were indeed directed at Mikołaj, but George did not escape the applied pressure. „Have you ever met a plain, dull teacher who was still nevertheless a good teacher? the latter was asked. In a typically colourful reply, George remarked that to be an effective teacher, „you don't have to swing from the chandeliers!” „What type of teacher would George recruit for his own language school? was another testing question. George responded by reversing the equation and suggesting that ineffective teachers are not ineffective due to a lack of methodological knowledge, but due to a lack of personality, so he would recruit from a basis of personal qualities displayed by applicants.

Mikołaj, meantime, was requested to list important theories language teachers should learn. He basically listed three: Linguistic and Relativity theories; Distancing and Politeness theories; and Critical Discourse Analysis.

When asked to list an example of a personal attitude/quality he would not think appropriate for a good teacher, Mikołaj relayed an anecdote about a colleague of his who talked non-stop, and was a ‘disaster’ as a teacher, because the students were not taught to communicate. This appears to be a sadly all-too-familiar story.

I asked George about the extent to which personality is the driving force behind ‘bad teaching’, and this seemed to greatly amuse the audience. Perhaps they saw me as firing some bullets in his direction, to ease the blitz of questions being aimed at Mikołaj, which would have been a correct assumption. Anyhow, George pertinently responded by perceiving a difference between the effective teacher and the popular teacher. He pronounced that the „worst teachers forget that they need to practise their English, not just the learners.”

It would be impossible to relate here, in detail, all the responses to the audience's questions. I have merely provided a sample of gems, to show the quality of debate that ensued. To conclude, some other highlights are worth relating. George was pressured somewhat into acknowledging that his arguments were in fact based on theory, though that did not take anything away from their value. Indeed, George ultimately agreed that recruitment of teacher trainees needed to be more broadly-based, covering theory, as well as methodology and personal qualities. He dismissed the ‘I am a victim’ mode as being a relevant part of a teacher's thinking, stating pointedly: „what I can do ... where I am now ... I must work with what I've got ...I am responsible! That's what counts!”

Mikołaj referred to some phrasal verb research comparing traditional methods of teaching with the ‘Metaphor’ approach which he favoured. The results showed that his ‘chosen way’ led to better results due to better understanding of what was being learnt. That was one of his most convincing moments in the debate. For the rest of the event, one sensed he was ‘fighting a losing battle,’ and this was borne out by the vote to decide which factor was seen as most important in determining an effective teacher: personality or technique. Only four of the audience voted in favour of technique. Nevertheless, Mikołaj was happy that he had given

teachers ‘much to chew over’ in the days to come, and that he had promoted as well as he could, the importance for teachers of scientific theory.

Once again, I must thank the two speakers for their dedicated efforts, and the quality of their arguments. As a result of this debate, they have become good friends, and that is another pleasing aspect of the event for me. The audience were concentrated, good-humoured, and responsive, and not shy in coming forward with pertinent questions. They helped make the event a success, and I thank them for their contribution. So, I look forward to our next debate in Poznań, and I dearly hope it can match the high standards set by this pioneering event in Toruń.

See you in Poznań,

Peter Wwhiley ... (Chairman of the Great Debate).

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