

10 Characteristics of Highly Effective EF/SL Teachers

by [Christine Coombe](#)

The question of what makes someone a good teacher is relevant for all teaching contexts, but it is especially important in the field of English as a foreign or second language (EF/SL) where teachers can be hired simply for being a native speaker with a bachelor's degree. Most people, if asked, would be able to express an opinion on what makes a teacher good or effective. These opinions would be based primarily on their own experiences in the classroom as students (McDonough & Shaw, 1993). When prompted, most people would offer up adjectives like *caring, fun, interesting, and flexible*.

Review of the Literature

The earliest studies of teacher efficacy defined it as “the extent to which the teacher believes he or she has the capacity to alter student performance” (McLaughlin & Marsh, 1978, p. 84).

Since then, a considerable amount of research has been done over the years, yet very basic questions still persist. Educators have failed to reach agreement on answers to questions like:

- What is effective teaching?
- How is it defined?
- How may it be measured?

Many researchers in the field believe that consensus on the above-mentioned questions is not possible.

What the research has found, however, is that the overall expectations of a “good teacher” have not changed drastically over the years but how they are manifested in the classroom has (Larsen-Freeman, 1986). Much of the research conducted has sought to identify characteristics, factors, traits and/or classroom behaviors of “effective teachers.”

A number of F/SL educators have come out with lists of characteristics which describe effective teachers; see the Resources section for a few.

My Top 10 Characteristics of a Highly Effective EF/SL Teacher

In preparing my list of top 10 characteristics, I initially began with 26 characteristics. Because 26 characteristics were a bit unwieldy, I narrowed my focus to the 10 I believe to be most important. Consequently, this list (like all the others) is not exhaustive or comprehensive. It is simply what I feel constitutes characteristics of excellence in our profession based on my experience as an English language educator, my observations, and on my research.

1. A “Calling” to the Profession

My top 10 list is in no order of importance, except for #1. Effective teachers are driven and passionate about what they do and feel a “call” to teach as well as a passion to help students learn and grow. Without this mission, or calling, teaching is just another job—and a tough one at

that. Central to this calling is the idea of a positive attitude. Effective teachers recognize that teaching is demanding. Despite this, they exhibit a sense of pride in what they do.

2. Professional Knowledge

Shulman (1986) has identified seven types of knowledge that highly effective teachers must have. According to him, teachers need knowledge about

- the content they are teaching;
- the curriculum, materials, and programs;
- the broad principles and strategies that constitute classroom management and organization;
- the student population;
- the particular educational context they are teaching in;
- educational aims and values, and
- pedagogical content knowledge, which is a special mix of content and pedagogy unique to teachers.

According to Pasternak and Bailey (2004), teachers need both declarative and procedural knowledge to function effectively in their classrooms. Declarative knowledge refers to knowledge about the content area they are teaching whereas procedural knowledge refers to the ability to do things in the classroom.

I believe that the right credentials and sound professional knowledge are of paramount importance in determining effectiveness. That means a Master's degree in TESOL/applied linguistics for teachers teaching at the university level or a Bachelor's degree with a TESOL specialization or certification for those working in primary/secondary schools. As a part of sustaining sound professional knowledge, teachers must recognize the importance of professional development and keeping up-to-date with technology.

3. Personality/Personal Qualities

To what extent personality factors relate to teaching effectiveness has been the topic of numerous empirical studies. Weinstein (1998) conducted a study which identified 10 characteristics "good teachers" were thought to have (as cited in Brown & Rodgers, 2002, p. 153). Seven out of the ten characteristics related to personality. The Weinstein study found personality factors like patience, warmth, creativity, humor, and outgoingness to be indicative of effective teaching.

Additional validation of the importance of personality characteristics comes to us from an unlikely source, Hollywood, which shows that teachers who have believed in their students, offered them guidance and support and went the extra mile to ensure their success, were the ones that were dramatized in movies like *Stand and Deliver*, *Dangerous Minds*, *Dead Poets Society*, and *Freedom Writers*.

4. With-it-ness

The concept of with-it-ness (McEwan, 2002) is defined as the state of being on top of things, tuned in to the teaching/learning environment, and in control of the different facets of classroom life and our jobs. A "with-it" teacher is one who can organize and manage their classroom, engage students in the lesson, and keep up a fast-paced momentum. Teachers with this quality

are ones who can multitask, use their time most effectively, and adapt to the changing needs and demands of their job and the profession.

5. Instructional Effectiveness

For many, if teachers possess the requisite qualifications and years of teaching experience, being a good teacher is considered a given. However, we all know and work with teachers who have good credentials and lots of experience but have the same one year of teaching experience 20 times (as opposed to having 20 years of teaching experience). Knowing your content area and being able to deliver effective lessons matters. Study after study confirms that students who have high quality teachers make significant and lasting learning gains. Those with less effective teachers play a constant game of academic catch up.

6. Good Communication Skills

Highly effective teachers must be good communicators as they are required to articulate ideas, talk about issues, and express their beliefs and values about teaching. Because teachers take on numerous roles in their classrooms and in the workplace, they must be skilled at conflict resolution as well.

7. Street Smarts

Street smart teachers are those who have knowledge about what is happening around them (knowledge of the students, the school, the community, and the cultural environment), and they combine this knowledge with common sense to solve problems. Street smart teachers are also politically savvy in that they are familiar with their institutional culture and they know which materials and topics to avoid both in class and in the workplace, and which battles to fight.

8. Willingness to Go the Extra Mile

For teachers to be considered effective, they need to believe in their own ability to make a difference in their students' lives. Their expectations of their students are always high. Moreover, they show a willingness to inspire and motivate their students through example.

9. Commitment to Lifelong Learning

Lifelong learning is now recognized by educators, governing bodies, accreditation organizations, certification boards, employers and the general public as one of the most important competencies that people must possess (Collins, 2009).

Effective teachers are concerned with their self- and professional development and regularly reflect on what they do in their classrooms. They also engage in strategic career planning, which, for many teachers, means assuming a leadership position.

10. Life Outside the Classroom

A multitude of sources in the professional and self-help literature cite the importance of not being too consumed by the job. Research also shows that people with hobbies and friends outside of their profession suffer less stress, which in turn increases an individual's productivity at work. So my final thoughts on this are that teachers should find something else that defines them outside of the workplace.

Conclusion

There is really no “secret” recipe to being the perfect teacher, nor is being perfect even realistic. As you read through my list of top 10 characteristics and the lists of others who have come before me, I encourage you to reflect on what you feel constitutes effectiveness with your students and in your particular educational context. There is probably no teacher out there who is uniformly strong in all areas. Like me, you will recognize your strengths and you will probably take note of some areas that need work. This reflective self-evaluation is, I feel, yet another essential characteristic of effectiveness. Indeed, the most important characteristics of effective teaching might not appear on any list.

This idea is best expressed by de Saint-Exupery (1943) in *The Little Prince*: “That which is essential cannot be seen with the eye. Only with the heart can one know it rightly.”

References

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Resources

- [Ten Characteristics of a Good Teacher](#) (PDF), by P. Miller, 1987
- “Qualities of Successful Language Teachers,” by Allen, as cited in [Teaching by Principles: An Interactive Approach to Language Pedagogy \(2nd Edition\)](#), by Brown, 2000
- Qualities of an “exceptionally effective teacher” in “[Effective Teacher Study](#)” (PDF), by M. Malikow, 2006
- “[Good English Language Teachers Are Those Who...](#)”, by L. Kamhi-Stein, 2012

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