

50 Ways to Be a Better Teacher in 2018

by [Chris Mares](#)

When I told my father I was writing a book called [50 Ways to Be a Better Teacher](#), he said, “No one’s going to buy it if you’re telling them they’re not good teachers.” He had a point. But that’s not what I meant. We can all be better. It’s fun to strive. Stretch oneself. Take risks. Try new things.

Plus, the book was part of a series titled, “50 Ways to ...”. Ergo, I didn’t have much choice.

But I did have a purpose. It came as a result of a 1-week TESOL Certificate Program I taught two summers ago. On the last day, one of the participants said, “What is it you want us to take away from this program?” I said, “Excellent question. Let me mull it and I’ll get back to you tomorrow.”

That evening I went for a dog walk in the woods. And a think. The next day I produced my list. I had organized it and typed it up as a handout. And here it is.

Ways to Be a Better Teacher

1. Get comfortable with yourself.
2. Find your inner teacher.
3. Get comfortable with being uncomfortable.
4. Commit to growth.
5. Experiment and take risks.
6. Teach intentionally with purpose and direction.
7. Teach all your students.
8. Find a way to reach everyone.
9. Remember that if you are prepared to do it, your students will do it, too.
10. Echo, echo, echo.
11. Recycle, recycle, recycle.
12. Remember to raise schema: Students need to be engaged and interested.
13. It’s always about students’ needs and interests.
14. It’s not about you.
15. There are always ways to resolve all situations and misunderstandings.
16. Take a step outside yourself and observe yourself.
17. Ask high-yield questions, not low-yield questions.
18. Be prepared.
19. Give yourself a time limit for your preparation time.
20. Remember you are a language informant; you don’t have to be a grammar expert.
21. Just because you can’t draw is no reason not to draw.
22. Just because you can’t sing is no reason not to sing.
23. Learn about your students’ languages and how they work.
24. Learn about your students’ cultures and education system.
25. If a student asks a question and you don’t know the answer, tell them you don’t know but you will find out and then make sure you do get back to them.

26. Establish clear rules and expectations.
27. Be consistent, reliable, and unpredictable.
28. Switch things up.
29. Be positive.
30. Be holistic.
31. Be humanistic.
32. Make your classroom a safe and respectful place.
33. Remember that you may have to balance the expectations of the institution you are working at with your own principles about language learning and teaching.
34. Develop a philosophy of teaching.

We spent a couple of hours going down the list, clarifying and elucidating the bullet points. There aren't 50; 50 is just a number. There are many ways to be better at anything. One way to use the list is to work down it systematically, five at a time, and to then try and be mindful of these particular tips. Once you've been through the whole list, go over it again, randomly, choosing five at a time to focus on.

During our discussion it became apparent that my list was partly a reaction to how I had initially been trained when I did my Cambridge Certificate in TEFL, many moons ago, in Hastings, in Sussex, England. It was a rigorous training. The paradigm was rigidly PPP: present, practice, produce. The focus was on language. Lesson plans were rigid and to the minute. There was a point but it wasn't for me. And, useful as it was, in many ways, the approach seemed to ignore the human aspect of teaching.

Teaching is a human endeavor. It involves the relationship between teacher and student. The relationship between the teacher and the self that teaches. It involves being able to sense and feel a class and to juggle multiple variables while observing what is going on.

Teaching is complex and underappreciated. It is also magical and inspirational.

When people used to ask me what I did, I would say that I was an ESL teacher. "Oh," people often said, looking for someone else to talk to. "I see," they would add, eyes flitting around the room.

Now I say that I prepare international students for undergraduate and graduate programs at the University of Maine—which is what I do. It's a complex job. As all teaching is. A good teacher must be many things.

According to Tomlinson (2003), a good language teacher:

35. is patient and supportive.
36. has a good sense of humor.
37. is enthusiastic about teaching and positive toward their learners.
38. is a confident teacher with positive self-esteem.
39. is interesting, stimulating, and creative.
40. is a good communicator.

41. is flexible.
42. takes initiative.
43. is sensitive to the needs and wants of each of their learners.
44. teaches responsively.
45. is critically aware of current theoretical and methodological developments.
46. has a large repertoire of pedagogical procedures.
47. makes principled and modified selections from their repertoire in relation to the needs, wants, learning style preferences, and expectations of their learners; their own personality, beliefs, and teaching style preferences; and the social and educational cultures of their teaching context.
48. is a positive user of the target language.
49. is positively aware of how the target language is used for communication.
50. is positively aware of the cultures of the learners and users of the target language.

That's a lot (and, combined with my list, happens to add up to 50)! I agree with Tomlinson. If you look back at my initial list, you will see that being a teacher involves know about teaching techniques, committing oneself to personal and professional development, working on developing a positive attitude, taking good care of one's physical self, and, finally, taking good care of one's inner self.

Becoming a better teacher or the best teacher one can be is considerably more than being able to present to students, have them practice, and finally have them produce.

Reference

Tomlinson, B. (2003). Developing materials to develop yourself. *Humanising Language Teaching*, 5(4). Retrieved from <http://www.hltmag.co.uk/jul03/mart1.htm>

Chris Mares is currently the director of the Intensive English Institute at the University of Maine. He is a teacher at heart, a teacher trainer, author, presenter, writer, musician, and athlete. He enjoys people, animals, and cooking. He can't wait for 1 January when he will be returning to full-time teaching and be shot of administration (not his forte).