

# MAKING STUDENTS HAPPY

ENGLISH TEACHING PROFESSIONAL MAGAZINE ( DIGITAL EDITION ) ISSUE 50

Paul Bress considers how to cultivate contented classes.

We are all aware that teachers play many roles: facilitator, entertainer, arbitrator (continue the list as you wish). You'll probably find that you're better at some of these roles than others. But, perhaps, what matters most is not the roles you play, but your overall ability to make students happy. Do your actions in class generally result in an increase in overall student happiness? Do they result in a decrease? Do they seem to have no effect at all? If students experience an increase in happiness as a result of their lessons, they will probably feel better about themselves both as human beings and as language learners. Once this process is set in motion, success has a tendency to breed success. But how can a teacher get the process started in the first place? I've compiled a list of what I think are significant happy-making criteria and devised a mini quiz on a teacher's ability in each of these. The criteria are: using names; getting students to contribute; facilitating learning; encouraging; helping students feel good about themselves.

## Examine your behaviour

For each section, tick the sentence *you identify with most*.

### 1 Using names

- a) I never use my students' names.
- b) I do my best to remember and use my students' names – by using mnemonic devices.
- c) I just use the names of the students who look a bit different from the others.
- d) I jot down my students' names at the beginning of each class (to help me remember them).

### 2 Getting students to contribute

- a) I occasionally ask shyer students to contribute and indicate to voluble students that they've had their turn.
- b) I occasionally ask the shyer students to contribute in class.
- c) I ignore students who never volunteer to contribute in class.
- d) I try to ensure that each student contributes in equal measure during each course of lessons.

### 3 Facilitating learning

- a) I consciously try to create the ideal conditions for successful learning, eg by getting the level of the target language right, making the context clear and including a significant amount of personalisation.
- b) I give a significant amount of time and thought to how well my teaching promotes successful learning.
- c) I don't bother trying to create the right conditions for successful learning.
- d) I occasionally consider whether what I'm doing in class is resulting in successful learning.

### 4 Encouraging

- a) I occasionally approach my students out of class to congratulate them on the progress they're making.
- b) I openly ridicule my students' ability in English.
- c) I highlight (publicly) what progress each student is making.
- d) I don't acknowledge any progress my students are making.

### 5 Helping students feel good about themselves

- a) I occasionally approach individual students outside class to tell them something positive about the way they behave in class.
- b) I don't comment on my students' endearing characteristics.
- c) I point out (again and again) each student's 'personality defects' in front of the class.
- d) I keep referring to each student's particularly endearing characteristics (at opportune moments in class).

## Key

- 1 a) 0, b) 3, c) 1, d) 2
- 2 a) 2, b) 1, c) 0, d) 3
- 3 a) 3, b) 2, c) 0, d) 1
- 4 a) 2, b) 0, c) 3, d) 1
- 5 a) 2, b) 1, c) 0, d) 3

## Your results

**0–4** Are you sure the teaching profession is for you? Maybe you should try a different job!

**5–7** You need to make some quite drastic changes to your teaching behaviour if you really want to create some happiness in your students.

**8–10** You are clearly a teacher who is aware of the need to create happy students, and you do a lot to ensure that this happens. However, you could still do even better!

**11–15** You are an expert in making happy students. Congratulations. If there were more teachers like you, then classrooms, and indeed the world, would be much happier.

### **Better your behaviour**

If you got a low score in this quiz, and yet you feel you'd like to stay in the ELT profession, what can you do? Here are some suggestions for both your verbal and non-verbal behaviour:

**1** When you first meet a group of students, ask them their names and write them down on paper, showing where they're sitting in class. For each name that you write, imagine the name (or part of it) in a sentence and *visualise* that sentence in a picture. For example, *Heidi* might make you think of hiding and your sentence/picture could be *Heidi is hiding under a chair*.

**2** Be quite meticulous about how much talking time each student gets (not necessarily in one lesson alone, but certainly over the duration of the course). This will involve asking people to stop speaking (*OK, Wolfgang, I'd like to give someone else a chance now ...*) and asking others to contribute (*Gertrude, would you like to tell me your opinion about this?*). Gertrude may say no, but at least you've created an opportunity for her to speak.

**3** Set clear, achievable, behavioural objectives at the beginning of each lesson – from the *students'* point of view. These objectives should result in your creating particular situations in which various language items will be employed. The teaching of these language items might come either before or after the situation that you set up. Some classes will appreciate being told exactly what they're doing in class and why.

**4** When one student has made very clear progress in an area that he or she has been finding particularly difficult, take the opportunity to give plenty of praise (*Well done, Boris! I've never heard you speak for such a long time before – you're really making progress in your fluency!*).

**5** In the same way, you can point out non-linguistic gifts, skills or attributes that your students bring into class. You might say something like *Lydia, I really admire the way you take responsibility for your own learning* or *Julia, I love the way you encourage others to speak – this creates a great atmosphere in class*. These comments (as with those in 4) can be made publicly.

If this all seems a little daunting, try working on one area at a time – or, even better, one aspect of one area. Then see if you notice any difference in the happiness levels of your students. If you think you're beginning to become an agent for happiness, then simply experiment a little more. You'll be doing everyone (including yourself) a lot of good.

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**Paul is a life-long, nonstop learner – he learns more from everyday experience than from formal research.**

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