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## **Psychology and ELT: 'You are Special! ☺'**

**Setting (false!) modesty aside:** Come on, admit it. Deep down you think you are special. In fact you know you are! ☺ No reason to feel bad about it – according to Cordelia Fine (2005) you are in good company. The human brain is so vain, most of us feel we are 'above average' in pretty much everything – we are more intelligent, more careful, better drivers, better lovers... the list could go on and on! In fact, so widespread is this phenomenon that it has a special name – it is called 'The Lake Wobegone Effect' <sup>1</sup> (Paul Bloom – Lecture 16, YT 2008) But can we make use of this only too human tendency to influence people? Can we use it to motivate them? Indeed we can!

**The importance of Post-it Notes:** R. Garner wanted to test the effectiveness of different ways of increasing compliance. To this end, he sent 3 groups of people surveys to complete. The first one got the survey together with a cover letter, the second got essentially the same form but with a handwritten request on the cover letter, but the third got the survey, the cover letter *plus a sticky note* with the handwritten request on it. Here are the results: 36% of the first group returned the survey and the figure rose to 48% among those of the second group. However numbers soared to a staggering 75% among those of the third!! (Goldstein, Martin & Cialdini 2007) The message here is clear: people do not like being 'one of the crowd' – the reason they complied more in the third condition, was that the post-it note marked the request as specifically addressed to (the very special ☺) YOU!

**How to get a really good tip:** Here is another example: This fascinating study took place in a restaurant. In the first condition, the waiter, along with the bill, left a small sweet for each diner. This gesture led to a small rise in tips – around 3.3%. In the second condition, the waiter left two sweets for each diner. The gesture was appreciated, and tips rose by about 14.1%. But it was the third condition that was the interesting one; in it, the waiter brought diners the bill, along with one sweet each. Then he turned away to leave, but before doing so, he hesitated, went back, reached into his pocket and left another sweet for each diner!! Tips went up by 23%!! (Wiseman 2010) Now there is clearly no material difference between the 2<sup>nd</sup> and 3<sup>rd</sup> condition – but what a difference in terms of the manner! The waiter seems to be saying 'OK, normally it's one sweet per customer,

seems to be saying 'OK, normally it's one sweet per customer, but for YOU I'm prepared to make an exception!' Brilliant!!

**Applications in the field of ELT:** The principle here is very straightforward: if we can make students (ss) feel that we look upon them as individuals rather as yet another person in the class they will perform better and they will like us more. Here are some ideas of how we can do this:

**Use the students' first names:** Try to learn them as early as possible – according to Fine (2005) research shows we like our name better than any other! ☺ So get the ss to wear labels initially if you have to. It is a sine-qua-non; you cannot make anyone feel special if you cannot even remember their name!

**Remember namedays and birthdays:** This is where you will be one-up on most other teachers! Be systematic: get this info early on and create a database in your computer. Then the machine will do the remembering for you! The importance of this cannot be over-emphasised (cf Joe Girard's technique in Cialdini 2001); the more you teach, the more your database will expand. Think about the effect of sending a 'Happy Birthday' message to a s you taught 5 years ago! Not only will they feel special, not only will they reciprocate, but they will also know you are still in business and be happy to recommend you to their friends! ☺

**Find out things about your ss – and use them!:** The more you know about your ss, the better (Dornyei 2001). A good teacher has to be able to work for the CIA any day! ☺ Both general information such as your students' interests and day-to-day pieces of news are useful. Greeting John after the holidays with something like 'So – played in any chess tournament lately?' is bound to be appreciated as would a display of concern for Kate's mother ('I hope your mother is feeling better') if you happen to know the latter has undergone an operation.

**Use humanistic activities:** This is the most straightforward way to make your ss feel special. For instance, one of the easiest activities is 'Things I like about myself / Things I like about you' where ss talk in pairs and they disclose things about themselves and their perception of others. Participating in this activity yourself is an opportunity for you to show your ss what you appreciate about them. <sup>2</sup> If getting ss to like us is positive, getting them to realise that we like them is three times as effective! (Levine 2006). In addition, we can make a note of what they like about themselves so that you can file it away and use it later when practicing 'Positive gossiping!' ☺

**Positive gossiping:** Say nice things about your ss behind their backs. This always works like a charm! While talking to Mary for instance you may say 'What I like about Georgia (Mary's friend and one of the naughtiest ss in class!) is that she is so friendly and cooperative!' You can be sure that this will reach her ears – esp if you make Mary promise not to tell her friend! ☺ You may then discover that a) Georgia likes you a lot more b) she tries to live up to the 'label' you have given her c) she stops playing up in class! As an added bonus, research

As an added bonus, research shows that when we gossip, people tend to attribute to us the labels we use for others! (Wiseman 2010)

**Make sure your ss notice things:** A key element in the success of the last waiter in the second experiment was the way he did things – it was surprising and caught the diners' attention!<sup>3</sup> What I mean is that it is only too easy for your ss to 'miss' things. So – make sure they take notice. For example, instead of praising someone in class about the quality of their work, you may call them back once the class is over and they have left the room, just to compliment them – as if it was an afterthought! Better still, you could write something on a post-it note and surreptitiously stick it on the inside of their notebook so they find it as soon as they get home! ☺

<sup>1</sup> Named after the famous fictional town of Lake Woebegone (the setting of Garrison Keillor's amazing stories) where 'All the women are strong, all the men are good-looking and all the children are above average!' ☺

<sup>2</sup> See also the importance of 'strategic disclosure' in Duck 1988

<sup>3</sup> On the importance of 'incongruity' see Dutton 2010

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