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# The Image of Modern University Teacher: Studying the Student Perceptions

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**Abstract**: The article analyses and describes the results of studying how the students perceive the image of a modern university teacher. Tertiary education in the 21st century requires changes in teacher attitudes and behaviours. The perception of the teacher's image by students is one of the most important factors affecting their attitude to the academic process. Several criteria assessed by the students anonymously are singled out; professional, personality-related and social ones. It seems reasonable to look for the peculiarities of teacher image perception by the students of different universities, namely the College of Asian and African Studies (CAAS of MSU) and the Russian Economic University (REU). The aim of the study was to identify and analyse the specific features of the image of teacher perceived by various groups of students. The empirical part of the study was conducted at the chair of West European languages of CAAS. The participants were: 45 students of CAAS, majoring in one of the four specialties: philology, history, economics or political science, and 31 students of the REU, studying economics or IT. The students of CAAS learn oriental or African languages and European languages, while REU students learn only English. The methodology of the study was to design a questionnaire in order to reveal the teacher personality traits, social and professional qualities. The analysis showed that the students' perceptions of the teacher image undergo some transformation over years of study, though not very dramatic. The professional component proves to be the most crucial for undergraduate students of both universities. Most students agree that the content knowledge is more important than general erudition or command of contemporary teaching methods. The most important personality traits turned out to be communication skills - the ability to listen and hear and respect for students. As for the teacher type, there is a distinct mismatch between expectations and reality.

**Keywords**: tertiary education, teacher image, professional component, personality traits.

#### Introduction

Rapid changes in society, their unstable nature, digital revolution with its serious impact on environment and human behaviour prove it necessary to give a profound overhaul to the educational space. If the tertiary education in general and the teacher in particular want to solve a complex task of avoiding uberization – the exclusion of universities from the educational process as mediators - they need to accept the realities of the modern world, which is chaotic, full of uncertainties and different from the previous one by its incredible, catastrophic pace (Kochetova, 2011).

The academic system of education developed for the industrial era has run into the contemporary problems of the digital epoch: abundant information, war for attention, the emergence of new professions. This system can no longer rely on outdated standards and is in need of serious qualitative changes, which will affect first and foremost the teachers. Today we need to realize that teachers can no longer boast of being the sole providers of information, they no longer possess "the keys to the kingdom of knowledge" (Johnson, McElroy, 2010). *Google Play* and *Apple store* are overflowing with apps, information is accessible to anyone anywhere any time. Young people with a Smartphone have information at their fingertips, they can exchange it, and they can study. And if contemporary teachers hope to preserve their "fields of knowledge" and "transfer of information" (Lewin, 1951), they risk losing this battle quite fast.

The second serious problem for the modern teacher is the students' changed behavioural standards. Current students behave differently; attention in class is a rare sign of efficiency which must be competed for (Johnson, McElroy, 2010). *Microsoft* research of 2017 showed the students' average attention span of 8 seconds.

The young generation's attitude to time is also different. Almost 80% of young people under 25, being used to digital reactions of about 1 second, find it difficult to be idle for longer than 1 minute in

comparison with 10 % of people over 65. In short, we are facing a generation who are difficult to interest but quick to bore.

The above problems require that the teachers reconsider their academic approaches and to offer students an academic plan developing creative approach, critical thinking and, above all, interest. Otherwise, we risk staying behind in the old world and following the outdated standards of thinking, unadopted to today's digitized world. According to G. Hamel and C.K. Prahalad (Hamel, Prahalad, 1996), only those who possess intuition, systemic thinking, high pace and a high level of process organization will survive in the world of the future.

California's think-tank "The Institute for the future" published its research which shows that 85 % of professions which will be in demand in the labour market in 2030 do not even exist today.

In the light of these new trends the question of the university teacher's competencies, professional qualities and personality traits arises. Works by I. Zimnyaya (Zimnyaya, 2004) are devoted to the problem of competency-based approach. It is important to take into account that the job of teacher belongs to the type of professions in which not everyone can achieve efficiency. There is vast psychological pedagogical literature on professional suitability of school teacher (Gurevich, 2008), but practically no works on the same issue related to university teachers. Most research papers mainly consider the professional competencies of university instructors, as they are deemed to be suitable for their job a priori.

As R. Baltusite and I. Katane put it: "As a result of education, anyone can become a teacher, but not everybody can be a teacher - EXPERT. The evaluation of the results of theoretical studies enables to identify common conclusions drawn in the works of many scientists and teachers, which characterize the personality of a teacher and his or her professional activities: love towards people; understanding, development and maintaining of pupils' individuality; a teacher's professional development, self-cognition and self-analysis; love towards one's own work; learning of a pupil; creating of favourable environment; responsibility for one's own result of work; understanding of one's own mission within the context of time; serving to the nation and mankind" (Baltusite, Katane, 2017, 36-37).

According to E. Klimov's classification (Klimov, 1993), the pedagogical profession refers to the type "man-man" and is characterized by the following: ability to manage, teach and educate people; broad mind; listening skills; speech culture; "soul-searching" inclinations, keenness of observation and sensitivity to people's feelings and characters, ability to imagine, model their inner world instead of attributing your own or the one known to you by experience; projective approach to people based on the assumption that they can always become better; empathy; ability to solve non-standard situations; a high degree of self-regulation. Besides, according to E. Klimov, there is an essential list of counter indications against working in a man-man profession: serious speech defects; self-absorption; incommunicability; excessive slowness; indifference to people; absence of unselfish interest. Earlier J. Holland created a theory of vocational choice, singling among others the social type, characterized by a specific set of typical preferences, interests and individual peculiarities such as tending to seek close relationships, being averse to isolative environments and possessing social skills (Holland, 1959).

Currently it is rather a teacher-student partnership that is required, particularly in a university setting. It has been repeatedly stressed lately that it is the student who should bear the responsibility for learning and achievement rather than the teacher. The teacher can certainly help by selecting an engaging material and activities, by creating a classroom climate that would contribute to successful and productive learning. Nevertheless, the main skill that should be taught and developed is the skill to learn, as the main teacher's task is to equip the students with competencies and skills for their future professional life. Going further, J. Barnett theorizes about the role of tertiary education in an age of uncertainty and super complexity. Without rejecting the importance of knowledge and skills, he argues that the main role of universities is to sustain students' will to learn and not only in a current university or course, but to go on learning throughout their lives (Barnett, 2007).

What kind of teacher can be more effective in that? Researchers repeatedly stress that only teachers who are keen on building relationships with students are successful. That is why teacher class management style acquires a particular importance.

The class management style theories are largely based on leadership styles theory by K. Lewin (Lewin, Lippitt, White, 1939) and on later works on parenting styles by D. Baumrind (Baumrind, 1971). The modern understanding of class management includes many aspects such as space and time management, students' behaviour management, activities they perform in class. This concept embraces teacher personality traits, abilities and professional behaviour. A number of studies emphasize the direct connection between the class management style and students' achievements (Wang, Haerted, Wallberg, 1993). B. Johnson and T. McElroy in their book "Edutainment" quoted Katie Cox, former state superintendent of Georgia, who explained, "Nothing is more important to the student's success than a positive relationship with the teacher regardless of interferences to their education such as a tough home life, limited parental support or socioeconomic level" (McElroy, Johnson, 2010).

There are several classifications of class management styles. Some researchers distinguish three approaches – non-interventionist, interventionist and interactionist (Walfgang, Glickman, 1980).

The non-interventionist approach bases on the assumption that everyone has their own needs which will find their ways to achievement. That is why the teacher exercises minimal control.

On the opposite end of the spectrum is the interventionist approach which bases on the conviction that personal development mainly happens under the pressure of external circumstances (people and institutions). So, the teacher exercises full control over the situation in the classroom.

Between these two extremes one can find the interactionist approach which focuses on the two-way influence of the environment and a person. Thus, control over the situation in the classroom is shared between the teacher and the students.

Another classification distinguishes between authoritarian, authoritative, democratic and laissez-faire approaches (Djigic, Stojiljkovic, 2011).

The authoritarian style is characterized by strict control, clear restrictions, practically non-existent verbal exchange, rare praise and reward. The students are to do what they are told without questioning and initiative. This style does not encourage the achievement of individual goals by the students.

The authoritative style is characterized by some restrictions and control, but they are set with explanations from the teacher who is open to verbal exchange, is firm but polite, and demonstrates warmth towards the students, genuine interest, frequent praise and reward. An authoritative teacher encourages self-reliance and autonomy of his learners, motivates them to independently reach results; he is seen as a fair teacher, because he understands that students cannot be perfect. They know they can talk to him without humiliation or embarrassment.

A democratic teacher is characterized by few restrictions, inconsistent disciplinary measures, orientation towards students' feelings rather than academic success or behaviour. He wants to be a friend. However, this style is associated with a lack of social skills and self-control among students, they have difficulty mastering socially acceptable behaviour when the teacher is so permissive, they are less motivated to achieve. Nevertheless, they like such a teacher as they do not need to be too serious in class. Sometimes, though, the situation gets out of hand and they do not learn anything at all.

A laissez-faire teacher is practically uninvolved, he is characterized by low demands towards his students, lack of interest, usage of the same old materials and plans. Such a teacher may lack necessary competencies or self-confidence or courage to discipline his class, as a result, students learn little, and they have low self-control and low motivation towards result.

More often than not teachers combine some elements of these styles. Nevertheless, they probably adhere to one particular style most of the time.

The term "democratic" is somewhat ambiguous; some experts equate it with being indulgent. Other scholars understand it as a teacher who shares some aspects of class management and decision-making with students and supports their autonomy (Harmer, 2007).

As for how students' achievements correlate with a class management styles, some experts believe that it is the authoritative style - the combination of demand and friendliness - that yields the best results in

terms of students' self-reliance, self-respect and productivity and, as a consequence, their satisfaction from studying.

Z. Dornyei also writes about the best results of different class management styles. Interestingly, autocratic teachers often get good results, but the quality of results is much higher with democratic teachers, who also produce longer-term results than autocratic teachers. All in all, it is easier to be a good authoritarian teacher than a good democratic teacher (Dornyei, Malderez, 1999; Dörnyei, Murphy, 2003).

The teacher role in this case is not to transfer knowledge but to aid in acquiring knowledge. More and more researchers and practitioners speak about the role of a facilitator, i.e. a mediator between knowledge and student. It develops student autonomy, when they are not just able to study independently but also to assume responsibility for their learning.

More than that, a new term of "edutainment" has appeared, meaning education through entertainment. Some researchers seriously state that a good teacher must be an edutainer, i.e. to perform both an educational and an entertaining role (McElroy, Johnson, 2010).

The aim of this study is to identify and analyse the peculiarities of how students of different groups and universities perceive teacher personality, as well as compare these perceptions.

# Methodology

In accordance with the aim of the study the following objectives were set:

- to identify the content and the structure of personal and professional characteristics of university teacher in students' perceptions coming from different groups;
- to analyse the indicators of teacher image on different stages of education (year 1 vs year 4);
- to study and compare specifics of teacher image of students in universities of different types (the academic MSU and the economic REU).

In order to solve these tasks, the following methods were used: the questionnaire of 12 questions (11 close-ended multi-choice questions and 1 open-ended question) drew up by the authors in the students' native language (Russian), ranking personality traits and comparative analysis of the data. The questions in the questionnaire were aimed at obtaining a complex characteristic of the modern teacher image across a number of parameters and were ranked accordingly. One open-ended question was included into the questionnaire with an aim to obtain qualitative data about the modern teacher and to provide the students with an opportunity to comprehend the modern teacher image independently and deeply. It also allowed them to include personal ideas, which was not presupposed by the close-ended questions. The questionnaires were designed in *Google* forms and sent via email, which allowed students to answer them online, anonymously at their leisure. The informants were 45 undergraduate students of years 1-4 from the College of African and Asian Studies, among them female 33, male 12, aged between 17 and 20, also the 1st and 2d year students of the Plekhanov Economics University - 31 people, female 26, male 5 aged 17-19.

## Results and discussion

The number of completed questionnaires was 76.

The question "Which teacher qualities do you consider to be the most important?" had a list of several options to choose from, but not more than three. As the graph demonstrates (Figure 1), the option "content knowledge" received the highest number of responses (82.7 %), which is quite understandable from the university student perspective - they enter a higher education institution to gain knowledge.

In the global information space where one can access resources for any field, students can compare their teachers' expertise with that of the best lecturers, and so, naturally, this indicator is extremely valuable for them. The second place was taken by "respect for students" (62.7 %), while abilities to hear and listen and to find a common language with all the students shared the fourth place (40 % each) following a slightly more prominent percentage of command of modern methods of teaching (41.3 %). It supports the thesis that students want to deal with a teacher as a partner who they want to respect and be respected by. These abilities suggest a student-teacher partnership.

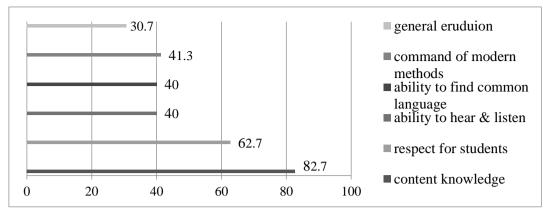


Figure 1. The most important teacher qualities (in % of respondents).

Responding to the question "Which kind of teacher have you encountered most often?", almost equal numbers of students answered "the teacher possessing these qualities" (34.7 %) and "unsure" (38 %).

Another question concerned teacher appearance. Most students pay attention to it (rather yes than no -62 %), 77.5 % are satisfied with it, while some students think that people have the right to look different or the way they want to look.

The question "Do you think modern teachers must have an excellent or good command of modern technologies?" divided the students into groups. One might assume that, having grown up in the digital era, modern students would agree that this is an obligatory condition of the teacher success. In fact, slightly more than a half thinks so (52.1 %), while 18.3 % do not agree and 29.5 % consider that a teacher can be successful without this skill.

One more question was aimed at finding out the level of student satisfaction with the academic process. On the whole the students are quite satisfied with its quality, 29.6% - completely, 64.8% - rather yes than no. The majority of the respondents think that most teachers motivate them to gain new knowledge (45.1% + 47.9% "rather yes than no").

The most interesting responses were received in answer to the open-ended question, "What do you think the modern teacher must be like?" The comments can be divided into two groups: those which refer to professional qualities and those, which concern personality. The most common answer was "interested and able to interest the students", as variants "knowing how to motivate", "inspiring". The second most common response was "understanding", and it does not only imply understanding individual students and their problems, "being on the same wavelength" with them, but also understanding modern realities and trends, being open to innovations and knowledge, informed about the latest developments in one's field of expertise, in a nutshell -"modern". At the same time the students want their teachers to be demanding and firm in case of negligent attitude to the subject. Such qualities as friendliness, patience, empathy what are very important too. It is essential for the students to have the teacher as a friend, but as an "older friend", i.e. an authority in both knowledge and general behaviour.

The students were also asked which teacher type they consider to be the most enticing for language learning. Almost half of the respondents (44.7 %) consider the type "teacher-friend" to be the most conducive to foreign language learning, while 43.4 % favour the democratic type. Interestingly, types "teacher-democrat" and "teacher-dictator" were encountered by students almost equally often (38.7 % and 40 % respectively), while the "teacher-friend" was encountered most seldom (12 %). These results (Figure 2) correlate with the previous poll conducted last year (Safronova, Klyukina, 2019) when 56.5 % of respondents found "teacher-friend" to be the most conducive to language learning.

The democratic teacher was then preferred by 39.5 %. In last year's survey the democratic teacher and the authoritarian teacher were encountered equally often (39.7 % each), whereas the "teacher-friend" also turned out to be the rarest type (10.3 % of the respondents met it most frequently). Thus, there is a consistent mismatch between the students' preferences and reality.

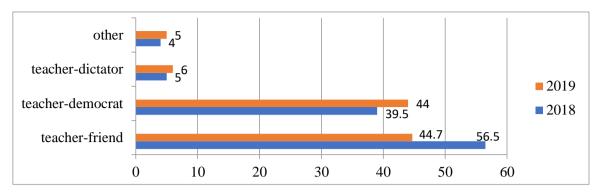


Figure 2. Comparison of preferences of the teacher type most conducive for language learning (in % of respondents).

As far as the comparison of teacher image for different stages of education (Figure 3), the obtained date indicate that the fourth-year students tend to concentrate on the three most important characteristics – content knowledge, respect to the student and the ability to listen and to hear, while the first-year students seem to value all the teacher qualities more equally. A possible explanation is that for the students in their final year of study, who are engaged in writing and defending their final paper and preparing for their qualification exams in order to obtain their bachelor degree, the teacher's content knowledge and interpersonal skills, such as the ability to listen and hear the student as well as respect to the student, become far more important than the command of modern methods of teaching and group communication skills.

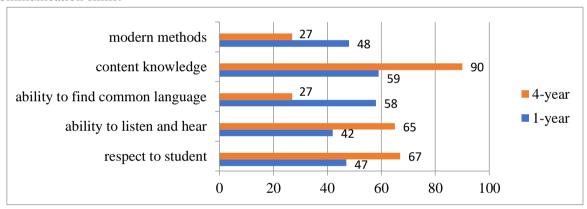


Figure 3. Comparison of teacher image for different stages of education (in % of respondents).

Another difference between the first- and fourth-year students concerned their experience of encountering various teacher types. Thus, the students fresh from school reported that they most frequently encountered dictatorial teachers (61 %), whereas senior students' responses seem to indicate that they mostly communicate with democratic teachers (63 %), which appear to demonstrate that school educational environment tends to be more authoritarian than that of tertiary institutions.

### **Conclusions**

The results of the empirical study show that the image of a modern teacher consists of several components: competencies (professional), personality and social.

The professional component (the content knowledge, general erudition, and command of modern technologies) is the most important for the students. However, the frequency analysis shows a greater significance of such a feature as "content knowledge" which grows in importance over the years of study. It involves not only having fundamental knowledge in a certain field, but improving this knowledge continuously, as it will allow organizing the studying process more efficiently. More than a half of the respondents consider that a modern teacher must have a good command of modern technologies, which provides efficient implementation of the academic process and warrants professional independence of the teacher.

Regarding the other two aspects of the professional components, the respondents are divided: for the students of the College of African and Asian Studies general erudition is more important than the command of modern methodology (13/7), while the students of the Plekhanov Economic University favour the teacher's skill (procedural aspect) over general erudition (15/6).

The most essential components of teacher personality are the ability to listen and hear (14/19) and the respect for students (14/19). These characteristics can be united into the factor of empathy which involves understanding the partner in communication and creating the atmosphere of trust in class, which, in turn, will increase the students' motivation. The results of the frequency analysis show that the students' opinions from both universities coincide.

The social component of the teacher image included a number of questions concerning the appearance. The frequency analysis demonstrates that more than 50 % of the students pay attention to the teacher's appearance which is an important component of the teacher image. The comparative analysis did not reveal any significant differences between the two universities.

There were no significant gender-related differences in perceiving teacher professional or personality features. The only noticeable variation was the following: only 3 out of 17 male respondents preferred a teacher-friend, 10 wanted a democratic teacher, while other 4 wanted various combinations of different types.

While comparing the responses by the first and the fourth-year students, it appears that the latter are more specific in their preferences and tend to focus on three most significant teacher qualities: content knowledge, respect for the student and ability to listen and hear.

As for the teacher type, they most frequently encountered, the students' responses seem to demonstrate another difference: the first-year students have the experience of communicating mostly with the "teacher-dictator" (61 % versus 41 %), which can be connected with rudimentary memories of the recent school past. The senior students have encountered the "teacher-democrat" most frequently (63 % versus 31 %), which suggests that the universities have a democratic style of communication as prevalent.

Students' perceptions of the teacher personality are an important subjective factor, which largely determines the efficiency of the learning. Not only does this factor influence the teacher-student communication and the organization of all classroom activities, but also students' motivation which at the end of the day will allow the students to achieve the desirable results and self-actualization in the professional area.

The rapid development of digital technologies has its consequence – setting up of a new information and communication culture. Thus, it is not only the student perception of information that changes (attention, concentration), but also perception of the educational context – formats of acquiring knowledge and, as a result, the role model of an educator. The modern teacher is the "presenter" of the studying process. The teacher should reconsider the academic approach. In response to this challenge a new role model can be suggested – that of a lecturer, moderator or mentor. This topic can be a subject of further research.

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