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The Ideal Language Student – Myth or Reality

Victoria Safronova¹ Dr. phil.; Evgeniya Klyukina² Mg. paed. Lomonosov Moscow State University, Russia vika-avril@yandex.ru¹; eugenialex@mail.ru²

Abstract: The image of the ideal student, existing in the era of new technologies, ubiquitous Twitter and Facebook, messengers and commercials, undoubtedly attracts the attention of researchers both at home and abroad. This is a cumulative image of cognitive abilities, business qualities, psycho-physiological peculiarities, appearance and interpersonal skills. This study aims to identify the main characteristics of the image of the ideal language student as perceived by the teachers of foreign languages from three leading universities: Lomonosov Moscow State University (MSU), Plekhanov Russian Economics University and The Presidential Academy of National Economy and Public Administration. The relevance of the study is determined by insufficient research of the problem and qualitative changes which have been occurring over the 21st century in education in general and tertiary education in particular. The article attempts to describe and analyse the results of an anonymous survey pertaining to the image of ideal language students as perceived by the practicing instructors of foreign languages. The total number of respondents was 79, including 42 instructors from Plekhanov University, 22 from the Presidential Academy and 15 from MSU. The analysis of the responses showed that the ideal student as perceived by the teachers is the one who possesses good critical thinking skills, is motivated and disciplined with a serious attitude to study. The obtained results do not allow drawing conclusions about specific features of the ideal student depending on the length of pedagogical experience. Each age group included all possible sets of characteristics. It is noteworthy that teachers from MSU valued both social qualities (team work, sociability) and personality traits (diligence, decency); the instructors from the Presidential Academy ranked first adequate reaction to critique and willingness to listen and hear; while their counterparts from Plekhanov University emphasized the importance of good presentation skills, speaking and communication competency alongside the interest in the subject. The statement "There are no ideal students" also came from among the practitioners of Plekhanov University.

Keywords: ideal image, student, cognitive abilities, personality traits, psycho-physiological peculiarities.

Introduction

The image of an ideal student does not frequently become an object of research or even of discussion among teachers. However, when we come to think of it, it raises quite a number of questions. When we enter a real classroom with real students, do we keep in mind a certain ideal image, which the students should (from the teacher's point of view) comply with? Do we subconsciously compare our students with our ideal that is hovering somewhere at the back of our mind? What is this ideal – a cumulative image of the best representatives of studentship that we have enjoyed working with throughout our career? Or do we have this image embedded from our own student life, when we were on the other side of the lectern and formed a certain image of a student whom almost all teachers liked? Does this image vary over our professional life alongside accumulating experience and re-evaluating stereotypes? If "nowadays education in a broad sense has been distinguished as the investment in the development of the society" and "higher education institution as a social institute should prepare a graduate for life", how do these aims correlate with educationalists' image of ideal students? (Nurmukhanova et al., 2014, 116). And the most important question – is there any practical value in the ethereal image of an ideal student?

Lately students have undergone a significant change following the transformation in the culture they exist in. As B. Johnson and T. McElroy point out the influence of culture is crucial for education. Movies, music, TV and other media have an enormous impact on education. As multiple research works demonstrate, mass media and pop culture are probably the most important ways of acquiring knowledge by modern children (Johnson, McElroy, 2010). Considering the technological breakthrough of the information age, when students have access to an unlimited amount of information at their fingertips,

and considering the requirements of the modern labour market in the globalised multicultural world, one cannot modify one's concept of who can be an ideal student.

It is evident that a seemingly innocuous concept of an ideal student turns into a multifaceted issue. As B. Wong and Y-L.T. Chiu (2019) remarks, the research literature on the concept of the ideal student is scarce and disparate. In 1952 the British author H. Becker wrote that the principal qualities of an ideal student, i.e., the motivation to work hard and diligently, can be acquired exclusively in the family environment, which is only characteristic of the middle class. Neither children nor adults from lower classes can learn to be ambitious, conscientious or industrious in work or study (Becker, 1952). In 1960 surveying teachers from an American university, D.R. Brown identified characteristics that were practically constant for the image of the ideal student: "cognitive intelligence, directed intellectual curiosity, general likeability and maturity". There were a number of other qualities pointed out by the teachers, such as independence, analytical ability, moral responsibility and promise for the future being among the most noteworthy (Brown, 1960). These characteristics look very up-to-date. Nevertheless, the idea of social status influencing teachers' perception of the ideal student still found its evidence in the work of N. Keddie from Britain, who in 1971 showed that teachers based their knowledge of students on the students' social position. According to her work, the ideal student is the one who is easy to teach, who resembles the teacher and accepts what the teacher says unquestioningly. This student does not cause problems in the class, works quietly and independently, doing whatever the teacher asks. Usually, he is a representative of the middle class. A less ideal or problem pupil questions what the teacher suggests, he wants to know the point of the tasks and activities, and, as a whole, is seen different from the teacher (Keddie, 1971).

A. Yourglich (1955) carried out research aimed at uncovering correlations between college teachers' and students' images of an ideal student. She discovered that there was much more agreement between these two groups concerning an ideal student than an ideal teacher, which she explained by the teachers teaching students "what the ideal student should be because of the teacher's dominant position". Both students and teachers emphasized such qualities as diligence, maturity, intelligence and cooperative, although in different order among the top 4.

Among recent Russian studies it is worth mentioning the work by E.A. Sokolova (2014), in which the method of "open tests" was used to ask the respondents (undergraduates of psychology and pedagogy departments) to describe how they perceive the ideal student. The survey demonstrated that the ideal student is: active (48.3 %), responsible (44.92 %), determined (35.59 %), diligent (26.27 %), responsive (26.27 %). The ideal student is a person of broad and multiple interests (27.11 %), but he is mainly interested in study and future occupations (25.42 %), and is academically successful (27.97 %).

According to The Oxford Languages and *Google* English Dictionary, "ideal" (adj) is defined as "Satisfying one's conception of what is perfect; most suitable. Existing only in the imagination; desirable or perfect but not likely to become a reality". Thus, the dictionary emphasizes the practical impossibility to attain the ideal as the ultimate goal as well as understands the ideal as being perfect (Oxford Languages..., 2020).

Nevertheless, B. Wong and Y-L.T. Chiu (2019) points out that if the ideal is not regarded as a perfection, which is impossible to achieve in the context of higher education, but is perceived rather as teachers' expectations connected with the students or as a desirable result, then the concept "the ideal student" acquires a practical sense. As the researchers indicate, it can potentially reduce the uncertainty that some students may have concerning teachers' expectations. Knowing which characteristics are ideal in the eyes of their professors, the students will be better informed and will have an opportunity to develop these qualities, which could smoothen the differences in the values and expectations of the students and teachers and make their relationship better and stronger. It follows that the concept of the ideal student is not just an ethereal image, but a practical and useful construct. It means, in its turn, that the teachers should quite clearly formulate the parameters of their ideal student for themselves and, preferably, be able to clearly communicate these ideas to their students, which would make their relationships more transparent and understandable for both sides. This practical meaning of the concept "the ideal student" can also help in motivating the students.

Putting forward his theory of an ideal type, M. Weber (1949) stated that an ideal type is not a description of reality, it is not even a hypothesis, but it "provides clear guidance to the construction of hypotheses". He further pointed out that "in its conceptual purity, this mental construct cannot be found empirically anywhere in reality. It is a Utopia".

As Encyclopaedia Britannica comments on this theory, this construct is derived from observable reality, but does not conform to it in detail because of its deliberate simplification and exaggeration. "It is not ideal in the sense that it is excellent, nor is it an average; it is rather a constructed ideal used to approximate reality by selecting and accentuating a certain element" (Ideal type, 2018). Although M. Weber developed the theory of an ideal type of application to social and historical studies, namely, some recurring phenomena, it can be assumed that the theory can be applied more broadly including the educational context.

Quite a number of research works have been written on primary and secondary school education, where respondents repeatedly emphasize the behavioural aspects of the ideal student. For example, A. Bradbury (2012) argues that "rational choice, self-promotion and individual responsibility for learning are valued" within the framework of educational policy for primary school, but the notion of what makes "a good learner" can be restrictive and may actually exclude some children from succeeding. In G. Thompson's study (Thompson, 2010) the respondents pointed out such qualities as obedience, discipline, and respect for figures of authority at school. Academic performance was seen as an expression of moral values of diligence and hard work. Interestingly, some students perceive themselves as "actors", playing the role according to the model that was assigned to them. The author again argues that such an approach restricts young people. The school is to teach the students to find new roles for themselves, not to bring up a disciplined population, as the latter does not address the challenges of the 21st century.

Having written numerous works on creativity and its correlation with teachers' concept of the ideal pupil, E.P. Torrance (1963) emphasized that these characteristics are practically incompatible with teaching creative thinking. The results of a survey of several hundred teachers across the USA demonstrated that the most valued trait was consideration for others, followed by independence of thought. Unfortunately, the top qualities did not include independence of judgment or courage, without which, according to E. Torrance creativity is impossible. For the American teachers, courtesy is more important than courage. Such characteristics as timely homework, energy and obedience, likability, the ability to listen to the ideas of others and accept the elders' judgment are also highly valued. E. Torrance concludes that these qualities would lead to producing students ripe for brainwashing, rather than creativity.

- E. Torrance also remarked that the images of an ideal student vary depending on the national culture, although some are universal around the world. Thus, speaking of differences, he mentions that good memory is most valued in East Samoa, being considerate to others in the USA, hard work in Canada and Australia, determination in Germany, while courtesy and obedience in India and the Philippines.
- S. Harkness and co-authors also put forward the findings of their research which demonstrated cultural differences in the concept of the ideal student among 5 European countries concluding that "teachers in all the samples talked more about the importance of social intelligence and self-regulation for success in school" (Harkness et al., 2007).

As for higher education, the characteristics of the ideal student may depend on the area of study. H. Thinyane (2013), for example, analysed the responses of the teachers concerning the IT students which demonstrated that such qualities as creativity, playfulness towards the computer, analytical and abstract thinking, problem-solving, introversion, autonomy, responsibility and engagement in class tended to be valued most. As far as future doctors are concerned, some other traits were of higher value, which was shown in the research by B. O'Brien and her co-authors in which the majority of the participants described the ideal student as proactive and independent, able to dwell upon the patient's problems, giving an impression of a knowledgeable and competent professional. (O'Brien et al., 2016)

The above-mentioned research of B. Wong and Y-L.T. Chiu (2019) was conducted by the method of focus groups to provoke discussion and interaction among the members. The research pinpointed several controversial conceptual moments in working out the image of the ideal student. For example, it was pointed out that the ideal image is often seen as equal or close to perfection. Besides, the participants commented on the subjective character of the ideal image, on its openness to multiple interpretations – ideal for whom? Ideal for what? It was difficult or even impossible to form a single ideal image even for one teacher. Moreover, it was problematic to assess objectively some of the traits, as one participant asked: "How can you assess curiosity?" In such a discussion some questions appear unavoidable, e.g., queries about the ideal teacher, the ideal university or the ideal society, which are known to be non-existent.

In another research paper published in 2020, B. Wong and Y-L.T. Chiu conducted 30 detailed interviews with lecturers and teachers in two English universities and discovered that there is a certain consensus among the respondents related to the quality of the ideal student. Many of the characteristics are academically related, for example, preparedness for a lesson or a lecture, prior acquaintance with the topic, engagement and active participation in the learning process and self-regulation. The student is ideal if he or she is willing to study and is ready for difficulties and challenges. At the same time academic performance per se is not a priority for instructors (Wong, Chiu, 2020).

S. Gurak-Ozdemir (Gurak-Ozdemir, 2016; Gurak-Ozdemir et al., 2019) conducted a study based on four thinking preferences (clarifying the problem, generating ideas, developing solutions, implementing ideas) and concluded that "the results reveal an implicit bias on the part of teachers to promote qualities that align most with their own creative-thinking preferences", which means that the teachers tend to "idealize" students who possess and demonstrate similar qualities and approaches to problem-solving.

It appears that teachers do possess an image of an ideal student. M.E. Downey and A.V. Kelly (1978) pointed out that the teacher having a prior concept of the ideal student may lead to several consequences: the teachers might want to "produce" ideal students in accordance with their model; the student who does not conform to the model is considered less ideal and the attitude to him might be less favourable; the teachers might see their success reflected in the ideal student and their failure – in the less ideal one.

In this connection an important question arises – does the teacher convey her concept to the students themselves? It can be assumed that the educational institution encourages certain models of behaviour by disapproving of or even punishing others, thus informing students of its image of the ideal which they should attempt to reach. However, what about the individual teacher? Should she try to make her concept known to the students, and if yes, how?

This study aimed to discover, study and analyse the content and peculiarities of the image of the ideal language student held by teachers of different universities in Moscow (Russia) as well as the comparative characteristics of these concepts.

Methodology

In accordance with the aims of study the following tasks were set:

- to identify the content and structure of the university teacher's concept of the ideal student;
- to analyse the peculiarities this image may have depending on the university (Academic Moscow State University, Economic Russian Plekhanov University and the University of Civil Service and Economics):
- to study and, if possible, compare the specifics of the image of the ideal student depending on the teachers' length of pedagogical experience.
- to find out if the teachers attempt to convey their image to their students.

The authors hypothesized that the image of the ideal language student will vary depending on the specifics of the educational institution and the length of pedagogical experience. Another supposition was that those teachers who frequently encounter ideal students help create them by informing their students from early on about their expectations.

Participants

Fifteen teachers of the College of African and Asian Studies (Lomonosov Moscow State University, further on CAAS), 41 teachers of Plekhanov Russian Economics University (further on REU) and 22 teachers from the Russian Presidential Academy of National Economy and Public Administration (further on RPANEPA) voluntarily took part in the survey. The sample was in the 27-75 age range (Mdn = 56), female – 89 %, male – 11 %., although gender was not taken into account. Nearly half of all respondents have been working as language instructors for 15-30 years.

Methods

The following methods were used: a questionnaire of 6 questions, namely 5 of a close-ended, multi-choice type and 1 open-ended question requiring a more comprehensive response. One of the multichoice questions was a list of 23 characteristics, which was condensed from 50 qualities in the original survey of

the University of Reading (Wong, 2020) to focus on the characteristics that were most relevant for this study – cognitive abilities, business qualities and behavioural aspects of the ideal language student. The questions were aimed at obtaining a complex characteristic of the image of the ideal language student which the university teacher holds and ranking these traits according to their importance. The open-ended question was included in the questionnaire to enable the respondents to independently analyse their image of the ideal student and contribute to the features of this image by adding traits that might not have been listed in the multichoice question. The questions were drawn up in Russian, which is a mother tongue for the respondents; their answers were subsequently compared and analysed.

Procedure

The questionnaire was designed in *Google Form* and sent via link which allowed the teachers to complete it anonymously at leisure.

Results and discussion

Seventy-eight completed questionnaires were received from practicing teachers of West European languages (English, French, and German) from three leading Moscow universities.

The first question concerned the length of teaching experience. In two universities the most populous group was made up of instructors with the teaching experience between 15 and 30 years (all in all 48.1 %, with 41.5 % in REU, 72.7 % in RPANEPA). As for the CAAS, because of the younger teachers' (5-15 years of teaching) greater activity while completing the questionnaire, their representation was the same as that of more mature teachers with the length of experience between 15-30 years (5 persons = 33.3 % each group).

The hypothesis that the traits of the ideal student may vary depending on the length of pedagogical experience was disproved, as the responses showed that in every age group the sets of qualities were very variable.

The second question was a list of 23 characteristics from which the respondents were supposed to choose the five most important for the ideal language student. The obtained results seem to only partly prove the hypothesis that the image of the ideal student should reflect the specifics of the educational institution because practically all instructors pointed out "Good critical skills, problem-solving skills" as the most significant quality (Figure 1).

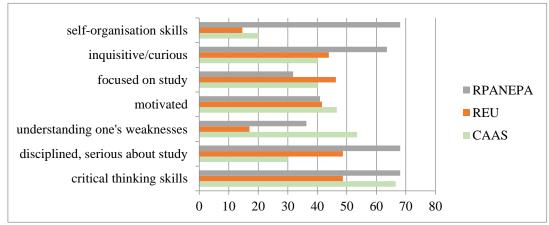


Figure 1. The importance of characteristics of the ideal language student in university.

In RPANEPA, specializing in economics, "critical thinking skills" and "serious disciplined attitude to study" shared the first place, while for the more academically oriented CAAS "disciplined" was in the fifth place following "the ability to understand one's weaknesses and the necessity for improvement" as well as "motivated attitude to study". For RPANEPA "the ability to see one's weaknesses" was among the most insignificant. Other characteristics pointed out by the teachers of all three universities (although with varying degrees of preference) included: "motivation", "enthusiasm and passion for study", "focusing on study and determination", "inquisitiveness and striving to learn more than required". The instructors from RPANEPA, providing education in economics and public administration, also gave an equal number of votes for "good time management skills/self-organization skills" and "the ability to understand one's weaknesses". The same university identified "moral and ethical principles" of students as one of the desirable qualities.

Interestingly, the teachers from all three universities did not value (0 answers) or valued very low (1 answer) such qualities as "leadership", "modesty" and "aspiration for good grades".

One more question pertains to the frequency with which the instructors meet students approaching their ideal. The responses from two of the three universities (REU and RPANEPA) demonstrated that they encountered such students infrequently (67.5 % and 81.8 % respectively) or practically never (REU -20 %). In CAAS the votes were divided between "frequently" (46.7 %) and "infrequently» (53.3 %). Possibly, due to the fact that students enter this faculty to learn oriental/African languages as L2 and West European languages as L3, they have a stronger motivation to study languages in general than the students of economic departments and thus they are more disciplined and serious about their study of foreign languages.

Most surveyed teachers consider that students possessing the qualities of the ideal student motivate the other students in a group (60.7 % "rather yes" and 25.3 % "yes").

The last close-ended question asked the respondents if they speak to their students about their image of the ideal student. RPANEPA has a clear-cut group of teachers who unambiguously outline their concepts when they first encounter the group. They are 10 out of 22 (45.5 %) with a slightly smaller group of instructors who discuss it with their students periodically during the term (8 persons or 36.3 %). REU, on the contrary, has a marked group of teachers who talk about it with their students but rarely (24 persons or 57.1 %). In CAAS the votes were more equally distributed among the categories: roughly the same number describes their concept at the first lesson (33.3 %), sometimes and never (26.6 % each group).

The responses to the open-ended question "Which features does your ideal student possess?" were of utmost interest because the respondents were free to make any comment concerning their concept of the ideal student. In some cases, the participants mentioned the qualities they could not point out previously out of the necessity to keep to 5 positions only in the multichoice question. Therefore, they identified such characteristics as "the ability to collaborate in a team", "to understand one's weaknesses", "being positive". Cognitive abilities were also indicated: intellect above average, divergent thinking, good memory, broad horizons, and analytical mind. As far as attitudes are concerned, teachers would prefer their students being interested in the subject, intrinsically motivated and conscious about their study. Some components of emotional development were also pinpointed: psychological resilience, patience and tolerance (Cambridge Framework..., 2018). The teachers would like to see the students' ability to learn and to do it efficiently, e.g., to be able to pull themselves together, when necessary, especially in an exam, to perform best. Besides, good manners and elementary etiquette are appreciated in a student. It is worth mentioning that the teachers of REU repeatedly speak of their need for respect on the part of the students, for "empathy towards the teacher and gratitude for the opportunity to study". It means that teachers want to feel valued, not only for their work or professionalism. They want to feel valued as individuals. All in all, the comments in this part sound more emotional and expressive, for example: "There are no ideal students!!!" It may signify that the teachers do not apply the concept of "ideal" to students, for them students are people who possess or do not possess a certain set of qualities which should allow them to gain knowledge.

One of the objectives of the study was to find out if the teachers attempt to convey their concept of the ideal student. Therefore, the last question was: "Do you speak to your students about your image of the ideal student?" An attempt was made to find a correlation between the teachers' responses and the frequency with which they encounter ideal students. The following results were obtained:

- for the teachers who frequently meet ideal students: a marginally prevalent group was of those who convey their concept at the first meet (6/15), followed by those who do it sometimes (5/15), then by those who do it periodically (3/15), and only 1 respondent who does see the need to do it at all;
- for the teachers who infrequently meet ideal students: the teachers who speak about it sometimes prevail (20/52), followed by those who do it at the first lesson (12/52), then by those who do it periodically during the term (11/52), and, finally, those who never do it (9/52);
- for the teachers who practically never encounter ideal students (9): those who discuss it at least sometimes or periodically prevail (5 and 2 respectively). Among this group there are practically no teachers who introduce their concept at the first lesson (1) or do not see the need to do it at all (1).

Therefore, it seems that informing students of what is expected of them might help establish a better teacher-student understanding.

Rather the small number of teachers who do not often encounter their ideal student (15/78) does not allow making more definitive conclusions about whether the fact that some teachers introduce their concepts to the students the first time they meet in class makes the students better informed about the expectations and, thus, enables them to get closer to this ideal. It can be hypothesized that teachers have rather high expectations concerning their students' behavioural standards and academic performance. The teachers possibly assume that university students are actually adults and having had the experience of learning at school must understand what is expected of them at university. The previous survey conducted by the authors indicated that students mostly prefer a teacher-friend, but an older friend, who knows how to interest to motivate and demand in case of negligent attitude to the subject and study on the whole (Safronova, Klyukina, 2020). It follows that there should be a dialogue between a teacher and a student on equal terms which could eliminate hidden assumptions and unknown expectations.

Conclusions:

The obtained data can be summarized as follows:

- The five principal qualities of the ideal language student identified by the teachers of foreign languages in three leading Moscow Universities were practically universal with a leading position taken by "good critical thinking skills". Besides, all surveyed teachers would like to see disciplined and serious attitude to study. They value motivation and conscious approach to learning. Other characteristics of the ideal student include inquisitiveness, being focused on one's learning, being determined, enthusiastic and even passionate about studies. If there are differences among the universities of different specialties, they are insignificant and do not give a possibility to talk about the instructors' prevailing requirements to the students, though there were peculiar and noteworthy nuances concerning the teachers' expectations.
- The obtained data are not sufficiently conclusive to single out any specific traits of the ideal student depending on the length of teaching experience. Each age group of teachers had all possible sets of characteristics.
- It was found out that teachers tend to speak with students about their image of the ideal student either occasionally, or even at the first encounter with them, although whether it helps the students be better informed about the teachers' expectations, is not crystal clear. Nevertheless, there is some indication that teachers who quite frequently meet their ideal students tend to outline their concepts more often than those who do not encounter their ideals in real life. It seems obvious that the students should know about the aims and objectives of their course before it actually starts. Not only should students be informed about the materials and academic requirements, but also about the instructors' expectations concerning attendance, behaviour and attitudes. The clearer the teacher outlines their demands, the easier it is for the students to meet them, as they have a reference point.

The research can be carried on further to compare the qualities of the ideal language student singled out by the teachers and by the students of the same universities to discover if there is any agreement between them. One more possible direction for further study is to conduct an additional questionnaire to ask the teachers if they were ideal students themselves to see if their concept of ideal students correlates with their perception of themselves.

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