



*Nick Michelioudakis (B. Econ., Dip. RSA, MSc [TEFL]) is an Academic Consultant with EDEXCEL. He has also worked in the field of ELT as a teacher, examiner and trainer. He has written numerous articles and is a regular presenter at TESOL and PEKADE events. He likes to think of himself as a 'front-line teacher' and is particularly interested in one-to-one teaching and student motivation. He also has a keen interest in Social and Evolutionary Psychology. When he is not struggling with students, he likes to spend his time in a swimming pool or playing chess. For any questions, comments or feedback, you can contact him at [nickmi@ath.forthnet.gr](mailto:nickmi@ath.forthnet.gr). To see more of his published articles you can visit his site at [www.michelioudakis.org](http://www.michelioudakis.org).*

## **Social Psychology and ELT**

### **‘There is more to a Label than meets the eye...’**

**If Mr Keuner Loved Someone:** "What do you do," Mr. K. was once asked, "if you love someone?" "I make a sketch of the person," said Mr. K., "and make sure that one comes to resemble the other." "Which? The sketch?" "No," said Mr. K., "the person." (from ‘Stories of Mr Keuner’ by B. Brecht) This little gem is my favourite Keuner story. Brecht is arguing that not only is it morally acceptable to change someone (hopefully in a positive way! ☺ ) but if you love them, you are duty-bound to try! Yet how do you go about achieving this? Piece of cake – you just label them!

**Labelling – Two experiments:** Researchers Alice Tybout and Richard Yalch wanted to see whether labeling people as ‘good citizens’ would affect their behavior on the day of the elections. So they interviewed a number of adults and randomly told half of them that they were ‘above average citizens, likely to vote and participate in political events’ while they told the other half that they were ‘about average’ in this respect. Would this simple label make a difference? It did. Not only did the former come to view themselves as ‘better citizens’ but they were also more likely to vote in the general elections held a week later (Goldstein, Martin & Cialdini 2007).

Similarly, Cialdini (2001) quotes a study held in Connecticut. Here, some people were selectively labeled as ‘charitable’. Amazingly, a week later when people in the area were asked to make donations for victims of Multiple Sclerosis, these people lived up to their newly-acquired reputation by giving more generously despite the fact that they had been randomly allocated to the ‘charitable’ group!

**How does it all work?** The mechanism is really yet another example of Festinger’s ‘Cognitive Dissonance’ theory (in Abelson, Frey & Gregg 2004) According to it, our mind dislikes holding opposing (‘dissonant’) views of ourselves – e.g. ‘I am a charitable person, yet I do not give to charity’. In an attempt to reduce this dissonance we change our behavior to align it with our beliefs. So, when an opportunity arises for us to attach a nice label to our public image, we simply jump at the chance! (cf Goffman’s work on ‘face’ – Levinson 1983). Once we have decided that we like being thought of as ‘charitable’ or ‘civic-minded’ the mind gets down to work trying to find justifications for these labels and reasons why this is so. This tendency to make connections and find reasons why things happen appears

to be extremely powerful. It has been calculated that in ordinary conversations about 15% of statements are attempts to provide explanations! (Sutherland 1992) In fact, so good is the brain at this, that even patently irrational or untenable beliefs persist – because our brains construct a mental ‘scaffolding’! (Fine 2005) And once the ‘scaffolding’ is in place, behavior follows!

**Applications in the field of ELT:** The idea is very simple: instead of telling your students that you would like them to change in a certain way – which they might resist – you can instead praise them for already being the way you would like them to be! (cf Mr Keuner! 😊)

**Attach positive labels to students:** If a particular student is always late for class, you may take some opportunity to praise them for being ‘responsible’ – then s/he will have to live up to the ‘label’! Does this work? Of course it does! For instance, research has shown that if children are taught that they seem to care about their handwriting, they spend more time working on it – even if there is nobody around watching! (Goldstein, Martin & Cialdini 2007) Here are two further points:

**Help your students construct the ‘scaffolding’:** You can facilitate this process by asking students to find reasons why they are so ‘hard working’ or ‘cooperative’. For example you might say something like ‘I’ve noticed that there are far fewer mistakes in your work compared to other students I’ve had in the past. Are your parents perfectionists by any chance?’ The student’s brain will immediately start to construct reasons to justify the lie you have just told them. Amazingly, bizarre though these reasons may be, they will still serve to buttress the ‘label’!! (Fine 2005)

**Allow an ‘incubation period’:** Self-perception does not change from one moment to the next. Note that in the two experiments above, the observable change in behavior occurred a week later. Naturally, you need not be passive during the intervening period; the more you reinforce the student’s belief in the veracity of the ‘label’ the better your results will be.

**Beware of ‘the Golem effect’:** Similar mechanisms also work the other way round. All experienced teachers know that the worst thing one can do is give a student a negative label. Criticising the individual (e.g. ‘You are careless’) rather than their performance (e.g. ‘You have made a lot of careless mistakes here’) can be disastrous as people often come to acquire the trait you attribute to them. This is known as ‘the Golem effect’ (negative) as opposed to ‘the Pygmalion effect’ (positive) (Brafman & Brafman 2009).

**Away from ELT:** It is no wonder that such a handy mechanism has attracted the attention of politicians. Famously, the wily Egyptian politician A. Sadat used it in summit meetings. Before negotiations began, he would make a speech praising his bargaining opponents for their ‘fairness’ and ‘cooperativeness’ thereby (in the words of H. Kissinger) ‘giving them a reputation to uphold’! (Cialdini 2001). A more recent example is that of Obama being awarded the Nobel Peace Prize – less than a year upon taking office! To my mind this cannot be a reward for his efforts. After all, Obama could hardly have shown his true colours after such a short time. Instead it is far more likely that this was a preemptive attempt to

actually shape his policy, diverting it away from the warmongering of the previous administration. It would indeed be incongruous if a Nobel Peace Prize laureate started another war!

**From Brecht to Lucas:** In the 'Return of the Jedi' (Star Wars) Luke Skywalker addresses Darth Vader saying 'I know there is still good in you – I can sense it'. Could it be that it is this very labelling that eventually sways DV? (Goldstein, Martin & Cialdini 2007). Perhaps this is what the German police had in mind when during the football World Cup in 2006 they praised English fans as 'the best fans of the world'. Quite apart from the fact that this statement may well enter the Guinness Book of Records as the most bizarre statement ever \*, it did prove effective. There was no violence whatsoever! (Dutton, 2010).

\* ...apologies to fans of the England national football team! ☺

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