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## **Social Psychology and ELT – THE HALO EFFECT**

How important is one's handwriting? Hardly at all you might say, especially today when most people use a computer. Yet research shows otherwise. In a revealing experiment, a number of exam scripts were copied twice – once in good handwriting and once in bad handwriting. They were then passed on to two groups of examiners who were told to mark them and were specifically instructed to mark for content. Amazingly, the neatly-written scripts got significantly higher marks than the others (Sutherland 1992). Why did such a thing happen? The answer is that very often when we have to assess someone (or something) and this person has a salient, positive feature, the latter colours our judgment, so we tend to make all kind of positive attributions about this person, judgments which are at best only marginally related to the quality which stands out. This is called the 'Halo Effect'.

**An experiment:** One would expect the scientific world to be less susceptible to such an effect. Not so. In 1982, two psychologists decided to try out an interesting experiment. They selected 12 well-known journals of psychology and to each one they sent an article to be considered for publication. These articles are routinely checked by two authorities on the particular field as well as the editor. The results: in 8 out of the 12 cases the articles were deemed unworthy of publication. Out of 16 'evaluators' and 8 editors who (presumably) read them, not a single one had a different view. Well, one might say, not all articles submitted are up to par. This is true, only in this case these particular articles had been published by the very same journals, under the same title only a few months previously!! The only thing the two psychologists had changed were the names of the authors (eminent university professors) to imaginary ones and their affiliations (originally such prestigious universities as Harvard or Princeton) to non-existent (and by definition obscure) ones! Well, you might think, at least 4 of the articles were thought to be good. Not quite. In 3 out of the 4 cases someone simply realised that they had published this material before... (Sutherland 1992)

Why did such a thing happen? The answer is probably that journals like the above are probably inundated with submissions from academics on the make who are anxious to add yet another entry to their CV. It is equally likely that many of these articles are run-of-the-mill, with little to recommend them. This being so, it makes sense for the 'evaluators' to resort to 'shortcuts' (Cialdini 2001) – rather than scrutinize each script, they look at the name of the writer first. If s/he is a famous professor from an Ivy-League University, then the article is more likely to be worthy of publication. But if we start thinking like this, then an amazing change happens: as Sutherland (1992) points out, when faced with a piece of work by an established writer, we tend to look for its positive aspects, while if the writer's name rings no bells then we start looking for flaws!

Still not convinced? Here is another example. In the mid-70s, someone sent a book to no less than 27 different publishers and literary agents. No marks for guessing what happened. All 27 rejected it. Yet this book ('Steps' by Kosinsky) had actually been published in 1969 and had won the American National Book Award! All that had been changed was the title and the name of the writer. What is more remarkable is that one of the publishers who rejected the 'new book' was 'Random House' – the ones who had published the original one!! (ibid.)

Lest you should think that this phenomenon is restricted to the world of books and publishing, here are some more examples to show you just how widespread it is: Good-looking people are universally thought to be friendlier, more intelligent and more humorous, tall people are thought to have all kind of leadership qualities, they are clearly favoured in job interviews and make more money than people like me who are slightly challenged in the vertical dimension, and, of course, men of a high social status are judged as more attractive by women...(Brehm, Kasson & Fein 2002).

**Applications in the field of teaching:** If we can create for ourselves this 'aura' of the competent/charismatic/special teacher, then we are halfway towards winning the battle for the 'hearts and minds' of our students. Here are some ideas:

***Friendliness:*** When I ask my students to describe the best teacher they know, they almost invariably mention someone possessing this quality. When I try to probe deeper to see what it is about their method that is so special, my students are often stumped. It is because attitude is such a salient feature that it colours the students' perception of the teacher both as an individual *and* as a professional (for research on this very theme, see Albersson, Frey & Gregg 2004, p. 8)

***First impressions:*** Teachers often 'save' their best techniques for later – a big mistake in my view. By using your favourite materials/techniques early on, you create a positive impression in the students' minds which will pre-dispose them favourably towards all your subsequent lessons. The tendency of first impressions to 'stick' has been demonstrated again and again (Fine 2005)

***Professionalism:*** Little details like being prepared, giving an outline of your lesson in advance, revising what you did the previous time, showing students that there is a continuity in your sessions – all these create an impression of 'professionalism' and they are more observable than, say, a profound activity sequence (Lewis & Hill 1992). The point is that once you have acquired a reputation as a 'true professional', this reputation precedes you and everything you do will then be seen in this light!

***Success:*** Unfortunately perhaps, teachers too are judged by results. This is particularly true in the case of 1-1 lessons. Consequently, there is a lot to be said for 'blowing your own trumpet'. This will create an expectation of success which boosts the students' confidence and acts like a self-fulfilling prophecy (Dornyei 2001).

***Titles:*** As I have said in other articles and as the above experiment clearly demonstrates, titles like 'MSc', 'PhD' etc. never fail to impress people about your competence – so if you have them, flaunt them! (On how effective this 'aura' can be, see also Goldstein, Martin & Cialdini 2007). Similarly, if you happen to work for a prestigious institution, then mention it to your students. I remember how people's faces used to light up when I told them I was an Oral Examiner for the British Council!

***Looks:*** At the cost of repeating myself, the importance of being good-looking can hardly be exaggerated. Not only does this quality affect the 'marks' one gets in virtually all other fields, but there is evidence that

this positive pre-disposition of others actually elicits all kind of positive behaviours from them (Aronson 1999). The moral is clear: it pays to work on your appearance!

**What about ELT?** So, what about our field? Are there any elements which can create a ‘Halo Effect’? Yes, there are - two of them: a) Your passport and b) your accent. Let me explain. I believe that if would-be employers receive 2 identical CVs, one from a native speaker and another from a Greek teacher, there are many cases when only the former will be short-listed. I believe that if two Greek EFL teachers go through an interview and one of them has a native-like accent while the other one does not, then the former is far more likely to be hired, even if the latter has better qualifications/more experience. And I am certain that (*ceteris paribus*) native speakers are on average better paid when it comes to private lessons. Now, I do not have any hard evidence for all this, but I am prepared to bet good money that all 3 hypotheses are true. Anyone for research?

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