

Teachers as lighthouse keepers

Daniel Xerri sees the light at Sumburgh Head.

After attending the IATEFL conference in Glasgow in 2017, I spent a few days in the Shetland Islands in the far north of Scotland. This provided me with the opportunity to reflect on the learning I had engaged in as part of this invaluable professional development event. On one of my walks, I visited the lighthouse at Sumburgh Head. Designed by Robert Stevenson, the grandfather of the famous Scottish author of *Treasure Island* and *Kidnapped*, the lighthouse was built in 1821. It stands 91 metres above sea level and its light, flashing every 30 seconds, is visible 23 nautical miles away. On my visit to Sumburgh Head, I realised how the job of a lighthouse keeper resonates in some ways with what we do as English language teachers.

ELT and lighthouse keeping

Up to 1991, operating the lighthouse at Sumburgh Head was the responsibility of a series of keepers, after which date the light was automated. Given how difficult life could sometimes be for those stationed at a lighthouse, only a few people were deemed to be cut out for the job of a keeper. One display at Sumburgh Head reproduces a Northern Lighthouse Board advertisement from 1960. It describes the profile of a lighthouse keeper, and many of the things it says about keepers can, at times metaphorically, be applied also to English language teachers.

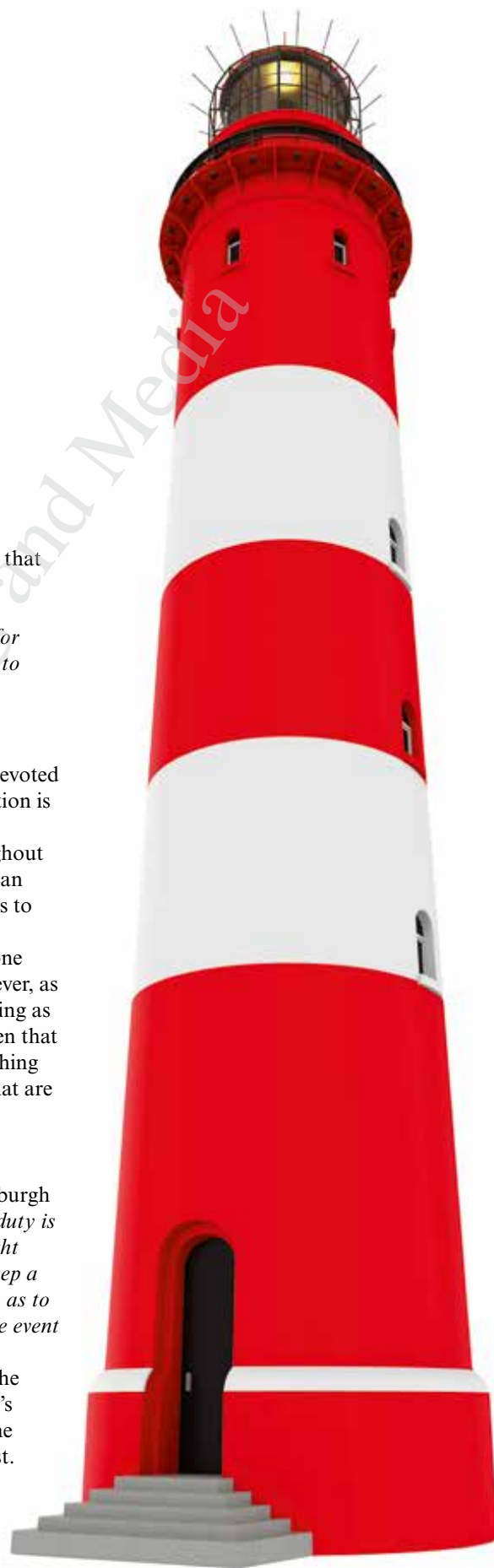
Dedicated

The advertisement starts by affirming that *'Not everyone is suitable to be a light keeper. The good light keeper has, or acquires, the temperament necessary for the job, which involves residence close to the sea and has much loneliness and isolation in its composition'*.

Teaching is also a profession that requires a sense of dedication. Being devoted to one's duties and the learners' education is immensely important and has to be sustained on a continuing basis throughout one's career, especially since teaching can sometimes be a thankless job that leads to feelings of isolation. For some people, teaching is also a calling, though not one that everyone gets to experience. However, as Dylan Fenton points out, seeing teaching as a calling is somewhat problematic, given that it is based on the assumption that teaching consists of dispositions and abilities that are innate and thus impossible to nurture.

Vigilant

According to the information at Sumburgh Head, a lighthouse keeper's *'primary duty is to watch at night, to ensure that the light flashes correctly to character and to keep a fog watch throughout each 24 hours, so as to be ready to operate the fog signal in the event of poor visibility'*. The job entailed discipline and hard work, given that the keeper had to regularly wind the light's turning mechanism, so as to ensure the safety of mariners sailing off the coast. If a keeper were to fall asleep, tragic consequences could ensue, so it was considered a grave offence.



Just as a lighthouse is an important means of facilitating navigation, so the English language classroom enables learners to follow their educational journey with profit and without scuppering their chances of future success. For this to happen, teachers have to be constantly attentive to their learners' needs and illuminate the way forward. By being vigilant with respect to any difficulties the learners might have or any problems they are likely to encounter in mastering the language, teachers are able to facilitate the smooth passage of the learning process.

Multi-talented

According to the advertisement, *'a light keeper must be a man of parts. He will acquire a good working knowledge of engines, at stations with radio beacons and radar; about radio telephones; from his study of the sea he will respect its immense power; he will be a handyman of varying proficiency but mostly of a high standard; he will be a useful cook and a good companion'*.

Likewise, as Scott Thornbury asserts, English language teachers are usually encouraged to develop a sound knowledge of pedagogy, a high level of proficiency in the language, and a well-honed awareness of the underlying systems of English for them to teach effectively. They are typically appreciative of the impact that English has on people's lives and, hence, seek to empower their learners by providing them with the means of using it in as competent a manner as possible. According to Sarah Mercer, besides their knowledge, skills and beliefs as language teachers, they are also valued for developing positive relationships with their learners. And, as Carrie Furrer, Ellen Skinner and Jennifer Pitzer assert, such relationships have the potential to have a beneficial effect on their learners' academic success.

Contented

Lastly, in the advertisement it is declared that *'a light keeper will not make a fortune, but he will be at peace with himself and the world'*.

Correspondingly, most English language teachers know that, in spite of how significant their role is in equipping their learners with the knowledge and skills needed to communicate effectively, in spite of how vital they are in cultivating the minds of learners, their salaries and working conditions are not usually commensurate. Nonetheless, if they possess a strong sense of dedication to their profession and to what can be accomplished by means of it, teachers will persist in their endeavours to touch other people's lives through what happens in the language classroom. They will also strive to keep growing as professionals, so as to be able to guide their learners on the best educational journey possible. Given how invested most English language teachers are in what they do and who they are as professionals, it is only right that their efforts should be better supported and recognised.



As mentioned earlier, keepers no longer operate the lighthouse at Sumburgh Head, as automation has made this job redundant. Sugata Mitra and others have suggested that

teachers might one day experience a similar fate, with computers and robots taking over the duties associated with language teaching. Whether this will happen or not is still uncertain. However, unlike lighthouse keepers, English language teachers are not just guardians of a stationary mass of matter.

Teachers deal with a complex and palpable collection of thoughts, emotions, experiences and interactions, which all play a pivotal role in language learning. As Sarah Mercer points out, facilitating the language learning experience is an inherently social activity: it involves communication and collaboration, and requires socio-cultural competence. This implies that teachers will still be needed in the future, especially if English language learning is seen as a vehicle for the mastery of 21st-century skills.

The futurist Michio Kaku decries the saying *'Those who can, do. Those who can't, teach'*. He suggests that although teachers might need to adapt to the needs of future technological societies in which intellectual capitalism will be maximised, these societies will generate jobs requiring qualities such as creativity, artistic ability, innovation, leadership and analysis. Contrary to what happened to lighthouse keeping, teaching is unlikely to become obsolete any time soon because, just like communicative ability, these qualities are still best fostered by teachers engaging in essentially human ways with their learners. Perhaps one of the advantages of being English language teachers is that while teaching the language, we can also help nurture so many other key qualities. ■

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