

Teaching English One-to-One

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I. Adapting lessons to individual needs

1. Reasons people study one-to-one

It is likely that at some point in your teaching career, you will teach a one-to-one lesson. Many of the same principles and guidelines about teaching groups apply here but there are also a lot of different aspects to take into consideration.

There may be many reasons why a student would choose to have one-to-one lessons rather than group lessons.

For example, the student:

- is a business person who is too busy to attend classes;
- is frail or not well;
- has young children and it is simply easier;
- is a child and it is more convenient at home;
- is particularly shy and not confident to join a class;
- believes they'll learn more quickly in one-to-one lessons;
- needs to pass an English exam in a short time and believes this is the best way to do it.

2. Assessing needs

You can often hear the term 'tailor made' in connection with one-to-one lessons. This means you can create lessons to suit the exact needs of your student.

The best way to find out what a student wants to concentrate on in the lessons is to ask them. Many students have a clear idea of what they want to practise in their lessons, or what topics they find interesting. Listen and respond to their interests.

If your student cannot think of anything they want to focus on, you can use a needs analysis questionnaire to find out exactly what your student wants or needs to work on. Then concentrate on these areas to use their lessons and time to the best extent.

3. Accommodating learning styles

When customising your lessons, it is a good idea to establish your students' preferred learning style. Many learners respond well to a mixture of styles, but if your student is strongly one type of learner, this can help you both when planning lessons and activities.

There are several types of learning style. However, we can put them all into three basic categories.

Visual

Learn through seeing...

These learners need to see the teacher's body language and facial expression to fully understand the content of a lesson. They may think in pictures and learn best from visual displays including: diagrams, illustrated text books, overhead transparencies, videos, flipcharts and hand-outs. Visual learners often prefer to take detailed notes to help absorb the information they learn in lessons.

Auditory

Learn through listening...

Auditory people learn best through verbal lectures, discussions, talking things through and listening to what others have to say. Auditory learners try to interpret the underlying meanings of speech through listening to tone of voice, pitch, speed and other nuances. They need to hear things spoken before seeing them written down.

Kinaesthetic

Learn through moving, doing and touching...

Kinaesthetic people learn best through a hands-on approach. They often find it hard to sit still for long periods and may become distracted by their need for activity.

4. Devising a programme

Once you have assessed your student's needs, it is helpful to devise a program to give to your student (and their employer if relevant). A programme is motivating for a student as they see their learning is taken seriously. If one-to-one classes become too casual and unplanned the student is likely to lose interest.

A programme typically includes the following elements.

Course aims

State explicitly what your student should be able to do by the end of the programme. This should be based on the needs analysis: if they need to use English to go shopping, the course aim should say 'You will be able to use English to go shopping'.

Session outline

Try to map out at least a very rough session-by-session outline. This could be stated as aims, or even just topics (for example 'food shopping', 'clothes shopping'). This helps tie sessions to the aims of the course, and, just as importantly, makes the programme seem organised and professional.

Assessment

You need to 'assess' your student regularly. This simply means giving your student chances to show they can do the things the course and session aims say they will be able to.

Assessment does not just mean formal pen and paper 'tests'. In fact, assessment should replicate the real-life aims of your student as realistically as possible. If one course aim is your student will be able to use English to go shopping, actually take your student shopping (when they are ready and confident, of course) and let them have a go.

5. One-to-one or small group?

Different teachers have very different opinions about one-to-one teaching. Some like the close one-to-one relationship; others find the interaction tiring. One-to-one of course offers a unique opportunity to give tailored help to a learner; on the other hand, it is hard to monitor your student's use of language if you are thinking about what you are going to say.

Consider the option of changing your one-to-one lesson to a group of two or three students. You can ask your student if they have a friend or friends they would like to invite.

This significantly changes the dynamic – it is not only less intense, but you can also step back, observe, and give valuable feedback on the students' performance in communicative situations. (And you can charge each student less, and still earn more!)

II. Dealing with potential problems

1. Advantages and disadvantages of teaching one-to-one

There can be many advantages in teaching a one-to-one lesson. One of the most common ones you will hear is that you can build a relationship with your student. This can lead to a rich and fulfilling experience as you watch your student progress as a result of your input and their hard work. As a teacher you can get a deeper understanding of the specific problems your student has. Consequently, you can devise lessons to help overcome the problems.

Generally students who have one-to-one lessons make faster progress because the learning experience is more intense. They are also usually more motivated to learn (as long as they are not being forced to do so, e.g. a son or daughter getting extra tuition to help them at school). This means that the learning process is often a rewarding experience for both the student and the teacher.

There are potential disadvantages with teaching one-to-one lessons as well. The most obvious one is the lack of peer interaction and stimulus. Some students do not have a very vivid imagination and need the help of other students to come up with ideas. This means you as the teacher have to act as the catalyst for your student's ideas, i.e. you have to prompt or suggest ideas to help get them thinking. Students need to work and concentrate harder as the focus is on them a lot more than in a larger group. Most course books are written for teaching groups. Finally, the student doesn't have anyone to compare their progress to.

2. Why the student can be unresponsive

There can be several reasons why a student is not very responsive. The material you are using may be at a higher level than the student, making them feel frustrated. Alternatively, the material could be too easy for the student and so they are just bored.

Perhaps the material you are using is not interesting or relevant to the student. Again, this is why it is very important to do a needs analysis with the student to determine their areas of interest. It is also important not to assume that just because you find a topic fascinating, your student will too.

Here are some other reasons why a student may be unresponsive to your teaching efforts:

- They feel uncomfortable or shy in a one-to-one situation
- They have had a bad day at work/school/home and are finding it hard to concentrate
- They want to tell you all their problems rather than work on your recommendations
- They have poor listening skills
- They expect you to dominate the lesson and do all the talking

3. Compensating for a lack of material

"Oh no! 45 minutes left to the lesson and I have nothing more to do."

It is almost guaranteed that you will find yourself in this situation at some time in your teaching career! It may even be due to a situation beyond your control.

Perhaps you share a one-to-one student with another teacher. Your colleague forgot to fill in the information about what he/she covered in the last couple of lessons. You turn up with the same material and the student says 'I did this last week with Bill!'

Alternatively, you bring in some material to the lesson that you think is perfect for your student. You introduce it and the student tells you 'Sorry, I am not interested in this topic at all.'

Maybe you have what you thought was an abundance of material to teach in the lesson but your student races through all of it and is sitting waiting for the next task.

So what can you do in these situations? The most obvious answer is to always have backup or extra material with you. It is good to have a range of materials to cater for all eventualities e.g. your student might need to work on some grammar points or want to do a speaking activity.

If you have an abundance of time to fill, there is a useful aid which can help you. While talking with your student, make a note of any important errors they make (you will need to explain to your student why you are doing this). Hopefully, if your lesson finishes before the planned time, you will have a list of errors under the 'What you said' column. Now you can go through the errors with the student and decide together how they can correct them.

Here is an example:

What you said	What you should have said
e.g. I have been to France two years ago. I like taking phoTOgraphs.	I went to France two years ago. I like taking PHOtographs.

These sheets are very easy to prepare and most importantly students find them very useful. This is mainly because they can see that the lessons are dealing directly with their problem areas as opposed to a group lesson where the teacher had to cater for all students and a wide range of errors that might not be relevant to them.

4. Student's favourite subjects

"He always wants to talk about his dog; I never get through my lesson".

It is important to remember that even though a certain topic of conversation might not be interesting for you, the student is paying for the lesson and so is entitled to speak about whatever they want.

The main problem here (apart from a frustrated teacher) is that if the student only speaks in the lesson without additional work on grammar etc. they will not make much progress.

Of course this will be viewed as the teacher's fault and not the student's, so it is important that you address the situation.

As a teacher you need to convince your students that until they start working on their errors they won't make much progress. The sheet you looked at earlier can prove very useful in situations like this. You can show your student their problem areas and persuade them of the benefits of working on other areas and not only speaking.

For example: "You obviously know a lot about the psychology of dogs, but you could be even more fluent when talking about them if you worked on this language point."

It would be good to create a bridge from dogs to reading / writing / listening / speaking activities on other topics.

You could try the following sequence of steps:

- Read a short text about a dog who rescues a drowning man
- Elicit ideas on how or why the dog may have done this
- Ask Yuki if he is a good swimmer and if he likes the beach
- Go on to discuss dangers and safe behaviour at the beach
- Work on vocabulary and conditionals (If I saw a shark, I'd ...).

Finally, it is important to remember that, as long as it is not for the whole lesson, letting your students speak about something that interests them should be viewed as a positive use of time. For many students the main point of taking English lessons is to improve their oral communication skills. So what better way to improve them than to speak about something they are genuinely interested in?

5. Varying the dynamic

Some teachers see a one-to-one class as a conversation between the teacher and the student, sitting face-to-face in a room. However, it is important to vary the dynamic. You need to change the interaction pattern and provide a range of activity types, in order to create a relaxed atmosphere and a well-rounded learning experience.

Click each heading to read some suggestions.

- Use a variety of activities

[reveal text]

A variety of contrasting activities is important in any class, but especially so in a one-to-one environment. Follow a speaking activity with writing, or use a reading text to trigger discussion.

- Give your student space

[reveal text]

Don't constantly urge your student to say something – this can actually scare your student. Stop talking and give your student time to think. Let your student read and listen on their own, or prepare for an activity in silence. Physically move away and even leave the room whenever possible.

Don't feel you are only giving value for money when you are central to the action. Your student is not only learning when you are talking.

- Change seating and location

[reveal text]

Change where you sit and work frequently to provide variety and interest – you can ask your student to decide. Stand up and move around if appropriate (for example, when doing a roleplay).

A one-to-one class may also be a great opportunity to go outside into the real world. Visit places of interest and relevance to your student, and do real things together. (Let your student be the teacher. Ask them to explain the world outside the classroom to you, rather than you telling them!)

6. Classroom rules

It is a good idea to agree on some rules for the lesson with your students.

Mobile phones

Ask your student to turn off their mobile phone for the duration of your lesson.

Timings

Decide how much time to allocate for work on speaking, grammar etc. in each lesson.

Homework

Identify whether your student wants to do homework or not. Some might say they want to do homework but don't actually have the time to do it.

Punctuality

Make sure you expect your student to be on time for lessons.

Feedback

Decide how often you would like to get feedback from your student about your classes.

Breaks

Agree when to take breaks. As one-to-one lessons are very intensive, it is important to have breathers periodically.

Seating plan

Decide the best way to sit. If you change the seating pattern this can help the student concentrate or even motivate them.

Corrections

Decide when and how often to correct your students.

III. Lesson activities

1. Ideas for one-to-one games and activities

A common misconception when teaching one-to-one lessons is that most of the activities or games for students are designed solely for groups. However, the majority of activities can be adapted for one-to-one lessons. In this section we are going to look at the various types of tasks that are suitable for one to one lessons.

Although the students do not have peer interaction in one-to-one lessons, pair work is still just as important as in group lessons. The only difference is that you as the teacher are always the other half of the pair.

Compare pictures or photographs

To personalise your lesson, ask your student to bring in photos of their family or holiday. There are countless tasks you can use pictures for, such as practising making comparisons, using the past simple and past continuous for describing what they did on holiday, or it can be a useful aid for increasing your student's vocabulary.

Make a phone call

Obviously this is a classic 'pairs' exercise. Sit with your back to your student (to make the task more realistic) and practise making arrangements, taking an order, complaining and apologising etc.

Record your student's speech

This is very good for work on pronunciation, and you can use a Dictaphone or video camera. This can also help students who have to give presentations. Apart from their speech, you can look at whether their body language is appropriate.

Guided tour

Get your student to give you a guided tour of their office or town. This is especially useful for students who regularly have foreign visitors to their company. Your student can practise a range of tenses here e.g. present simple – 'This is the town hall where...', or the present perfect – 'Our company has been based here for 10 years.'

2. Preparing a student for real life

A one-to-one class is a chance to identify the specific real-life needs of an individual student, whether to use English at work, study at university, or live successfully in a new country. Focus on the real-life goal with your student, and treat English as simply the means to an end.

If, for example, your student needs to use English at work, list the exact things they need to use English for in their job: using the phone, writing emails etc. Together devise a list of criteria to evaluate success in the real world (e.g. 'I can persuade people to buy things', 'My email will create a good impression'). Have your student actually perform the workplace tasks – if possible, video or record them – then evaluate the performance together according to the criteria.

3. Using authentic materials

Authentic materials bridge the gap between the classroom and the real world, and when teaching one-to-one it's very easy to bring in authentic texts (with no photocopying required) and realia.

Read straight from authentic sources

Rather than making a photocopy of a magazine article, bring in the actual magazine. It is motivating for your student to handle and comprehend something real from the English-speaking world. (It is also much more engaging to read a full-colour publication than a black and white copy.)

Use a range of listening texts

Avoid becoming the main source of listening input for your student, which happens in many one-to-one classes. Make sure they listen to a wide range of interactions in different contexts using a variety of recordings and videos.

Give your student control

Give your student physical control. Let them operate equipment and handle materials. This changes the teacher-student dynamic where the teacher always 'allows' the student to do things (which can be suffocating in a one-to-one environment).

4. Using the Internet

The Web is an excellent resource for one-to-one teaching. It allows your student to direct the focus of the lesson to their own needs and interests.

The main problem learners have is finding relevant or quality material. You as a teacher can guide your student in these initial stages and then step back to allow them to work independently; be there to help if your student asks.

Avoid using the Internet as a time-filler with activities a student could as usefully do on their own; consider how you could incorporate the Web into the larger lesson (for example, your student finds information and then discusses it with you).

Language learning sites

There are many sites dedicated to language learning on the Internet, largely providing listening and reading activities, and controlled practice quizzes for grammar and vocabulary. Allow your student to explore and find activities that they find useful and enjoyable.

Authentic reading and listening

The Web is clearly a rich resource for real listening and reading. Set your student small tasks during your lesson, and then use what they found to look at language or as a trigger for writing or discussion.

A project

Your student could work on an ongoing project related to their real-life needs, such as a guide to the local community or a collection of useful language for their work. They could do much of the research outside class and then discuss with you what they discovered.

5. A lesson sequence

Let's consider the following profile of a student:

Level:	Intermediate, has been learning English for 5 years
Job:	Salesperson
Interests:	Music, keep-fit, films, cooking and sports
Areas he/she wants to work on:	Improving speaking skills and grammar
Need English at work for:	Making presentations, meetings, socialising, writing e-mails, telephoning
Learner style:	Kinaesthetic

Here is an outline of a lesson which would be suitable to the student with the above profile. It addresses her interests and needs:

- Bring in some sports equipment to stimulate a discussion about sports the student enjoys.
- Set the student the task of preparing a five minute presentation about a sport for the following lesson.
- Discuss the stages of a presentation including language used at various points and the use of visuals.
- Look at a short presentation on the internet and discuss what was good or not so good about it.

- Tell the student about a presentation you enjoyed and what techniques enhanced it.
- Elicit information about presentations the student has seen and what they did or didn't like about it.
- Discuss possible content for the student's presentation and how it might be organized.
- End with a quick game where you toss the ball to each other as you both name a piece of equipment.

As we tailor a lesson to a particular student, we need to be careful that we aren't doing something that interests us, but doesn't interest the student. If we are following a book, one of the nice things about teaching one-to-one is that we can drop bits and add bits to cater more closely to the student's needs and interests.

Make sure your lesson is focused around one main idea. Do not try to pack it with as many activities as possible.

IV. Ten top tips

Finally, here are some top tips to take into account when teaching one-to-one lessons:

1. Create a good needs analysis. This should include questions about learner style and interests. Don't forget – needs change.
2. Modify activities. Don't skip pair work, think about how activities can be adapted.
3. Don't forget the skills. Writing, reading and listening takes the pressure off you.
4. Don't be afraid to just let a student get on with an activity and work at their own pace.
5. Change the focus and pace of the lesson. Have short breaks, change the subject, keep the students on their toes.
6. Be prepared. Students can rush through work very quickly or they may not like what you have planned for them. Be one step ahead!
7. Have extra backup material readily available at all times.
8. Set out rules. Have rules on how much time is for 'conversation' and how much for 'work'. Also ask your students to turn off their phones unless really necessary and be unavailable for that hour.
9. Don't be afraid to have 'just conversation'. This can often benefit the student as much as a 'grammar presentation'.
10. Encourage and praise your students often. Remember that they don't have anyone else to compare their progress with.