



Teaching one-to-one (part 2)

Ingrid Wisniewska offers more practical advice

Ingrid Wisniewska offers some practical advice on how to balance teacher and student views of language learning in one-to-one lessons.

In my previous article, I outlined some of the advantages and possible challenges of teaching one-to-one. In this article, I am going to discuss another aspect of one-to-one teaching: learning how to balance your own values and expectations with those of your student.

Imagine that you are about to start learning a foreign language. It's your first lesson with your one-to-one teacher and the first thing your teacher asks you to do is to read a list of verbs and memorise them. How would you feel? What would you do in this situation?

It is sometime helpful to imagine yourself in your student's place as this can help to anticipate possible problems or misunderstandings. In the situation described above, the problem may not be the activity itself. It is probably that the activity did not match the student's needs and expectations.

In order to anticipate possible misunderstandings or disagreements, it may be helpful to think about these questions.

1. What is my teaching approach as a one-to-one teacher?

'My goal is to create a friendly and relaxed learning atmosphere.'

'My one-to-one lessons are all about helping students to develop good study skills.'

'I see myself as a coach, motivating my student to study harder.'

In contrast to group teaching in a school context, one-to-one teachers are often in a situation where they have to explain why their approach to teaching is effective and promote themselves as effective teachers. It can be helpful to write down your answers to questions such as: What do I enjoy most about one-to-one teaching? What is my goal in one-to-one teaching? What makes my style of teaching effective? What kind of atmosphere / learning environment do I try to create?

Reflecting on these questions and developing clear and confident answers to them will help you to instill confidence in your students and help them understand your teaching approach. You may also want to use some of these answers if you plan to promote your lessons on posters, flyers or websites.

Tip: To help students understand your approach to teaching and learning, explain the reasons for your choices of activities. If possible, highlight measurable improvements to show your student that they are making progress.

2. What are my student's expectations of one-to-one lessons?

Most adult students have some preconceptions about the best way to learn, even if they are not aware of them. This may be based on previous experiences of learning at school (which may or may not have been successful). In one-to-one lessons, the student's individual preconceptions about learning are likely to surface more strongly. Sometimes, they may want to learn only through speaking. Or they may think that grammar is the most important part of learning.



It is helpful to make space in your lessons for students to evaluate activities. Encourage them to discuss how they learned at school and whether they thought it was effective. When choosing learning activities take your student's expectations into account and strike a balance between your and your student's expectations. If, for example, your student thinks that grammar is the most important thing, include a section of grammar in each lesson, but also combine it with other fluency-based or skills-based activities. Careful monitoring by getting regular feedback from your student will also help to make sure that your lessons are on track and your student maintains motivation and continues to make progress.

Tip: To find out if you and your student's expectations are compatible, you may want to offer a free trial lesson without commitment. This gives both teacher and student a chance to decide if there is a match of personalities, expectations and teaching/learning styles.

3. How can I find out about my student's language needs and goals?

At the start of your course, it is essential to establish your student's reasons for learning English and what they will use English for. You can then use this information to work with your student to create an individual learning plan.

Often, your student may be unclear about their goals. They may say that they want to improve their English in general and rely on you to tell them what they need to improve. However, the process of involving the student in planning their course goals and how to achieve them is important for two reasons. First, it helps to create a relationship of collaborative learning that is crucial to engaging the student in the learning process. It allows the student to take some responsibility for the success of the lessons, instead of relying solely on the teacher. Second, it creates milestones for students to measure their own progress. This is an important way to maintain motivation and ensure your student will want to continue learning.

You may want to try out a variety of different methods of finding out about your student's needs and goals. You may start with an interview and follow up with a written questionnaire. Or you may combine an interview with filling out a written questionnaire. You may choose to follow-up with a paragraph or a journal entry (depending on level) about why they want to learn English.

Keep in mind that a student's goals can change over the course of just a few lessons, whether for external reasons (a promotion, a job offer) or simply because they have become better at articulating what they want. Goals need to be revisited and re-evaluated at regular intervals.

Tip: A good way to show your student that they are making progress is to audio record a part of your first lesson. You can replay this at a later date to show how much your student has improved.

4. What can I do to ensure that my student turns up on time and avoid absences?

Finally, it is important to establish some ground rules concerning practical issues such as payments, lateness and absences. Some teachers use a written agreement that clarifies what will happen if a student does not turn up for a lesson, or is more than ten minutes late, for example.

You can decide rules such as:

- please pay at the end of each lesson/Please pay in advance for the next lesson
- please phone or email me 24 hours in advance if you would like to cancel a lesson
- if you are more than 10 minutes late, the lesson will finish at the agreed time
- if you miss a lesson without telling me in advance, it is your responsibility to follow up and arrange the next lesson.



Cultural differences about lateness or absence can also cause misunderstandings. As with teaching/learning approaches, it can be helpful to discuss these issues and decide them collaboratively with your student, as well as deciding other course or lesson requirements such as how much homework they should do and how often they would like to be evaluated.

Conclusion

One of the advantages of one-to-one teaching is the flexibility to create a learning journey that is unique to your student's needs and interests. Thinking about this learning journey from your student's point of view and being clear about goals and expectations are an important way to make sure that the journey enjoyable and also successful.

Ingrid Wisniewska PhD is the author of *Learning One-to-One*, a handbook for one-to-one language teachers, published by Cambridge University Press.