



Teaching Tip #8

Teaching one-to-one

Methodology

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Why is 1-2-1 'special'?

Having talked to fellow teachers and done a workshop on this subject I realised how strongly teachers feel about aspects of this kind of teaching.

The topic of One to One teaching provokes personal, sometimes passionate responses from many English language teachers. This is especially true when it comes to teacher-learner roles and the startling lack of published ELT material. One teacher neatly described the teacher role as being "blurred" between teacher, psychologist and friend. One minute learners complain the teacher is not pushing them to do enough homework then the next they are talking about work problems or family life.

This seems to be a challenging situation for teachers to be in, and a situation which, unfortunately is not covered much in ELT discussion. Apart from Peter Wilberg's One to One teacher's handbook (1987), on looking through published material on Language Teaching I failed to find any sections on teaching one to one, while there was lots advice on the classroom management of groups. It is somehow assumed that teaching English as a foreign language means organising huge groups of students, while the reality is that one to one is a normal and often significant part of our teaching lives.

What are the advantages and disadvantages for teachers and learners of One to One Teaching? We asked many teachers this question. These were the results:

Advantages and disadvantages for students

Advantages

- Students have the constant attention of the teacher so they can listen to and speak more English than they might in a group situation.
- Student can contribute to classes more and feel part of the learning process by bringing material like books, songs, articles from local newspapers to class.
- Their strengths and weaknesses are addressed more consistently and fully without the competition of other students for the teacher's time.
- They can become better learners through learner training with their teacher.
- There are less time constraints so they can go at their own pace and not feel pressured by the progress of other students.
- According to the Natural Method as suggested by Stephen Krashen, learners acquire language best through the modified input of the teacher. This means that the teacher adapts their language to the level of the student and in one-to-one classes the amount and type of input can be maximised by the teacher to benefit the student.

Disadvantages

- There is a similar potential for exhaustion as they too can be in constant interaction in an unnatural way with the teacher.
- It can be difficult to measure progress without other students to compare with and the possible lack of a syllabus.
- There can be a lack of individual study time. They might not have the same “sink in time” as they would have in a group. This can go against the acquisition of language, especially if teachers don’t give enough restricted practise (Scrivener, 1987) of new language and students don’t absorb the language as effectively as they would if they had more time to reflect and process input in a class where the teacher might be more comfortable with silent periods.
- The lesson format can become monotonous if a teacher lacks the confidence to experiment with change of pace and type of activity. They might assume a student would not be open to activities such as dictation, songs, moving around the class, chants, drilling etc

Advantages and disadvantages for teachers

Advantages

- Only one level - This means no mixed abilities or fast finishers to deal with.
- Material can be supplied by the student.
- We as teachers can learn something too. Students can teach us about their interests, work and experiences.
- We can select material we are sure will interest and motivate the student.
- There are fewer time constraints. This means we can spend as long as necessary to address our student’s needs, and explore areas of personal interest.

Disadvantages

- The teacher is always “on”. One common comment is “When else would we spend ninety minutes talking constantly to one person?”
- Teachers find it difficult to take notes for correction without distracting the student.
- There are a limited range of activities. This means no pair or group work, which can be a bit monotonous for the teacher, and the student.
- We might feel bad about doing reading and writing. Teachers worry that students will see it as a “waste of time”.
- There is an astonishing lack of materials and teacher’s notes hardly ever take this situation into account.
- The role of counsellor can be stressful. Teachers might feel uncomfortable listening to personal problems of their students.
- The same window or wall to look at each day can be boring.
- Student/ teacher personality differences or opposing opinions can make life difficult as teachers are afraid to respond to comments they strongly disagree with.
- Often schools don’t give a syllabus for one-to-one classes so it is more difficult to record and show progress to the student.

10 things that you can do with a one to one class

1. Guess the news story

Collect a week’s worth of newspapers (in any language) and cut out pictures of news stories from each one. Aim for a selection of five or six topical news pictures from that week. Then

take an A4 or letter size sheet of heavy paper (or card). Cut a small square out of the middle of this card. When you come to class, place a picture from the news under the card so that only some of the picture is visible. The student must 1) speculate about what the picture is about, and 2) tell you as much as they know about the news story.

2. Written conversation or role play

Conduct a conversation but only in written form. Take a piece of paper and write a question to your student and give him or her the paper to write an answer on. Go back and forth like this until you have a good sized sample of writing. This can be used as the basis for correcting written mistakes and planning further classes.

3. Post it mania.

Bring a pack of post it notes to the class one day. Look around the room and write a word of something that is in the room on a post it note. Give it to the student and ask him or her to stick the post it note on the correct object. Do this until you have labelled many things in the room. At the end of the lesson call out things and ask the student to bring you back the post it note (unless they would like to leave it on the object as a memory aide!).

4. Sight translation activities.

Many one to one students are business people who are expected to learn English for their job. One typical area that people at work need English for is sight translation. Someone comes into the office waving a piece of paper and asking if anyone can tell them what it means. Do this from time to time with your student. Give them a document related to their work and ask them to explain it quickly to you in English. If you speak your student's L1, give them a document in English and ask them to give you a quick translation into their language.

5. Get out of the class.

One-to-one classes are often extremely mobile, and teachers can take advantage of this. Ask your student to take you on a guided tour in English of their home or workplace. Do a shopping class, where you and your student go to several shops together. Or just go for a walk outside with your student and do your class like that one day. A change of environment is very good for refocusing the mind, and there are lots of new topics for language study that you can get just from walking down the street.

6. Questionnaires.

Prepare a series of question prompts on a topic. For example, if your topic was sports you could have the following question prompts:

- /like sports?
- what/ sports/play?
- what / sports /watch on television?
- ever / win / sports award? etc.

First interview the student using the prompts. Then ask the student to do the same for you. When you are finished, review any special vocabulary or grammar that came up. Tell the student that for the next class he or she must prepare a similar list of questions on a different topic to interview you.

7. Cuisinaire rods.

Cuisinaire rods are little coloured wooden sticks that are used in teaching maths. With one-to-one classes and very small groups, there are lots of things you can do with cuisinaire rods. Ask the student to make a representation of the company structure using the rods (like an organigram). You can also use rods to teach word stress (rods for every syllable, a different coloured rod for a stressed syllable).

8. Index cards

One piece of equipment that is particularly useful for a one-to-one class is a set of index cards. Use them to keep track of new vocabulary. The cards can then be used from time to time to review this. You can also use index cards as cue cards for a presentation. Help the student write their cues for a mini presentation on a topic, then get them to give you the presentation using only their cues. You can also write different conversation topics or role plays on individual cards. Ask the student to choose one at random and talk about or act out the situation on the card.

9. Think of someone who

Many teachers of one-to-one classes are frustrated by coursebook or resource material that is only suitable for large groups. However, some of these activities can be adapted. For instance, the classic Find Someone Who activity can be changed to a Think of Someone Who and used with only one student. Using a Find Someone Who worksheet, ask the student to write the names of people that he or she knows who match each category. The student must do this without telling you anything. He or she must also write the names down in a different order than they appear on the worksheet. Do the same yourself with another copy of the same sheet. Then swap papers. The objective is to ask and answer questions to find out which person written down on the paper matches which category. You and the student will therefore be asking and answering the questions several times, just like in a Find Someone Who activity with a large class.

10. Speaking Lessons on Onestop

Let us take some of the pressure off you. There are several lessons on Onestopenglish that can be easily used with one to one or very small classes. Specifically, the Deck of Conversations and the Deck of Business Conversations are two speaking classes which are ideal for small groups or just one student.

10 tips on how to minimise disadvantages

1. Be prepared to take on different roles. Talk to colleagues if you are feeling stressed by being a 'counsellor'. We can guarantee other teachers will have similar experiences.
2. Set clear goals. It is important to set long and short term objectives which include types of activities such as reading, role-plays, watching videos as well as language points. Also do feedback regularly to check if these goals have been met. The student then has a list of achievements and an opportunity to review things they are still not sure of. You can also get feedback on types of activities they have enjoyed. Try to do this once a month.
3. Do a thorough needs analysis. (Editor - try the Needs Analysis in the Business English section)
4. Embark on learner training from the start of the course, emphasising how they can improve through better learning strategies.
5. Why throw out all of the good things you do with groups, like drilling, games, standing up to do a dialogue and so on? Students in one-to-one classes can enjoy this too. It could be argued that they need it even more, especially if monotony is setting in. At the very least, change the room around and change your sitting positions from time to time.
6. To combat the strain of extensive, unnatural periods of concentration and interaction for both parties, go and get a coffee or have a walk for a few minutes while your student reads or does some other individual activity. They'll probably appreciate the time out too!
7. Take notes openly. Explain why you are doing it. This could be for correction purposes or for things to address in future classes or good things they have said you want to reinforce. The student will enjoy the fact that you are paying attention to their language problems.
8. Take part in pair work activities - be student B. This can be a great listening exercise for the student as well as a speaking activity.
9. Communicate with other teachers who are doing similar teaching to you**. If you are using published ELT material organise idea sharing sessions with other teachers on how

to adapt coursebooks and supplementary material. (see the article on Collaborative Teaching in the Methodology section for more ideas like this)

10. Take time to discuss real concerns of the student. Depending on your relationship, it's a great opportunity to talk about things which are meaningful for them such as family, stress at work, their plans and goals. You'll find that students often come out with their best English if what they are talking about is real to them. Teach the person not the material!