

Teaching one to one

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Most teachers at some time in their career have to teach one to one classes. They find a very different, challenging and special learning context, with unique possibilities and unique problems.

One to one teaching is made more special by the fact that many teachers have to develop their own strategies, approaches and materials; one to one work is common the world over but discussion, support and resources are not. In this article we will look at what exactly makes these classes so different from teaching groups, identify the advantages and disadvantages of learning and teaching in this way, and review some possible approaches and techniques to help effective learning.

- Why one to one classes are different
- Advantages
- Disadvantages
- Approaches
- Conclusion

Why one to one classes are different

Classroom management

It may seem that there is little or no classroom management required in a one to one class, but there are still key decisions to be made about how the classroom is set up, where you and your learner should sit, how you should manage the physical resources etc.

Materials

Aside from the fact that you almost always have to adapt existing materials extensively to suit a one to one class, many teachers find that they can use material that the learner has produced or that they have found together.

Timing and structure

One to one classes, especially private ones, often move at a pace decided by the learner and their needs rather than an institution's course/term structure. There is also flexibility in the length of classes, which can be timed around learning aims rather than a timetable. Often there is no need to think about an exam or other formal evaluation.

Roles and relationship

The normal roles of a large group often change in a one to one class, where the intimacy of interaction can mean that you become much more of a friend to the learner – or an enemy. There is often a shift away from a teacher-centred dynamic and as a result the learner takes on a much more equal role in making decisions about the class.

Techniques

Although many techniques we use in a large group are applicable to a single learner, they will always change either in how they are applied or why. For example, you may find that extended listening or reading texts are not the best use of time and need to be adapted. Other techniques

may be more suitable to a one to one class, such as reading aloud to the teacher to focus on the features of connected speech.

Pressures

The fact that both teacher and learner are alone together for the duration of the class means a different kind of pressure – sometimes greater, sometimes less. For example, there is considerable pressure because both are 'always on', and the need to achieve results can be much greater for the teacher, but the learner may feel less pressure because there no others in the class.

Motivations

Many learners decide that they need a one to one class and then seek out a teacher, organise materials, schedule times, and agree cost independently. They are often highly motivated to learn. For the same reasons, you may be much more motivated to teach. In addition, you may feel a much higher degree of responsibility for one learner than a large group where many learning factors are outside their control.

Advantages

- The learner has the undivided attention of the teacher. This means more opportunity to engage in real communication, more feedback and better understanding of the learner's needs.
- The learner often has more control over the aims of the class, the pace and the materials.
- The learner has more opportunities to use the teacher as a resource – to ask questions, to see models of language, and to practise skills.
- The learner can develop a real and productive relationship with the teacher
- The learner's needs can be addressed more fully because there is more flexibility in timing and structure
- The teacher has a greater opportunity to engage in real interaction and to learn
- The teacher does not need to worry about the problems of large groups – mixed ability, group dynamics, early finishers, late arrivals etc
- The teacher can make more money and work independently of an institution

Disadvantages

- Many learners feel more comfortable practising new language – and making mistakes - in a group dynamic rather than in front of a teacher
- Classes can be physically and mentally exhausting for learner and teacher
- The class may become boring if the teacher does not find new approaches or the learner does not respond to the class
- There are no opportunities to interact with other learners, develop a group dynamic and to receive support
- There may not be enough time given for the learner to do silent study – important in the processing of new language
- The learner and teacher may not get on
- The teacher may feel pressurised to achieve results because of a greater degree of responsibility
- The teacher may find it difficult to find suitable materials and activities, and to structure an effective syllabus
- The learner may exploit the opportunity given and a captive audience – to check work not related to the aims of the class, to have a shoulder to cry on, or to merely chat. This can of course also apply to the teacher

- The teacher may find it difficult to measure the learner's progress or level without the framework of a syllabus or other learners to compare with
- The teacher may feel that they do not have the experience, training or resources necessary for this kind of class and that they are only effective working with large groups

Approaches

As I have mentioned above, many of the tools I use with a large group are adaptable to a one to one class, but the methods or aims may change. Other techniques are more suitable precisely because of the one teacher – one learner dynamic. Below are some recommendations:

Discuss your learner's needs and get agreement

It is very important that you know exactly what the learner wants from the class. Agree on a list of priorities. Later you may find that their needs are different – this too needs to be discussed.

Explain what you are doing and why

A one to one class is a great opportunity to explain why you do the things you do. Tell your learner your aims and how the work you are doing supports them, for example when you set homework or correct speaking. Encourage your learner to ask questions.

Be very flexible

You will need to be flexible over time, lesson and course aims, and material. Be ready to change if your learner asks you too.

Try a range of methods and techniques

Much of what you do in group classes will work with one learner – try it. For example, songs, games, chants, pair work, jigsaw listening and reading may all be applicable – with participation from you.

Set your limits

One to one classes can become very intimate. Decide how far you want to go. Humanising your class can be productive but don't get into personal areas that make you or your learner uncomfortable.

Give feedback

Find a range of methods for giving feedback to your learner. You can for example use immediate feedback when they are speaking, or a hot sheet, or just keep data for another class. Spend time working on errors – they are a great opportunity to make substantial improvements.

Use homework to support learning

Learners like homework, it adds value, and teachers often forget how good a tool it can be. Use homework to get your learner to do things you wouldn't in the class, for example extended writing, research or more controlled practice.

Push your learner

Without the dynamism of a large group it is easy to lose sight of this, especially if your learner likes to talk a lot. Take advantage of the dynamic to push your learner – with the language you use, for example, or when correcting.

Know when to stop

One to one classes can go on for a very long period of time indeed, especially if you form a close

relationship, but you should constantly evaluate the progress of your learner, albeit informally. There may come a point where you feel that a group would be a better place for your learner to be.

Conclusion

One to one classes are not easy and they deserve more attention from material writers, trainers and employers. Successful teaching in a one to one class may be a case of finding out what you can use from your own bank of tools, and how these can be developed and changed to suit each new learner – at least until a more complete methodology is developed to support teachers in this challenging but potentially hugely rewarding area.

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