ONE-TO-ONE

How to discover what one learner needs, and build lessons around them

AT A GLANCE

What it is	teaching a single learner, at a school, at their home or workplace, or online
Key difference	the lesson is built around one person: their needs, interests, pace and goals
Key message	start with a thorough needs analysis, plan from lesson to lesson, and work alongside the learner rather than in front of them
Tools	a **needs analysis questionnaire** in the appendix

THINK ABOUT

Wilberg (1987: 6) wrote: "Group teaching is one-to-many. One-to-one is many-to-many."

- What do you think he meant?
- How are the dynamics of a one-to-one lesson different from those of a group lesson?
- What roles does a one-to-one teacher play that a group teacher may not?

What makes one-to-one different?

In a one-to-one lesson, there are no other learners to work with, compare with or hide behind. Every minute is focused on one person, and the learner often has a much stronger say in what the lessons cover. This creates a very different dynamic: lessons can be more like a conversation between two adults than a class, and the teacher becomes a partner, a coach and a resource as much as a teacher.

	Advantages	Challenges
For the learner	a relaxed, personal atmosphere; immediate feedback; lessons based on their own needs, interests and pace; more control over their learning	constant participation can be tiring; no peers to compare with or learn from; less variety of interaction; mistakes can feel more exposed
For the teacher	a natural flow of communication; knowing the learner and their needs well; close monitoring of understanding; easy personalisation; designing lessons together	no "down time" to think during the lesson; materials get used up quickly; keeping variety and motivation; pressure to meet the learner's expectations; short-notice cancellations; working without colleagues

Adapted from Wisniewska (2010: 3–5)

Roles of the one-to-one teacher

One-to-one teachers move between several roles, often in the same lesson (Wisniewska 2010; Bleistein & Lewis 2015).

Role	What it involves
Needs analyst	finding out what the learner needs, and reviewing it regularly
Conversation partner	taking part in discussions and role-plays as an equal
Model	showing how a task can be done, e.g. by doing it yourself first
Informant	answering questions about language as they arise
Coach	setting goals, giving feedback and encouraging the learner to keep improving
Consultant	helping the learner with real tasks, e.g. preparing a presentation or checking an email

Needs analysis

Because the course is built around one person, a good **needs analysis** is essential. It usually combines a questionnaire, an interview and a placement test, and it continues throughout the course.

What to find out

Area	Questions to ask
Course needs	duration, frequency and intensity; times and location; bookings and cancellations
Language needs	previous learning; other languages; strengths and weaknesses; reasons for learning; goals; topics, situations and functions; skills and systems to focus on
Materials and equipment	published or authentic materials; the learner's own materials; available equipment and technology
The learner	interests and hobbies; learning preferences and strategies; time available for study outside lessons

It helps to distinguish what the learner **needs** to do in English, what they **lack** (what they can't do yet), and what they **want** (Hutchinson & Waters 1987). These don't always match: a learner may want grammar lessons but need practice in taking part in meetings.

How to find out

- a **questionnaire** before the course (see the appendix)
- an **interview** to discuss and confirm the answers
- a **placement test**, and a short speaking and writing task
- a **can-do self-assessment**, e.g. based on CEFR descriptors
- **samples of real tasks**, e.g. emails the learner writes, texts they read, or a description of a typical meeting

Four learners, four sets of priorities

Learner	Key questions to explore
Learning for pleasure, at a school	What do they enjoy talking about? What do they want to be able to do (e.g. travel, watch films)? How fast do they want to progress?
A professional, at their office	What tasks do they do in English (meetings, emails, calls, presentations)? With whom? Can they bring real documents? How will interruptions be managed?
Preparing for an exam, at home	Which exam, and when? What score do they need? What are their strongest and weakest papers? How much homework can they do?
Relocating to a new country, online	Which everyday situations worry them most (renting a flat, the doctor, schools)? Which variety of English will they hear? What technology do they have?

A first lesson in action

A first 60-minute lesson with an intermediate adult learner who needs English for work.

Stage	Time	What happens
Getting to know each other	10 min	Teacher and learner talk about themselves, their jobs and interests. The teacher listens carefully and takes notes on language and topics.
Needs analysis	15 min	They go through the questionnaire the learner completed beforehand, discussing goals, situations and priorities.
Diagnostic task	15 min	The learner does a short task from real work, e.g. describing their role or a current project. The teacher notes strengths and needs.
Feedback	10 min	The teacher gives positive feedback and focuses on two or three useful points, e.g. reformulating some sentences.
Agreeing goals	10 min	They agree three goals for the first month and plan the next lesson. The learner agrees to bring an email or document to work on.

Notice that the lesson is both **teaching** and **needs analysis**: the diagnostic task gives the teacher information and the learner useful practice and feedback.

Planning and materials

Plan from lesson to lesson

Rather than planning the whole course in advance, build it lesson by lesson, using what emerges from each one: errors, questions, topics and the learner's new needs. Plan strong **starting points**, such as an interesting text, a video or a real task, rather than every step (Scrivener 2011). A coursebook can provide structure and support, but use it selectively.

Adapting group activities

Group activity	One-to-one version
Pair work	the teacher becomes the partner; swap roles and repeat

Group activity	One-to-one version
Information gap	the teacher holds the other half of the information
Group discussion	the teacher plays devil's advocate or presents other people's views
Mingling or survey	the learner interviews imaginary people, or records questions for friends or colleagues
Jigsaw reading	teacher and learner each read half of a text and tell each other
Presentations to the class	the learner presents to the teacher, records it, then improves it

Feedback and correction

One-to-one learners get all the feedback, so it is easy to over-correct. Choose a few useful points, and use techniques that build independence:

- **Reformulation:** after a speaking task, do the same task yourself, naturally. The learner notes useful language, asks questions, then tries again.
- **Recording:** record the learner, listen together, identify what to improve, then record again.
- **Delayed feedback:** note errors during fluency work and deal with them afterwards, so communication isn't constantly interrupted.
- **Do, feedback, do again:** ask the learner to prepare a real task, give feedback, then ask them to repeat it with improvements.

Practicalities

Issue	Things to consider
Location	At a school, you have resources and colleagues. At a learner's home or workplace, check equipment, space and interruptions in advance.
Cancellations	Agree a clear cancellation policy in writing before the course starts.
Boundaries	Lessons can feel informal and personal. Keep a friendly but professional relationship, and be clear about what you can and can't help with.
Teaching minors	Follow your school's safeguarding policy. Where possible, teach in a visible space, keep parents or guardians informed, and use approved channels for communication.
Fatigue	One-to-one lessons are intense for both people. Vary the pace, include quieter tasks such as reading or writing, and accept silences: they are thinking time.

Making it work

Invest in rapport

The relationship is the foundation of the course. Take time to get to know the learner, and keep building the relationship over time.

Revisit needs regularly

Review goals and progress every few lessons, and adjust the course.

Work alongside the learner

Sit beside rather than opposite the learner, share a pad of paper or a screen as your “board”, and work on tasks together.

Common pitfalls

Pitfall	What to do instead
Treating the lesson like a group class with one learner.	Adapt activities and roles for a single learner.
Talking too much.	Ask questions, listen, and give the learner most of the speaking time.
Only chatting, with no clear learning focus.	Agree goals and include focused language work.
Correcting everything.	Choose a few useful points; use reformulation and delayed feedback.
Doing a needs analysis once and never again.	Review needs and goals regularly.

ONLINE CLASSES

Many one-to-one lessons now take place online. Share your screen and a document you both can edit, record parts of the lesson (with permission) for feedback, and use the learner’s own emails, documents and websites. Agree what to do if the connection fails.

KEY TAKEAWAYS

- One-to-one lessons are built around one learner’s needs, interests and pace.
- The teacher moves between roles: needs analyst, partner, model, informant, coach and consultant.
- A thorough, ongoing needs analysis is the foundation of the course.
- Plan from lesson to lesson, and adapt group activities for a single learner.
- Give focused feedback, and keep a friendly but professional relationship.

WHERE NEXT

Business English needs analysis and real tasks for work

Error Correction reformulation and delayed feedback

Learning Preferences and Strategies getting to know your learner

Teaching Speaking task repetition and feedback

Further reading

Bleistein, T. & Lewis, M. (2015). *One-on-One Language Teaching and Learning: Theory and Practice*. London: Palgrave Macmillan.

Osborne, P. (2019). *Teaching English One-to-One*. Shoreham-by-Sea: Pavilion Publishing.

Wilberg, P. (1987). *One to One: A Teacher's Handbook*. Hove: Language Teaching Publications.

Wisniewska, I. (2010). *Learning One-to-One*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press.

References

Hutchinson, T. & Waters, A. (1987). *English for Specific Purposes*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press.

Scrivener, J. (2011). *Learning Teaching* (3rd ed.). Oxford: Macmillan Education.

Appendix · Needs analysis questionnaire

Give this questionnaire to the learner before the first lesson, then discuss the answers together. Adapt it for the learner's level and context.

About you and your English

What do you do (job, studies)? What are your interests?

How long have you studied English, and how? What other languages do you speak?

Your goals

Why do you want to improve your English? What would you like to be able to do by the end of the course?

Who do you use, or will you use, English with? In what situations?

Your strengths and needs

How confident do you feel...	1	2	3	4	5
speaking in conversations	☐	☐	☐	☐	☐
listening and understanding	☐	☐	☐	☐	☐
reading	☐	☐	☐	☐	☐
writing	☐	☐	☐	☐	☐
grammar	☐	☐	☐	☐	☐
vocabulary	☐	☐	☐	☐	☐
pronunciation	☐	☐	☐	☐	☐

Your lessons

What kind of activities do you prefer? Can you bring materials from your work or studies? How much time can you spend on English outside lessons?