ONE-TO-ONE LESSONS

by Vicki Hollett

Do you love or hate one-to-one lessons? There's no doubt about it, they can cramp a teacher's style. Patterns of interaction in a classroom are severely limited and activities like "get into a group and discuss it" just aren't going to work.

But as well as the obvious limitations, one-to-one lessons also provide some wonderful opportunities. To mention just a few, we can:

+ give our student control over the content matter of their lessons,
+ develop a more normal/relaxed/friendly teacher-student relationship,
+ have "real" conversations instead of artificial interactions,
+ let the student choose what to do at different stages of the lesson,
+ go at the student's pace and take breaks whenever they wish,
+ spend as long as they want on something without worrying that everyone else in the class will get bored,
+ have time to observe the learning process in action.

The one-to-one class allows the teacher to adopt a different role. As Peter Wilberg puts it: "The teacher's job is not to provide the communicative content but to find out what it is and then select the language forms that match it. One-to-one allows the teacher to operate in this way."
"The student provides the content, the input. The teacher provides the form, the language that meets the student's communicative needs. Instead of ending with communication practice, the one-to-one begins with it" (Wilberg, 1987).

So the teacher's responsibility shifts. Instead of being the provider and controller of the content matter of the lessons, we become the language adviser. The student speaks and we help them express whatever they want to say more aptly and succinctly. It's a "deep end" approach, where the traditional presentation, practice, production procedure can be put into reverse. It has many similarities to Community Language Learning.

Community Language Learning - Deep End Strategy

1A The learner presents (in L1) a message that they wish to deliver to another student.

1B The learner presents (imperfectly in L2) a message they wish to deliver to another person.

2A The teacher restates the learner's message in L2.

2B The teacher restates the learner's message more succinctly in L2.

3A The learner delivers the L2 message to the other student.

3B The learner checks the teacher's version and differences are discussed.

4 The teacher and the learner struggle alongside one another to create a "best" version. (Adapted from Richards and Rodgers, 1986)
It can be incredibly satisfying to work like this. The student can practise talking about the subjects they really need to talk about in English, so topicality and authenticity are guaranteed. It's the ultimate tailor-made course where no time is wasted working on irrelevant material. The student has to assume more responsibility for their learning and generally their motivation level is high. For the teacher, this approach provides opportunities to learn from the student. Of course we have to think quickly because the content of the lessons is unpredictable, but that can be very stimulating.

But the approach has its disadvantages too. In the long term the courses can lack focus. The input in lessons is often limited to the teacher's reformulation of their student's original output. So it generally involves very little by way of "brought-in" listening and reading texts. Learning theorists suggest students need to be exposed to large quantities of text if they are to acquire new language. But paradoxically, the one-to-one lessons the students appreciate most are the ones that are based solely on their input.

The reasons for this are more easily understood in the context of business English. (Many one-to-one students are mature professional people.) The students place a heavy emphasis on improving their speaking skills. A smaller number rate listening as a priority and very few see reading as important. The number requesting writing is absolutely minimal. And the students' perceptions of their needs in these skills areas are borne out by research conducted by the University of Sussex into how foreign business people actually used English at work. On average, they spent eight hours a week in situations where they needed to speak and listen. They had to read just two documents in English a month and they only had to write a fax or something twice a year. With evidence like this it is not hard to understand why students want to spend the most time in their lessons on speaking.
And they have to do the speaking, because we can't predict what it is they want to say. To take an example, supposing I have a student who needs to describe their company's production process. Like most teachers, I have walked into such lessons armed with materials on passives and sequencers, thinking that they would be coming up. But then, when I've actually sat down to work it out with the student, I've found they need a set of entirely different language. What they actually wanted to say about their production process has had no relation to the dialogues in Business English books. They might be wanting to argue for a larger budget so they can get more equipment or they might be wanting to instruct me in how to speed up the system. So my carefully prepared materials sit untouched in their file.

The point is, if you are really creating a tailor-made course that is going to meet your student's needs, you need to let the students determine the content, because you cannot know what is going on inside their head. If you start trying to put words into their mouth, ten to one, they won't be the words they want. So the "deep end" approach proves popular. The student speaks and the teacher helps them to say it better. What happens to the course syllabus then? Well obviously the syllabus is not going to be a broad ranging, carefully balanced syllabus such as you might find in a course book. It will be evolving from the content supplied by the student. It's ad hoc and haphazard. Are we right to allow our students' courses to be structured in this random way? I'm not sure. On the one hand, it's time efficient. The students are only practising the language items they need in order to say what they want to say. There will be no time wasted on irrelevancies. On the other hand, are they getting enough exposure to a wide range of language to ensure acquisition of new language?
References


Vicki Hollett is a co-author of 'In at the Deep End - Speaking Activities for Professional People' published by Oxford University Press. She began her English teaching career with International House in London, and has given talks and conducted workshops for teachers of English in Asia, Europe and South America as well as in the UK.