

Teaching advanced learners

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With advanced students having such varying structural and lexical needs, what can the advanced teacher do to hold a class together and give everyone something that will be clearly relevant to their highly individual needs?

Felicity discusses the different types of students and their needs and offers some guidelines for teachers.

What does it really mean to be an advanced learner of English? No more need for grammar? The ability to read Shakespeare or Stephen Hawking's *A Brief History of Time* for pleasure? A capacity to understand jokes or to write cogent articles on sustainability in the modern economy?

The problem is that in one advanced class it may be all of these things, as no two advanced learners are going to be identical in their knowledge and needs. As far as grammar is concerned, we can be pretty sure, at lower levels, that our students will be having problems getting to grips with the present perfect and the sequence of tenses in conditional sentences. But by the time those learners reach an advanced class they have probably got as close to acquiring the English tense system as they are ever likely to. In a typical advanced class the occasional student will appear to have mastered all the grammar that s/he was taught at lower levels while the rest will have wildly varying remedial needs. Yet even those students who never use the present or the conditional forms in an appropriate or accurate way are understandably likely to resent it if their advanced English lessons centre on the all-too-familiar presentation and practice of grammatical structures that they were subjected to in their intermediate courses.

In terms of lexis, all pre-advanced learners have a similar need for a core vocabulary, but advanced students have now acquired the basis from which they can move into their own special spheres of interest. Some will be learning English for business purposes; others will have scientific or IT ambitions; others will be nurturing a cultural interest in English-language literature or music or cinema; others will mainly want their study of the language to serve their travel plans, while still others will have no choice but to attend English lessons even though their interest in the language is minimal. A typical advanced class, in my experience, will have at least one student of each of these varieties together with several other less predictable types.

With students having such varying structural and lexical needs, what can the advanced teacher do to hold a class together and give everyone something that will be clearly relevant to their highly individual needs? For me, there are three key guidelines which I try to follow with advanced classes.

- Make it different
- Stretch the students
- Individualise where possible

Making it different means finding an angle that will be fresh for the students, so that they do not feel that they are treading water rather than making real progress. Part of this may be the selection of different genres of text to work on; part is a matter of picking topical issues to discuss; part is taking a different approach to grammar – going for an overview, say, or focusing more on usage than form.

Stretching the students is not as painful as it may sound. It is simply a matter of encouraging learners to realise that it is not enough at this level just to get by in English. Now they have reached the point where they should be working on scrambling up the peaks that rise above the intermediate plateau. This involves such things as using natural collocations, communicating in the most appropriate register, making an effort to extend their active as well as their receptive proficiency in the language and getting to grips with the ways in which metaphor and connotations are exploited in texts to make them more interesting for the reader.

Individualising is an acceptance of the fact that advanced learners have widely varying needs, and it means taking opportunities both to cater for and to exploit this inside and outside the classroom. It requires the teacher to allow students a certain scope to select individual texts that match their own interests rather than having all the class marching in lockstep to the same tune. It becomes important at this level to give learners more leeway to work on projects or presentations of their own choice.

Following these three guidelines makes the advanced teacher's work in many ways more difficult and less predictable than it is for the teacher at lower levels. But there is a definite upside to this in that the potential for variety and stimulation for the teacher is also greater. At this level we never know what we are going to encounter next: perhaps today a learner who has a good enough command of English to be able to explain to us what *A Brief History of Time* is all about and tomorrow someone who can share a decent English joke with us.