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Introduction to One-on-One Learning and Teaching

Let’s assume that you are reading this book because you are doing, or are interested in doing, some one-to-one language tutoring or learning. The history of one-on-one learning is both rich and lengthy (Lepper et al., 1997). The Ancient Greeks made use of tutors all those centuries ago when Socrates tutored a young slave boy. From ancient times to the present, one-on-one instruction has led to significant learning gains and provided personalized learning that can’t be achieved in larger language classrooms.

This first chapter explores how to capitalize on the advantages of one-to-one learning while avoiding some of the challenges. In addition, we describe the book’s style, which is a combination of a thoughtful, academic approach and practical examples. Given the intended readership, the book is more than a “how-to” manual. It addresses the theoretical and practical issues faced by language tutors and learners.

In this chapter, we’ll consider questions like the following:

- What is the role of theory in the practice of tutoring and learning language one-on-one?
- What are the advantages and challenges to the one-on-one learning environment?
- Why is there a debate about tutoring among language educators and language planners?

Scope of this book: theory and application

The current volume integrates theory on second language acquisition and language teaching and learning into each chapter. The theoretical foundation provides the reader with more than a toolbox of activities
to select from; through examining research and theory, tutors develop a
general structure for sessions and are better equipped to address many of
the common issues faced in language learning and teaching specific to a
one-on-one setting. In addition, we include many examples drawn from
people’s experiences in different parts of the world, teaching and learning a
range of languages. These show that there is not just one simple formula for
one-to-one language teaching, and also provide stories from real language
learners and tutors. Practical examples and activities are also included, so
the tutor or learner can apply concepts into their own sessions.

In our examples we try to acknowledge the range of situations faced by
the book’s readers: the experienced and the beginners, the highly qualified
and those who speak a language but know nothing about teaching. There
is also the range of languages to be taught, although teaching methods
and approaches do not change fundamentally whichever language is
being learned.

As with so many topics, this one could have been carved up in many
different ways. With the help of the index and table of contents, readers
will be able to track specific concerns, some of which reappear from
chapter to chapter.

Overview of one-on-one language teaching and learning

One-on-one learning includes a number of initial variables that affect
the experience. For example, do the learner and tutor have the same first
language? Another aspect is the length of tutoring. In this first chapter,
we’ll briefly address some of these issues, as well as cover them in greater
depth in subsequent chapters.

First, let’s consider the languages spoken by the two participants. If
the tutor and learner share a language, this can be an advantage in the
early stages of the lessons, especially for explaining subtle differences
in usage. Later on, though, the tutor needs to be careful not to use the
shared language at a time when it would be more useful (although per-
haps not easier) to use the language being learned.

A second variable is the purpose for learning the language. Whereas
in classroom learning a teacher must work to integrate a variety of goals,
the great advantage of having only one student is that the lessons can
be tailored to that person’s purpose for having the lessons. The chal-
lenge to a tutor may be to search out the most appropriate materials,
particularly when the purpose is quite specific such as:

- Passing an examination
- Dealing with clients on the telephone