

Understanding your learners – a practical introduction

Webinar handout

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This webinar was a practical introduction to the professional practice of ‘Understanding your learners’. This professional practice is TeachingEnglish’s theme for April, May, and June 2025. This handout provides a short explanation of the activities mentioned in the webinar.

- Learn more about the British Council’s professional practices here:

<https://www.teachingenglish.org.uk/professional-development/teachers>

- Then access the ready-made pathway for ‘Understanding your learners’ here:

<https://www.teachingenglish.org.uk/professional-development/teachers/professional-development-pathways/pathways-understanding-learners>

Activities/strategies to get information about learners as individuals	
All about you	This activity is a needs analysis to get the basic details of a learner’s life. Make a table and ask learners to complete it (family, languages, interests, etc). Our tip is to store this on a spreadsheet and use it for planning.
What they like	This activity is a needs analysis to learn more about how learners like to learn. Ask learners to complete the sentence starters: <i>I like teachers who... / I like lessons when... / Interesting topics for studying English are...</i> You can also do a class survey mid-term where you list activities you have done in class. Ask learners to choose 8 favourites! Weave those into your curriculum.
‘Next-to-the-desk’ moments	This is an ongoing technique to be able to fill your teacher notebook with information about your learners. Don’t always stand at the front. Work at learners’ desks when you can, at their eye level when possible. You’ll learn more. Invite 1-2 learners each class to the teacher’s desk to do mini-speaking tasks. Make sure some of these tasks include how they are feeling about progress, allow them to show you their best work, as well as tasks like talking about topics from the book.

Happy graph	This lesson plan practices <i>past simple</i> but can be used by the teacher to learn about the learners' lives. Make notes on relevant info in your teacher notebook. www.teachingenglish.org.uk/teaching-resources/teaching-secondary/activities/pre-intermediate-a2/happy-graph
All about me box	Throughout the year, learners collect pieces of information about themselves and store it in a box, folder, or virtual space (e.g. Padlet.com). They do a 'show and tell' speaking activity to describe their objects (lower levels), and why they've chosen them (higher levels). https://www.teachingenglish.org.uk/teaching-resources/teaching-primary/activities/level-2/all-about-me
Using poems	Writing poems can help learners talk about their feelings. It's a language task that works on a socio-emotional level. https://www.teachingenglish.org.uk/professional-development/teachers/knowning-subject/articles/using-poems-develop-productive-skills
Class journals	This ongoing activity for teenage learners can give you an insight into what they are learning/enjoying/not learning/not enjoying. It can be a dialogue between teacher and learner. www.teachingenglish.org.uk/teaching-resources/teaching-secondary/lesson-plans/pre-intermediate-a2/class-journals
Observation-based methods to uncover behaviour/the learner as a part of a group.	
Observe others	How does the learner take part in other teachers' classes? This could also be done as a <i>blind observation</i> , where to meet and talk through a problem with another teacher.
Be observed	What can other teachers tell you about how a learner works with others? What can they see, that you can't?
Observe the learners	Who are they working well with? When are they at their best? What do my students do/say when _____ occurs?
Involve the learners	Do a group work preferences questionnaire. Ask learners who they want to work with, what they find challenging, etc. Don't share this with other learners. Or do an activity like 'Our learning' web, where learners write down their hopes and fears about learning on a post-it. They then stick up those post-its on the board, and try to link them together, with chalk or string. They find out who in their class feels the same as them, and strengthen bonds.

Good luck in your professional development over April, May, and June! To join our Facebook community, click here: www.facebook.com/groups/coursesforteachers

A recording of the webinar can be watched here: <https://www.teachingenglish.org.uk/news-and-events/webinars/webinars-teachers/understanding-your-learners-webinars>

www.teachingenglish.org.uk