

TEACHER CREATURE PRESENTS

# HOW TO KEEP A STUDENT

Although you've had a few lessons with a student, there's no guarantee that he'll continue scheduling lessons. Here I describe what I do to keep students happy so they keep buying lessons.

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I was at an event not long ago where I met a lot of English teachers, including two girls from the site. Like many of you, they were just out of college, had been in Prague only a few months, and this was their first experience teaching English.

When I asked them about the site, both of them said they had got a few students and had had a few lessons, but then the lessons suddenly stopped. Either the student became too busy at work, got sick, or just stopped replying to emails.

I didn't tell them at the moment, but I was pretty sure what was going on.

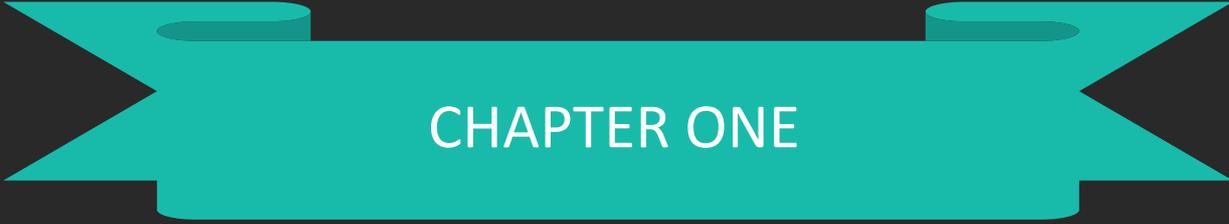
From what I've seen, most of the emphasis that TEFL programs, language schools, and ESL sites place on teaching is on how to prepare for and teach a room full of students. And unlike the students they were used to teaching in the school's classrooms and in companies – where students get their lessons for cheap or for free - a student paying with his own money has higher expectations: he wants results.

He knows whether or not he's making progress. And if he's not, he's probably going to blame you. And rather than have an uncomfortable conversation, he'll just suddenly become very busy at work.

Being someone's private teacher is a different from classes in schools and companies.

The aim of this guide is to help you keep your students by being a better private teacher.

Good luck getting privates,  
-Ryan



## CHAPTER ONE

# THE THREE BIGGEST COMPLAINTS I HEAR

Whenever I get a new student I always make it a point to ask them how they found me – was it online or through a recommendation – and if they found me online, I ask why they chose me (a lot of teachers online...). And not always, but often, they tell me that I wasn't their first choice, that they contacted another teacher, had a few lessons, weren't satisfied, and then decided to try me.

I then ask them why they weren't satisfied with their first teacher. These are the reasons I get.

# PROBLEM ONE: “We just talked.”

This is the number one complaint I hear from students, the main reason they dump their teachers and decide to give their money to someone.

The next sentence usually contains the words “no structure.”

But how many times have students told you that what they want is conversation?

I think this is a case of the patient trying to prescribe his own medicine.

If what they think they need is conversation – and maybe they do or maybe they don’t – you also have to give them something more so that

- 1.You look like a real teacher and not someone who’s just talking
- 2.They make progress

## Solution: Controlled conversation

Talking is fine. It’s why they’re learning English, after all. But after a month of just shooting the shit, even if their English is improving, it’s hard to see the value in it.

One way to prevent this is by what’s called “controlled conversation.” The main element of speaking is still there, but add four things and your student will feel that it’s a real lesson.

Here are the four elements to a form of conversation that keeps the student satisfied.

### Element One: Structure

This really helps to communicate that while you are just talking, it is still a lesson and you still are a teacher.

Here’s the basic structure most of my lessons follow:

- |             |  |
|-------------|--|
| 1-5 minutes | Warm up<br>Reason: Just like when you go to the gym, before you start to lift heavy weights, first you need to do something easy to warm up. So when we start we’ll talk about something easy and I won’t correct you. |
| 1 minute    | Go over plan for the day’s lesson  |
| 1-5 min.    | Review vocab, grammar from previous lesson(s)  |
| 1-5min      | check homework (if they had any grammar exercises)   |
| -depends-   | lesson   |
| 1-3min      | review again (new vocab, old too), plan for next lesson  |

And very important – make sure your student know that you have a structure and that you’re following this structure! Don’t assume that they’ll just pick up on it.

The very first lesson I have with a student, after they have their coffee and the shit has been shot, I say, “Ok, to start, let me explain the structure of a typical lesson.” And I write down the above.



## **Element 2: Homework**

For a conversation lesson I usually ask my student to pick a video or article they want to discuss and then send me the url.

Homework achieves two things. First, it helps to make it feel like a lesson. Second, it gives you something to talk about. Have you ever had one of those students who tells you 'just conversation' and then after three minutes of your first conversation you find out that they didn't read, follow the news, watch movies or TV, have any non-repair/mushroom related hobbies, or opinions about anything, including mushrooms.

Here's what I do:

1. I give them some options for sources. The ones I use most often are:

Some sources I use are:

- The Prague Post (praguepost.com)
- <http://www.bbc.co.uk/news/>
- BBC 6 Minute English (for pre and intermediate students)  
<http://www.bbc.co.uk/worldservice/learningenglish/general/sixminute/>
- TED.com (for more advanced/ambitious students)

2. I tell them to choose an article or video and send me the link a day before. I ask them to select it themselves because I think it's important that they choose something they're interested in (plus, it saves me some time).

## **Element 3: Review**

Unless he's got just an incredible memory, if your student doesn't review between lessons he's not going to remember the vocab. And if he doesn't remember the new vocab from the previous lessons, he's not making so much progress.

If you haven't already, do a search for "curve of forgetting" and learn why periodic review is so important. Here's what I do:

1. Tell them we're going to review previous vocab
2. Start with the vocab from the last lesson
3. Keep it easy-give them the word and ask for a synonym or example
4. Go back further and make it more difficult by making them provide the word, ex. I'll give them a synonym or antonym or an example

The review during the lesson isn't really to help their memory. It's to hold them accountable for doing the review themselves.

Then during the lesson I select the most valuable words for them to learn (7 max). I write them down. I tell them which ones I wrote down. And they know and expect that they'll be quizzed on them the following lesson.

## **Element 4: Correction**

When the student says something like "My boss drive me crazy." Your choices for correction are:

- Audio cue: make a sound that tells them they just made a mistake
- Write the mistake down and ask them to correct it
- Visual cue: raise an eyebrow, draw an 's' in the air, open palm forehead smack (subtle, yet surprisingly effective)

But you probably already know this.

As a friend of mine who works as a TEFL trainer says, the problem isn't that teachers don't know how to correct students, it's that they don't know why it's important. He says a lot of the students complain that although the trainee was nice, he didn't correct them.

So here's why you need to correct your students.

Every week I go to a Toastmasters meeting. For the first year, the guy who started the meeting would stand up in front of everyone and say, Welcome on tonight's meeting.

For an entire year. And no one corrected him.

Why? Well, most of the other people there make the same mistakes with prepositions. But for me and the other native speakers, well, it's just not polite to correct other people.

So sometimes when I have a new student and I make a correction, they get this incredulous look on their face and say something like, Are you serious? I've been making this mistake for years and no one corrected me!

Imagine a world with no mirrors. How many people would be walking around with bad haircuts, their zippers down, and some green crap between their teeth? Your students want to know the correct way to speak, they just can't hear what their mistakes are. They have no mirror to see their English green crap.

That's your job.

(NB. You can't fix everything at once, so prioritize. If a student screws up the past tense of a verb and the third conditional all in the same sentence, go after the easier, more important mistake first – the past tense of the verb.)



# PROBLEM TWO: “Dead grandmothers”

One of my students likes to tell the story of a former teachers who often cancelled lessons at the last minute. After a while he began to run out of reasons, so he started to use the dead grandmother excuse. Then he started to run out of grandmothers. But that didn't stop him, he just kept going and so did the dead grandmothers.

Other variations of this guy are the teacher who

- Is chronically late
- Cancels often
- Shows up hung over
- Dresses unprofessionally
- Is unprepared
- Hits on his female students and makes them feel uncomfortable

I can kind of relate. When I was working for language schools, waking up before dawn, running all over town, and just scraping by, I wasn't too motivated to do my best either. One of my friends joked that he was thinking of having a tee shirt made that said “What do you expect for \$9 an hour?”

But all this changes when you have a private student. Here's why:

- Cost. You're often getting more per hour than your student. They're aware of this and their expectations are higher.
- Their pocket. While companies usually pay for all or most of the cost of in-company language lessons, the student who meets you in a café is paying out of his/her own pocket. And therefore has higher expectations.
- Pay. You're now making about double per hour what you would at a language school. So your incentive to keep the student should be greater.

## Solution 1 – Clothes

If you like quick fixes, simply looking like a professional will cover up loads of other faults. Appearances really are that powerful.

However, this isn't a fashion guide, nor would I be the guy to write it, so I'll just pass on the two most important things I've learned.

1. Clothes are important.

And not just that – it's easy. Other things you've got to work for. Take a few minutes to put on some decent clothes in the morning and your behavior and how others treat you will be different the rest of the day.

2. Go shopping with a woman



Actually, this doesn't apply to everyone. How do you know if you should go shopping with a woman? Take this short quiz:

- I am male.
- I'm not gay.

If you answered 'yes' to only two of the above questions, then I highly recommend you go shopping with a woman (preferably one who dresses well).

I've wasted so much money this way. I walk by a display. I think, yeah that's cool. I buy it. I wear it once or twice (or in the worst case, a couple months or years), until finally a woman tells me 'You know, those pants/shoes/whatever don't fit/match/look good.'

### 3. Dress a little better than the other people in the office

This isn't so hard these days. Even in the law firms I teach at, my students often wear jeans on days they don't have to meet a client. However, if they wear a suit, I give up. If you're a guy, just stick with an ironed shirt and non-jeans and non-sneakers, and you'll be doing better than average.

### 4. Your monthly upgrade

If you're not sitting on a wad of cash, set a goal to buy one item each month, and treat it like your rent. That is, when your pay check comes in, you probably pay or set aside enough for the really important things like rent. Do this with clothes. Buy that new pair of shoes at the beginning of the month when you still have the money.

Some further reading (for you non-gay males):

[http://www.amazon.co.uk/Details-Mens-Style-Manual-Ultimate/dp/159240328X/ref=sr\\_1\\_2?ie=UTF8&qid=1387357028&sr=8-2&keywords=style+guide+for+men](http://www.amazon.co.uk/Details-Mens-Style-Manual-Ultimate/dp/159240328X/ref=sr_1_2?ie=UTF8&qid=1387357028&sr=8-2&keywords=style+guide+for+men)

## Solution 2 – They come to you

Prague really is a small town, and I'm always running into people I know on the street. There used to be this one teacher I knew and whenever I would run into him, he was actually running. We'd exchange a quick 'hi', he'd whiz past, and then I'd look at the time and see that it was a few minutes past the hour; he was just always late for his next lesson. And wherever he is now, I'm sure he's not there yet.

I also have a bad habit of either arriving exactly on time, or a few minutes late.

This is a personality type, and if this describes you, I'm sure your former bosses and your mom have already given you plenty of reasons to be on time. And probably none of them have stuck.

But these days I'm not late. What changed? I'm still either right on time or a few minutes late for meeting friends, but not with most of my students.

The difference is, now most of my students come to me. It's hard to be late when you're already there.

If you don't have the option to teach in your apartment, you could simulate office hours in a café. Block a time every week when you'll be there, tell new students that these are your hours, and then slowly start to fill them.

# PROBLEM THREE: “Never ending story

Don't watch this video. <http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=7Vf2sDgeu7k> It's the worst thing I've ever seen. Whenever I'm in Lucerna for 80s night, no matter what time it is or how much I've drunk, I hear this thing and I'm instantly awake, sober, and annoyed.

But for some reason students love to use the title of this movie to describe their experience of studying English on and off for years.

Because they've been at it for so long, they feel discouraged. Either they think they shouldn't have to keep having lessons or they think they should be a higher level.

And when they feel discouraged, they look to make a change, which is usually getting a new teacher.

There could be two problems here: either they've got the wrong attitude and they think that's really something that you can one day be finished with, or they really are stuck and not making progress.

## Solution 1 – Mental Shift

On one hand, a language should be a...you could say, a life-long habit, a part of your life, routine... No one ever declares, 'I gotta get in shape', then gets in shape, then declares, 'Well, I'm done'. Being fit is something you've to maintain for the rest of your life.

Language is the same. Even if you moved to Madagascar and stopped speaking English, after a while you'd start to forget it.

Connect it with something in their life. Do they repair stuff in their home or cottage? Ask them if they're ever done? What happens if they finish a job and then walk away and never do any other work?

You can make the same connection with sports, weight lifting, stretching, and so on. Most people have the experience of improving at something, then walking away and losing that skill or ability.

## Solution 2 –Visual Progress

If you want to lose weight and then lose weight of course you'll be motivated because you'll see the numbers on the scale are different, you look different in the mirror, and your clothes don't fit the same. You're not just making progress, you're seeing progress.

I have plenty of students who make good progress, but they don't think they're making progress because they can't see it.

I highly recommend writing down the new vocab every lesson. With it you can:

- Quiz them every lesson, show them how many new words they know
- type it up and send it to them every month
- give a written test monthly or quarterly

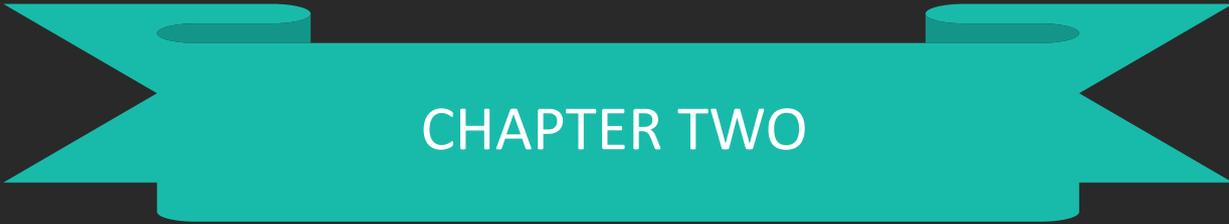


## Solution 3 –Check in

When a student tells me a story about having to speak English at work or travelling, I ask them to stop and reflect on how they felt. Did they feel more confident than they did a few months ago or the last time they gave a report in English. Usually they do.

We often have these habits of looking just at where we need to do, not at what we've already done. It can result in a state of constant discouragement. (I've even started to keep a "Done" list at the bottom of my "To Do" lists.)



A teal ribbon graphic with a 3D effect, featuring a central rectangular section and two pointed ends that extend outwards.

## CHAPTER TWO

# TEACHING PRINCIPLES AND TECHNIQUES

Here comes the parsley.

After you've handled the three biggest problems above – your conversations look like real lessons and the holes in your jeans are all patched up – the following are some tips to add a little extra to get your students to learn a little bit faster.

### Stop talking

One of my clients is a company with about a hundred employees. I've taught there for years on my zivno, but to handle the number of students, they also contract out to one of the big language agencies. The result is that when I go to the kitchen to make some coffee and there's a lesson in progress, the teacher is often someone I've never seen before. But while the teachers change, what stays the same is that the student is usually just sitting there while the teacher is talking and talking and talking.

Bad.

First of all, the student doesn't need you to listen. You're not the rare source of a secret language. There's the BBC, podcasts, youtube, movies and TV and so on. With you, they should be speaking.

### Silence

This is magic.

As the teacher, our impulse is to answer every question and solve every problem immediately. But try this – the next time your student asks a question or says they don't understand... don't say anything.

Let a few uncomfortable moments of silence pass, and often you'll hear them say the answer. And if it's not correct, at least they're thinking for themselves and getting more comfortable with making mistakes. You can also nudge them a little by asking, What do you think it means?

### Can you lift this for me?

Imagine if you were a personal trainer and one of your clients asked you to pick up a weight for him. That's how I feel sometimes when students ask me what a word means, how to pronounce a word, or to explain some grammar for them.

If the word was part of their homework, they should have found the meaning themselves, and they also could have found the correct pronunciation (dictionary.com).

Sure, sometimes they get too busy. But if it happens too often, explain that they will get more out of the lesson if they use you for practice, not as a dictionary.

### Make connections

Information used to be valuable. Now it's everywhere and most of it is free.

What's really valuable is how to remember information.

You've probably had the experience where a student makes a mistake, you correct him, he makes the same mistake, you correct him, and so on.

Next time there's a word that doesn't stick, ask them what the word sounds like.

Here's an example, one of my student kept wanting to say "beat my nails" instead of "bite." I asked him, What does 'bite' sound like? He said, 'gigabyte.' So I told him to imagine a computer disc and him biting into the disc.

Also, the stranger the better. Boring is forgettable.



Here's another example. In "English File Pre-Intermediate" there's a picture of a bullet-proof vest. My student had trouble remembering the word "bullet." I knew he knew the word for 'bull', so I showed him a picture of a bull in one of the vocab sheets in the back. After he said the word "bull", he was suddenly able to remember the word "bullet". I then told him to imagine a bull wearing a bullet proof vest.

After you do this once or twice with a student, start getting them to get into the habit of teaching themselves how to remember tricky words. Ask, 'How can you remember this?'

### Make them repeat

In TEFL programs we learn that it's good to echo back the correction.

So a student says, I learned English for one hour yesterday.

And you say, Oh, you studied English yesterday.

And the student say, Oh, right, I studied English yesterday.

But often, the correction doesn't always live happily ever after.

So many times with my students, they just nod or say 'yeah, ok' and move on.

Hearing the correction is good. But it's not enough. They have to repeat it if there's any chance of it sticking. Be the teacher, be assertive, stop their new sentence, and tell them to repeat the previous sentence correctly. (And if they continue to be resistant, you can try explaining why it's a good idea.)

### Make it visual.

Let's say you're talking about the floods in Prague. You use the word 'retaining wall', and your student asks you what that means. You could take a minute to explain it, and maybe he'd get it and maybe he'd remember it.

But, if there's a computer or tablet or phone handy, type the word into google (or better, get the student to do it), hit 'images', and then he can see in an instant what it means. It's less ambiguous and images are easier to remember.

Even if word is abstract, another part of speech could be visual. For example, once the word 'tranquil' came up in a text a student and I were reading. If you do an image search for this word, you get pictures of waterfalls and sunsets and unicorns and shit. For your average left brained office worker, that's not going to help.

In this case, I asked him what the noun was. He didn't know, so I told him it was 'tranquilizer.' Now when you do an image search for this word, you get pictures of pills and darts and unconscious humans and animals. We then had a nice discussion about what you could tranquilize and who he would like to tranquilize. And that's not something likely to forget. From there, it's a short jump back to the original, abstract word, 'tranquil.'

And much more memorable than me going on about "Well, you know, it's kinda like how you feel when you're sitting by a waterfall at sunset and like you see a unicorn, ya know?"

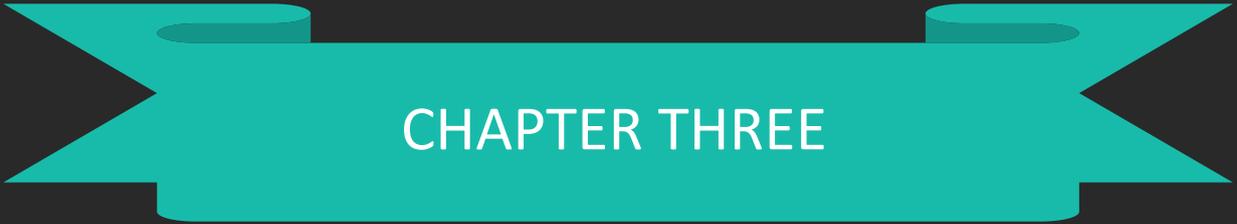
### Measure it

So many of my students make the same mistakes over and over again that it's more than a little discouraging. They'll say, She lives in the Prague. I'll write the sentence down and ask them where the mistake is. They'll say, Without 'the.' They'll keep talking, and 30 seconds later will make the same mistake.

Often, these mistakes are fossilized, and there's not a lot you can do about it.

But before you give up, try this. When you hear your student repeating the same mistake, write the correction down on the paper in front of you, and then whenever they make the mistake again, put a mark next to it so they can see how many times they repeat it.

As this quote from WebMD puts it, "Measurement of anything tends to change it and makes people much more aware in the first place."



CHAPTER THREE

**ADVANCED  
TECHNIQUES**

## Over deliver

Back in the old days, when I lived in the States and had to have a car and was obligated to do such nonsense as get it inspected and pay someone to fix strange noises, I went through a series of mechanics. I've forgotten them all, except the last one. A typical visit to him would entail me showing him the problem, and then he would tell me when it would be ready and how much it would cost.

Nothing out of the ordinary there.

But when I would go to pick it up, it would be washed and vacuumed, and sometimes he would have changed the oil for free. I remember one time after he handed me my keys, he handed me a tiny light bulb and said he noticed that it was burnt out and so he replaced it. For free and without having to be asked.

You can guess the effect this had on me: I always went back to him, I never looked for another mechanic, and I always told these same stories whenever a friend mentioned they had a car problem.

The strategy is simple:

1. Tell the customer you'll give them what they want.
2. Give them what they want (on time and for the agreed price).
3. Then give them more.

In other words, over deliver.

It takes more work, you might not see the benefit immediately, but if your students keep spending money with you and recommending you to their friends, then you'll see the returns in the long run.

Some ideas on how you can over deliver:

- After each lesson, type up a summary – a list of their mistakes, new vocab, homework reminder, etc. – and email it to them.
- Give them a new notebook at their first lesson.
- Do testing.
- If you have lessons at your apartment, give them the good stuff: fancy coffee, Harney and Sons tea, refrigerated Mattoni. And what about snacks?
- Go over time
- Correct emergency emails
- Organize a weekly or monthly pub night or activity. Invite your friends and students. The idea is to give them an opportunity to meet other native speakers and practice in a real setting.

Any other suggestions on how a teacher can over deliver? Share them below.

## FINAL NOTE

I hate golf. For many reasons. But probably the biggest is that I suck at it. And the reason I suck is because my teacher sucked. The lessons went something like this: Do this, this, this, this, and this, and now hit the ball.

Let's compare that to how I learned (or rather, relearned) to swim freestyle. There's a teaching technique in swimming called Total Immersion. It works like this: In the first lesson you do something incredibly simple (for example, floating on your back and kicking). You do it over and over again until it's natural and your body remembers how it feels. In the second lesson you do the first incredibly simple thing, plus another incredibly simple thing (for example, rotating your body from side to side as you swim on your back), and you do it over and over again until it's natural and your body remembers how it feels. In the third lesson...well, you get the point.

The result is, you learn to swim freestyle, and it feels easy.

But first you have to have the patience not to try to do everything at once, to jump ahead till you're ready, in other words, not to hit the ball right away.

In this guide I've given you a lot information. And now it's up to you to be a good teacher to yourself.

Don't try to do everything in one day or one week!

Pick one thing to do in all your lessons, starting today or tomorrow, until it becomes easy and a habit.

Then pick another thing, and repeat.

**If you need a little more structure, here's a program you can follow:**

Week One: tell your students at the beginning of the lesson what the structure for that day's lesson will be

Week Two: Write down the new vocab words you discover in the lesson (not too many though, seven max), make sure you confirm with them that they wrote down the same words in their notebook and tell them they'll be quizzed on them. Quiz them on the words during the next lesson.

Week Three: Correction. Aim to fill up one full page of mistakes per lesson. Lots of correction can be done orally or with visual cues, but writing them down gives you a goal and keeps you on task.

Week Four: (Your turn. What do you want to incorporate next?)