



# Show-Me

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## Teaching English to Absolute and False Beginners

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Most ESL / EFL teachers agree that there are two types of beginning students: Absolute Beginners and False Beginners. If you are teaching in the USA, Canada, Australia, a European country or Japan, chances are that most beginners you teach will be false beginners. Teaching false beginners and absolute beginners require different approaches. Here is what to expect from false and absolute beginners:

### **False Beginners**

Beginners that have already studied some English at some point in their life. Most of these learners have studied English at school, many for a number of years. These learners have usually had some contact with English since their school years, but feel that they have little command of the language and therefore want to begin 'from the top'. Teachers can usually assume that these students will understand basic conversations and questions such as: 'Are you married?', 'Where are you from?', 'Do you speak English?', and so on. Often these learners will be familiar with grammar concepts and teachers can launch into descriptions of sentence structure and have students follow along reasonably well.

### **Absolute Beginners**

These are learners who have had no contact with English at all. They often come from developing nations and often have had very little education. These students are often more challenging to teach as the teacher can not expect learners to understand even a minimal amount of English. The question, 'How are you?', will not be understood and the teacher must begin at the very beginning, usually with no common language with which to explain the basics.

With these differences in mind, I would like to make a few suggestions about teaching absolute and false beginners on the following pages.

When teaching 'Absolute Beginners' there are a number of things to keep in mind:

- **Absolute Beginners have had no contact with English**

When teaching someone who has had no prior (or very little) contact with the language, you need to carefully choose what you present. Here is an example of the type of thinking that needs to go into planning a lesson:

If I begin the first lesson with, 'Hi, my name is Ken. What is your name?', I am presenting three (!) concepts at once:

- o The verb 'be'
- o Possessive pronouns 'my' and 'your'
- o Subject and verb inversion in the question form

It would be much better (and more comprehensible) to the students if I began the lesson with, 'Hi, I am Ken.' and then gesture to the student to repeat a similar phrase. In this way, the student can repeat by rote and begin with something easy which can then lead to something like: 'Hi, I am Ken. Are you Ken?' - 'No, I am Elmo'. By limiting the linguistic concepts absolute beginners can more easily assimilate the pieces.

- **Do not assume familiarity with linguistic concepts**

This is rather obvious, but often ignored by many teachers. If you write a grammar chart - even a simple one - on the board, you are assuming that students are familiar with grammar charts. Students may not have had the type of education that involves charts and representations. By keeping things aural and visual (gestures, pictures, etc.) you will be appealing to learning styles that students are sure to have acquired in everyday life.

- **Use exaggerated visual gestures**

Using gestures such as pointing to yourself and saying, 'I am Ken', and then pointing to the student to repeat helps students understand what you want of them, without confusing them by more language such as; 'Now, repeat'. Develop specific gestures as codes for certain linguistic operations. For example, to illustrate the idea of inversion in the question form you can extend your two arms and say, 'My name is Ken' and then cross your arms and ask, 'Is your name Ken?', this gesture can then be repeated as linguistic skills become more advanced and the students will understand that a question needs to be asked. For example, 'I live in New York' and then cross your arms and ask, 'Where do you live'. When a student makes a mistake asking a question, you can then cross your arms and the student will understand that he / she needs to invert in order to ask a question.

- **Try to pick up a few phrases of the learner's native tongue**

This is purely a psychological trick. Learners - especially adult learners - who are learning English with no prior experience are not only undergoing a difficult learning experience. In many cases, they are also learning how to learn a language. If you put yourself on the line by expressing the desire to learn a few phrases of your students' native language, you can go a long way towards building a rapport with students which will help them feel more at ease in class.

Next, I'd like to take a look at teaching false beginners...

When teaching 'False Beginners' you can be a bit more adventurous in your approach to teaching. Here are some things that you can count on - and some points to watch out for:

### **Make allowances for the different levels of your 'false' beginner class**

False beginners will all have had some English training at some point in the past and this can cause some special problems.

- Some learners will really know more than they admit and, with the passing of time, might become bored with some of the basics.
- Different levels can quickly create tensions between learners, as those who know more can become impatient with others who require more time.
- Some learners might be false beginners because of inherent learning problems.

## **Some Solutions**

- **Give more advanced learners more difficult tasks.** - For example, when asking questions of students ask the more advanced learners questions beginning with 'Why' which will require a more advanced response.
- **Give more advanced learners extra work in class and at home.** - By having a few extra tasks at hand you can bridge the gap that is often created when those who are faster finish earlier.
- **If more advanced 'false' beginners become impatient don't hesitate to ask them something that is over their head.** - This might be a little harsh, but will work wonders!
- **Remember that things will eventually even out after the first few weeks.** - Usually, 'false' beginners are there because they really do need to review from the very beginning. This implies that sooner or later all of the learners will be learning something that is truly new for them and problems with impatience will quickly disappear.

**If a learner is a false beginner because of learning problems, you will need to consider different learning styles** - People learn in different ways. If grammar explanations, etc. are not helping a particular learner, you can help that learner with visual, audio and other methods appropriate for different learning styles.

## **Some Helpful Assumptions About Your Students**

- **Your students will have basic familiarity with linguistic concepts.** - False beginners have all studied English at school and will therefore find things like conjugation charts and timelines useful.
- **Standard themes will probably be familiar.** - Most false beginners are comfortable with basic conversations such as: ordering food in a restaurant, introducing themselves, talking about their immediate family, etc. This will give you a good starting point on which to build when beginning your course and getting to know your students.

## Absolute Beginner English - 20 Point Program

Teaching absolute beginners requires the teacher to pay special attention to the order in which new language is introduced. The teacher lesson plan plays an essential role in making sure that new grammar is introduced slowly and successfully. This 20 point program provides a syllabus to take students from speaking no English at all, to being able to fulfill basic communication needs including; giving personal information, and describing their daily routines and the world around them.

Obviously, there is a lot more to speaking English confidently than these twenty points. This 20 point program has been designed to provide a strong base on which to build while, at the same time, providing learners with the most important language skills they will need to get going.

### Order of Introduction - Teacher Lesson Plan

When teaching absolute beginners, it is very important to proceed methodically building on what has been introduced. Here is a progressive list of points to be taught in order to build up the 20 points listed above. Most of the points have specific lessons teaching the various grammar and usage skills. In the case of definite and indefinite articles and basic prepositions, the points are taught through assimilation throughout the various lessons, as the explanations required would involve vocabulary skills beyond the means of most absolute beginners.

These exercises will appear very simple to you, and you might even feel that they are insulting. Remember that the students are taking very little steps to quickly establish a base on which to build.

Here is a list of each of the 20 points to be covered, as well as a brief description and/or list of what is included in each point:

- **Give Name & Personal Information**  
*Name, telephone number, address*
- **Greetings - Introductions**  
*Basic small talk including 'How are you'*
- **Numbers 1 - 100**  
*Pronunciation, counting skills, telephone numbers*
- **Alphabet**  
*Spelling Skills*
- **This, that, here, there**  
*Recognizing the connection between 'this, here' as opposed to 'that, there'*
- **Present of the verb 'to be'**  
*Conjugation of the verb, question and negative forms for all subjects*
- **Basic descriptive adjectives**  
*Ability to describe objects simply*
- **Basic prepositions use**  
*in, at, to, on, etc.*

- **Some, any, much, many**  
*When to use some and any in the positive, negative and question forms. Questions using much and many*
- **Question Words**  
*The use of 'wh-' question words as well as 'how much' and 'how many'*
- **Adverbs of Frequency**  
*The use of adverbs of frequency such as: always, often, sometimes, never*
- **Subject Pronouns**  
*I, You, He, She, It, We, You, They*
- **Possessive Adjectives**  
*My, Your, His, Her, (Its), Our, Your, Their*
- **a, an, the**  
*Basic rules for usage definite and indefinite articles*
- **Jobs**  
*Names of the most common jobs*
- **Telling the Time**  
*How to tell the time*
- **Time expressions**  
*Using 'in the morning', 'in the afternoon', 'in the evening', 'at night', and 'at' with time*
- **Everyday Objects**  
*Well rounded basic vocabulary*
- **Present Simple**  
*The use of the present simple for describing everyday routines, positive, negative and question forms*

## **Elementary Level Syllabus for Beginner Level Courses**

### **Part I: Lessons 1 - 9**

#### **Syllabus - Lesson 1**

Theme - Introductions

- The revised language items will include: The verb 'to be'
- Revision of possessive adjectives: my, your, her, his
- Basic greetings

The new language items introduced will include:

- The use of names of countries
- Expansion of lexical set: basic greetings
- Expressions including: Countries and nationalities

**Syllabus - Lesson 2**

Theme - The World Around Me

- The revised language items will include: spelling skills
- Revision of letters of the alphabet

The new language items introduced will include:

- The use of questions and negatives with the verb 'to be'
- The use of determiners: this, that, those and these
- The use of 'a' and 'an'
- Expansion of lexical set 'everyday objects' - singular and plural
- Expressions including: basic opposite adjectives

**Syllabus - Lesson 3**

Theme - My Friends and I

- The revised language items will include: singular and plural nouns, numbers 1 - 100, phone numbers, the use of the verb 'to be' for giving personal information

The new language items introduced will include:

- Giving personal information: name, marital status, phone number, address, age
- Asking for and telling the time, prepositions used for telling the time 'at', 'past', 'to'
- Expansion of lexical set 'jobs'

**Syllabus - Lesson 4**

Theme - A Day in the Life of...

- The revised language items will include: Times of the day, the 12 hour clock - a.m. and p.m.
- Revision of basic verbs used to describe daily routines

The new language items introduced will include:

- The use of the present simple (1)
- The use of the first, second and third person singular in the present simple
- Expansion of lexical set 'daily routines'
- Expressions including: verbs and nouns that go together, prepositions used for times of the day - in the morning, afternoon, evening / at night

**Syllabus - Lesson 5**

Theme - The Workplace

- The revised language items will include: continuation of the present simple (2)
- Revision of basic verbs used to describe work tasks

The new language items introduced will include:

- The use of negative and question forms in the present simple
- The use of the first, second and third person plural in the present simple
- The use of adverbs of frequency
- Prepositions of place and movement: 'to', 'in', 'at'

Expansion of lexical set 'daily work routines'

Expressions including: Asking for help and asking someone to repeat

### **Syllabus - Lesson 6**

Theme - Talking about Work

- The revised language items will include: Greetings and informal discussion about your work tasks
- Revision of seasons, months and days of the week

The new language items introduced will include:

- Expansion of lexical set 'means of communication'
- Expressions including: terms used for talking about the relationships between people in an office

### **Syllabus Lesson 7**

Theme - The Ideal Office

The revised language items will include:

- Revision of lexical set 'things in the office'
- Revision of daily work tasks

The new language items introduced will include:

- The use of 'there is' and 'there are' for descriptive purposes and in the interrogative form
- The use of 'some' and 'any' in the positive, negative and interrogative form
- Expansion of lexical set 'furniture' to include items commonly found in an office
- Expressions including: prepositions of place including: on, in, near, next to, in front of, and between

### **Syllabus - Lesson 8**

Theme - The Interview

- The revised language items will include: verbs expressing skills and abilities
- Revision of expressions used for asking and giving personal information

The new language items introduced will include:

- The use of 'can' to express ability
- The use of 'have got'
- Expansion of lexical set 'skills and abilities'
- Expressions including: verb - noun collocations (words that go together)

### **Syllabus - Lesson 9**

- The revised language items will include: 'introductions' 'numbers and letters', 'skills and abilities', 'telling the time', 'describing your daily work routine', 'numbers and letters'
- Grammar Revised: The use of the verb 'to be' in the present simple, possessive adjectives, the use of the present simple, the use of basic prepositions of movement and place, the use of 'some' and 'any', the use of 'there is' and 'there are', the use of 'can' to express abilities, the use of determiners
- Vocabulary Revised: countries and nationalities, telling the time, work routines, objects in an office, months, seasons and days of the week, asking for help and repeating, relationships at work