



The absolute beginner	- Has no prior knowledge of any English or attitude towards English whatsoever.
The false beginner	Has some knowledge of English (usually self-taught or from past English lessons) and has some attitudes towards English (maybe from pop culture).
The beginner with/without language learning experience	- Previous language learning experience (not necessarily English)
The part-time/full-time beginner	- The amount of time they have dedicated to their language studies
The “other alphabet” beginner	- The alphabet used in their L1 and other languages they know
The adult/young beginner	- The age they are now, as well as the age they started learning

(adapted from Grundy, 1994)

A beginner is a beginner, right? Unfortunately, not. As with all labels, the word ‘beginner’ fails to accurately encapsulate the needs, wants and experiences of a real student, and limits us from understanding how to teach them effectively.

From an educational point of view, understanding the type of beginner that you have in front of you is invaluable to predicting the kinds of activities they will enjoy and what they would like to learn, which is especially important if you do not share a common language and they cannot express this to you in words. More so, it also helps us to predict what barriers to learning are likely to pop up, where you might experience resistance or where their biggest problems lie. By addressing these directly, we are less likely as teachers to inadvertently cause offence or ruin our student’s self esteem by giving them too complex tasks.

The categories in the picture above are by no means an exhaustive list: students will often be a mixture of these, and there are likely other categories too. This article however will focus on these, give a little description and some ideas for activities to try in your next lesson.

### 1. The absolute beginner

This category is quite rare, as most people will have had some exposure to English in their lives, even if it is just ‘Hello’. However, for some older refugees from less developed countries, this may be the case. The key teaching element of the absolute beginner is that they have no prior experience of learning English, and may not even have prior learning experience. It is key to teach them how to learn, to revise frequently and get them to develop good study habits.

Activity idea: Start with sounds and link these to simple words. For example, phonics teaching with ‘Hello’, ‘Goodbye’ and so on introduces the alphabet logically.

### 2. The false beginner

Most learners fall into this category, as they will have learnt some English either at school or through exposure to mass media. This means that they may have bad study habits, fossilized mistakes or

poor attitudes towards learning English. It is important to assess these, because everyone sort of reverts back to childhood/adolescence when learning.

Activity idea: Using pictures, ask them how they feel about parts of learning English, such as grammar, speaking, homework and so on. They can divide pictures into groups using happy and sad faces. If they give a big sad face to 'grammar', you know that this is area to tackle once you have more trust from the student.

### 3. Beginner with/without language learning experience

Much like the absolute beginner, a student who has no experience of learning is likely to need to learn how to learn. However, a beginner with some language learning experience, even if it is not English is likely to have developed some study habits and understanding of language structures and differences that will make it easier for them to grasp English.

Activity idea: Be sure to check how many your student knows, and how they learnt it. You can do this with flags (or maps if you think they may know several dialects or tribal languages) and ask how they learnt using pictures of a school/class/teacher, friends/family or books.

### 4. Part-time/full-time beginner

Even living in the UK, students can still not fully immerse themselves in English, especially when they have family or friends who have better English language skills to help them out. The more part-time a learner is, the slower their progress is likely to be. Of course, being part-time might not be a choice, but it's important to think realistically about what can be covered and revised in the time they have available.

Activity idea: Don't be afraid to set homework and expect it to be done. Even 5 minutes of homework a week will make a big improvement at this level, and it develops the student's ability to do things without you and have a go.

### 5. The "other alphabet" beginner

If a student's L1 has the Roman alphabet, they already have a huge advantage on those that don't, as they are familiar with letters, have reasonably similar sounds and a far greater chance that the language roots have similarities. Students who have another alphabet to learn essentially must start as though they are completely illiterate, with an initial focus on getting them to make English sounds and start to form letters.

Activity idea: Avoid leaving letters until later, as the sooner you start to tackle reading and writing, the less mystery and anxiety your student will have around it. But don't be tempted to start by going through the alphabet! Introduce letters with familiar words (their name is always a great place to start) and go through the sounds of each letter at the same time. For example, there are about 4 different ways to say "e".

### 6. The adult/young learner

Age plays a role in language learning itself (the time before you are 12 is the easiest time to learn languages) but also in attitudes. Older students are more likely to believe they are “too old” to learn or to have bad habits or attitudes from previous study. If an adult student studied English at school, and is still beginner, it is likely they either didn’t have good quality lessons or enough interest to keep using it. They may feel embarrassed about this. Younger learners may struggle with motivation to learn or feel under pressure to do exams they may not be ready for.

Activity idea: Games of all kinds are a great way to disguise learning and relax students who are feeling anxious. The simpler the game, the better, and keep games reserved for revision, as introducing new language in a game can cause more anxiety. Whack-a-letter (where you make a sound and students hit that letter on a board, leading up to spelling words), matching pictures (for example, smiley faces and pictures of food to makes sentences like “I like bread”) and jumbled sentences (“how / hello / you / are” and you can say the sentence before for extra help) are some easy to set up and change examples.

The Peter Grundy book mentioned above on teaching beginners is a great resource to anyone, and goes into far greater detail about the complexities and rewards of teaching beginner students.

From my point of view, beginner learners are often babied by teachers. It is important for their self confidence and progress that you come to the lesson expecting them to achieve, and creating aims that are realistic. At beginner level, students can literally double their vocabulary on a regular basis, and this is incredibly motivating to a student.