Teaching Advanced Learners
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What is an advanced learner, in fact? Labelling them C1 or C2 doesn’t really help in practice. Let’s start by finding out what they can do, what they can’t do, and what we need to focus on. We can look at both language, and communication.

For language, a linguistic profile suggests that advanced learners have some knowledge of all grammatical structures, an active vocabulary of about 3,000 words, and broader passive vocabulary; they can approximate English sounds and intonation patterns, but they do have some ingrained mistakes. In terms of linguistic needs, they need revision of structures, focus on more sophisticated structures, and vocabulary activation and discrimination (which words to use in which contexts); work on pronunciation (e.g. stress and intonation) can benefit their self-expression.

An advanced learner’s communicative profile illustrates some ability or awareness of style and register, functional elements, and non-specialized spoken and written English. They need further practice in recognizing and using different styles and registers, expansion of the range of functions, and extensive practice in all four skills: freer speaking, and development of reading, writing and listening skills.

One of the easiest ways to start addressing advanced learners’ needs is to start looking at the problems they have: ingrained mistakes, avoidance of various structures they’re not sure of, and being either too informal, or too formal.

It’s all a bit of a minefield! What’s more, because of their level, it’s difficult to show progress, and any group will show an imbalance of skills. That said, however, they know what they want, and what they don’t! All this can create apprehension in any teacher!

So where do we go next?

I like to find out why they are continuing their learning, but instead of doing a full-blown needs analysis (which might over-raise expectations), I give my students sentence starters, e.g. ‘If I wasn’t studying English now, …’; ‘Not many people know that I’m particularly interested in …’; ‘By this time next year, …’, and so on. One of the bonuses of this sort of activity is that you can devise sentences which check students’ language when they complete them. I usually give students five sentences, and ask them to complete three, and discuss them with a partner. Getting them to hand something in along these lines will help you be more specific about what needs working on.

Before moving on to more specific activities, one very important area is working out how to demonstrate progress. I like to refer back to previous input (course book sections, language points, lexical focus, etc.). I usually elicit this, run a discussion or meeting where students give feedback, and also ask students how they feel about each language area or skill we’ve looked at, using a three-star scoring system, where 1 is low, ‘I need more help with this’, and 3 is high, ‘I can use this language’.

In my next posts on working with advanced level students, I’ll suggest ways of looking at grammar and vocabulary activities, and then we’ll be addressing skills work.