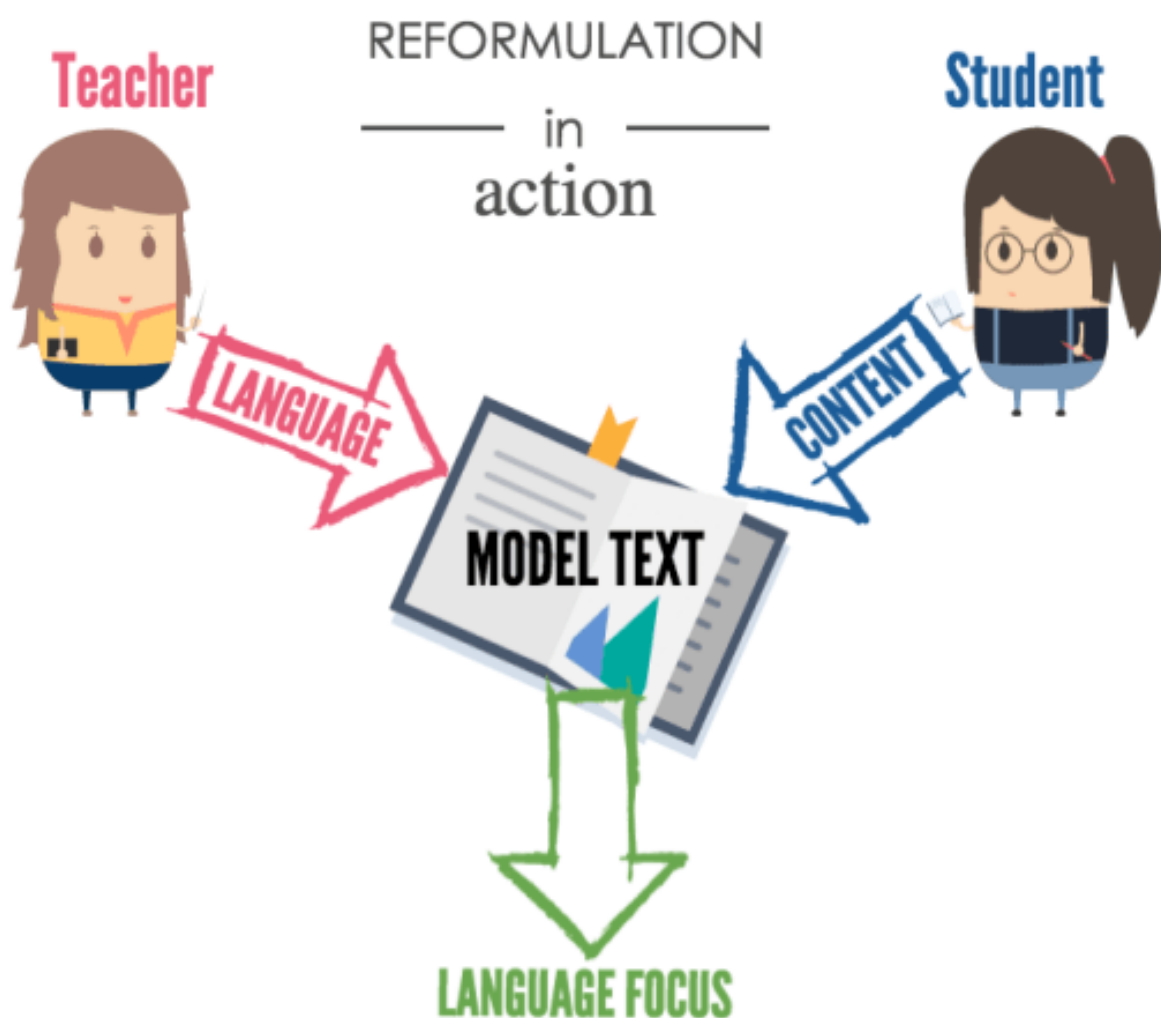


Teach English **ONLINE**



How can you help your student improve their English rapidly, and ensure that your lessons are focussed on their needs, wants and interests? How can you do this, and save planning and resourcing time? Here's a great approach known as reformulation, first described in a book written by Peter Wilberg called ***One-to-one: a teacher's handbook*** (Language Teaching Publications, 1987), which I've adapted for online lessons.



What is reformulation?

Reformulation is the process of correcting, modifying and improving student language. In a reformulation lesson you start with your student's writing or speaking and help them to make it better. It's a method ideally suited to the kind of one-to-one teaching common in online teaching.

The focus is on your student's language needs

Since a reformulation lesson is based around your student's language, rather than the language a coursebook or worksheet thinks the lesson should be about, it means we can focus entirely on the language your student really needs to know.

The student provides the content

The starting point of a reformulation lesson is a piece of speaking or writing provided by your student. This might be a homework task or a piece of work previously done for school, work or simply for pleasure, meaning the content will also be related to your student's interests as well as how they would like to use the English language in the real world.

The teacher provides the language

So thanks to the student, you have content for the lesson. Your job, as a teacher, is to provide the language to make the content better. During the lesson you work with your student to correct any errors, fill in missing language and improve their word choice. Then you focus on one or two language features that were troublesome, using supplementary texts and materials where necessary to support this language focus.

The end result

By the end of the lesson, your student will have a model text, built upon their own work, and a keener understanding of the language needed to express themselves better. Not only will it help your student learn English more quickly, but it requires very little planning and resourcing on your part.

The Lesson Stages

In a reformulation lesson, you start with something the student has produced before the lesson, use it to create a model text and then look at the language more closely. This effectively reverses the structure of a typical English lesson such as that found in coursebooks, where we usually ask students to produce language at the end of a lesson, having first primed them with model texts and lots of language first. Here's how it works:

Stage 1: student input

It's a better use of time if your student emails you their work before the lesson. This could be a document or, if your student wanted to focus on speaking, an audio recording (ideally with a typed transcript) of a talk or dialogue made on their phone or computer. Copy and paste the writing or transcript into an online whiteboard or a scene-shared, word processing document and you have the content for your lesson.

Stage 2: teacher analysis

Before the lesson or at the start of it, quickly look through their language. Is the meaning clear? What grammar do they need to work on? What words and phrases could be improved? What is

missing? This helps you identify what to reformulate plus a couple of language areas to focus on later in the lesson.

Stage 3: reformulation

This is the meat of the lesson. Here, the teacher provides the student with the language they lacked when writing or speaking. The teacher can ask the student questions and offer choices, suggest better language and phrases, correct mistakes and, if needed, provide explanations. The student shouldn't be a passive bystander in this process, but an active participant whose attention is being drawn to language choices. Either you or, ideally, your student can modify the text on the screen.

Let's say your student has written a text about her family. Here's an extract:

My father pilot. He work for Aeroflot. My mother doctor. She work in hospital.

You could correct some of this yourself, or ask your student to self-correct, which they can often do once their attention has been drawn to the errors. Another approach is to correct the first sentence (my father pilot to my father is a pilot) and, using this as a model, ask your student to correct the second sentence themselves. Ask her what's missing. If she needs extra help, give her choices: "Do you say 'my mother is doctor' or 'my mother is a doctor'. Make her think! This draws her attention to the very language features she's unsure about. You can take a similar approach to correcting the missing third person singular 's'.

At the end of this stage, the student should have a piece of writing a little bit above their current proficiency level, something they couldn't have produced on their own before the lesson. It's a model piece of writing, an example of good language for them to keep, which is based on their own language, not something from a coursebook, worksheet or website that was written by someone else.

Stage 4: spot the difference

Now, paste the original document into the online whiteboard, next to the reformulated (model) text. Ask your student to highlight on the whiteboard the differences between the two texts. Can they explain some of these differences? You could also cover up the reformulated text and ask them to tell you how they can improve their original writing. Essentially, what you're doing here is drawing your student's attention to the gap between their current proficiency level and native-like English. Noticing this gap is fundamental to language learning.

Stage 5: language focus

In this stage, you focus your student's attention on one or two specific language features that they need most help with or that will be most useful for them. In the example above, we would choose to focus on the use of articles and the use of the third person singular 's'. This stage can involve using texts and exercises drawn from coursebooks, websites or worksheets, or simply quick activities that you put together.

Here are a few activities I often use:

- Gap fills: fill in the missing word, missing preposition, missing article, missing verb ending and so on, depending on the language focus (e.g. My brother is ____ firefighter, he work_ in London)
- Correct mistakes in a sentence
- Jumbled sentences (e.g. writer uncle my a is)

- Dictogloss: make up a short text, similar to the one provided by your student, and read it out two times at normal reading speed. Your student should listen and write down as many words as possible, then they should work on their own and use their list of words to reconstruct the same text that you read out. Finally, they should compare their reconstructed text with the text you read out, noting the differences between the two. (This spot the difference is crucial because it forced your student to focus on the language they don't know.)
- Monster cloze: paste your student's reformulated text, or something very similar, into an online whiteboard. Make sure you also have the text written on a piece of paper! Cover up each individual word by drawing a rectangle over each word. Your student needs to guess the words in the text. It works like hangman, except your student has to guess words instead of letters. You should find that your student can guess content words (e.g. pilot, doctor) quite easily, but will struggle more with more grammatical words (e.g. the, are).

Suggestions for student content

Ideally, the student's speech or writing should be something related to what they ultimately want to do with English, whether it be giving product presentations in English, writing an essay for an exam or negotiating with a customer, but it's also a good idea to get your student to write or talk about themselves, their dreams and their opinions, because this is what we do when having social conversations.

Here are some suggestions from Wilberg's book, along with a few ideas of my own:

- My job
- My school
- My best friend
- My favourite relative
- My hobbies
- My first job
- My family
- My plans for the next year/next 5 years/life
- My best holiday
- My city/country and why I like it
- What I would improve about my country/city
- My closest call with death
- What I think about...
- The worst job I ever had
- The best job I ever had
- A strange person I met
- The last time I got angry
- The last time I got frustrated
- The last time I was in pain
- My most embarrassing moment
- Why I don't smoke
- Why I am not religious
- Why I vote for...
- If I had the power to....
- If I had three wishes I would...
- If I could live anywhere I would...
- My favourite book
- My favourite film
- My favourite TV programme

- The three most important people in my life
- A place I would love to visit again
- A person I would love to meet (again)
- If I were invisible I would...
- If I had a time machine I would...
- An era I would love to have lived in

Alternatively, if your student has already got examples of their writing available, they can simply scan it, type it or photograph it and send it to you prior to a lesson; school and university students probably already have lots of written work sat in exercise books unmarked, so use that.

Summary

A reformulation approach to student learning is a great way to make sure a lesson stays focussed on a student's interests, wants and language needs. Too often, teachers take on the responsibility of deciding for the student what they should learn, but because a reformulation approach demands that the student provide the content, it's the student that takes on this responsibility, leaving the teacher to focus on what they do best – to act as language guides and mentors who help the student communicate better.

Try out the reformulation approach. Ask your student to email you a piece of their writing and take it from there. When I first tried it, the lesson was a bit hard going, but it quickly gets easier. You'll find your student learns a lot, and you'll save time! Let me know what you think of this approach, and let me know how it goes. Good luck!