



Part1: Investigation

Understanding Learners Beyond Assumptions

Training handout

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1. The Problem with Assumptions

In classroom practice, teachers constantly make rapid judgments. These are often based on observable behaviours: who speaks first, who hesitates, who finishes quickly, who avoids participation. As shown in your opening task (slide “What Do I Notice First?”), noticing is immediate, but interpretation is not.

The issue is not that assumptions exist. The issue is that they often remain unexamined and begin to function as conclusions rather than hypotheses.

When this happens, learners are positioned in fixed ways: as strong or weak, motivated or disengaged, capable or limited. These positions can shape teacher expectations, interaction patterns, and ultimately learner outcomes.

2. Observation vs Interpretation

A critical distinction in responsive teaching is the difference between what is seen and what is inferred.

Observation	Interpretation
Observable behaviour	Explanation of behaviour
Descriptive	Analytical
Immediate	Tentative
Evidence-based	Requires validation

For example, a learner who does not participate may be interpreted as unmotivated. However, the same behaviour may also reflect processing time, anxiety, cultural norms, or lack of linguistic confidence. Interpretations are not inherently wrong, but they must remain open to revision.

3. Patterns We Notice (and misread)

Teachers tend to notice recurring classroom patterns, many of which appeared in your task examples (participation, task behaviour, interaction style, language use, non-verbal signals). These patterns are useful, but they become problematic when they are treated as fixed indicators.

Observed Behaviour	Common Assumption	Alternative Interpretation
Finishes quickly	High ability	Surface processing / familiarity
Speaks fluently	Strong learner	Risk-taking / ignoring accuracy
Quiet in class	Low motivation	Reflection / anxiety / cultural norm
Uses L1 frequently	Lack of ability	Strategic processing / collaboration

The danger lies in collapsing behaviour into identity.

4. Case Study: The Quiet but Accurate Learner

A learner rarely participates in speaking activities but produces consistently accurate written work. In classroom discussion, they avoid eye contact and respond only when directly addressed.

A common assumption would position this learner as lacking confidence or motivation. As reflected in your scenarios (e.g. “does not speak unless called on”), this interpretation often leads to increased pressure to participate.

However, alternative interpretations suggest a more complex picture. The learner may require longer processing time, may come from an educational culture where speaking is not prioritised, or may feel more secure in written production than oral interaction.

If the teacher responds only to the assumption, the intervention may increase anxiety rather than support development. If the teacher treats the behaviour as data rather than conclusion, multiple pathways become possible: structured speaking support, preparation time, or alternative participation formats.

5. Evidence-Based Understanding of Learners

Responsive teaching requires moving from assumption to evidence. This involves a process of noticing, testing, and revising interpretations over time.

Assumption-Based Practice	Evidence-Based Practice
Immediate conclusions	Delayed judgment
Fixed labels	Flexible understanding
One explanation	Multiple hypotheses
Teacher certainty	Ongoing inquiry

6. From Assumption to Action

The goal is not to eliminate assumptions, but to work with them critically. When teachers treat their interpretations as provisional, they create space for more accurate and inclusive responses.

Small shifts in practice can have significant impact:

- allowing processing time before participation
- offering multiple ways to engage
- observing patterns over time rather than single moments
- questioning first impressions

These shifts move the classroom from reactive teaching to responsive teaching.

Reflection

The key question is not:

“What kind of learner is this?”

but:

“What might explain what I am seeing and what do I need to understand next?”