Why Good Tutors Still Lose Students

Luke Collins | Stay Booked | Published 29 September 2026

A learner can praise every lesson and then stop booking. That does not prove that the teaching failed. The goal may have been completed, money or time may have changed, or the learner may no longer see a useful next step. A tutor who assumes one explanation too early can respond in exactly the wrong way.

In my September 2026 TESOLANZ workshop, I used a simple distinction: satisfaction asks whether the last lesson was useful; continuation asks whether another lesson still makes sense. Those are related, but they are not the same decision.

Look for the first change

The final cancellation is often the last visible event, not the first. A student who used to book four weeks ahead might begin booking one lesson at a time. A cancelled session may remain unfilled. Talk about next month may become less definite. Compare such changes with that learner's own pattern. None of them proves why the learner is leaving.

Before offering a discount, more homework or another package, write down two plausible explanations and one neutral question that could distinguish them.

Six places to examine

The commitment horizon: How far ahead is the learner willing to plan, and has that changed? Ask what has changed in their schedule or goal rather than demanding an advance booking.

The completion point: Has the original problem been solved? Finishing after an exam or interview can be a successful outcome. Discuss whether to finish, pause or choose a genuinely new goal.

The evidence gap: Does the person deciding whether to pay for lessons see appropriate evidence of progress? A learner, parent and employer may need different explanations. Share only what is suitable for the relationship and privacy expectations.

The cost of returning: After a break, does restarting feel like a task in itself? Keep a clear record and offer an easy first session back. Do not require a returning learner to reconstruct everything alone.

Continuity of the work: What has been learned about this student that will make the next lesson more useful? A record of recurring errors, successful explanations or relevant vocabulary belongs in the learner's progress record. Its purpose is better learning, not making the learner dependent on one tutor.

Permission to finish: Have you made it safe to say that the current arrangement no longer fits? A scheduled review can offer four honest choices: continue, change direction, reduce frequency or finish.

Ask before intervening

Consider a hypothetical adult learner whose interview is postponed. She previously booked four sessions ahead, now books one, and does not immediately replace a cancellation. She still speaks positively about the lessons. We know her booking pattern and interview date changed. We do not know her finances, satisfaction or intention.

A useful question is: "With the interview date moved, would you prefer to keep practising now, space the lessons out, or pause and review closer to the date?" Each answer leads to a different plan. The example is hypothetical; it is not evidence about a real learner.

What retention should mean

The goal is not to prevent every departure. It is to reduce avoidable confusion while respecting a learner's right to finish. At the end of a lesson, name one meaningful change, retain one suitable piece of evidence, agree on the next useful step and confirm either a booking or a date to review. A clear ending is better than a pressured continuation.