

TEACHING ENGLISH TO ADULT LEARNERS

Summary: Teaching English language to adult learners can be incredibly rewarding, but incredibly challenging too. The world outside the classroom makes demands on all (four) language skills and the adult student is anxious to acquire a “survival” capacity or communicative competence”.¹ In addition, many students will demand to see and spell what they heard and it seems pointless to refuse them this satisfaction. Adults have a way of learning what they want and when they want to learn it. Communicative competence includes the ability to have a conversation or communicate with a native speaker in a real-life situation, with stress on communication of ideas rather than on only accuracy of language form or knowledge of grammar rules. Hence students can have a meaningful communication which means that students are processing content that is relevant, purposeful, interesting and engaging.

Key words: teaching, English, adults, communication, motivation, goals

Teaching Adults

There is an art to teaching English to adults. Some skeptics, generalizing from their own experiences, might be doubtful of any educating or successful language learning after the age of twenty. The “you can’t teach an old dog” mentality is a much a part of us our belief in the limitless educability of youngsters. Adults can learn and in fact, as Edward L. Thorndike pointed out in 1927 study “the ability to learn declines only very slowly slightly after the age of eighteen”.² More recent research suggest that the basic capacity for learning remains essentially unimpaired throughout the life span though the speed of leaning appears to decline very slightly.³ However Second language acquisition is troubled with the study of the way in which an individual becomes able to use one or more languages which is different from his first language. This process can take place in a natural setting or

¹ This is seen by most language teaching experts as the goal of ESL classes: the ability to communicate functionally in the language for a different purposes, including academic, professional, and social.

² Edward L. Thorndake and others, *Adult Learning*. New York, 1928, p.59.

³ Irving Lorge, “*The adult Learner*” in *Adult Education: Theory and Method*, Chicago, 1963, pp.1-9.

through formal classroom instruction, and, although the degree of proficiency that can be attained is a controversial topic, it can start at childhood or during the adult age (Krashen, 1982).⁴ Also ‘the highest purpose in teaching of languages may perhaps be said to be access to the best thoughts and institutions of a foreign nation, its literature, culture—in short the spirit of the nation in the widest sense of the world’⁵

A child acquires a second language more easily than an adult. And as Collier (1988), expresses that successful language acquisition depends on the learner’s age.⁶ Child is often able to acquire a second language without any formal instruction and just being in English speaking country and being surrounded with English language. An adult, on the other hand, may with great effort achieve only limited mastery of a language, and he will probably require the formal instruction of the teacher in the classroom.

As the child moves toward adulthood, may lose facility in acquiring a language. The older child may require formal classroom instruction in order to acquire better command of language. Though many of the following techniques in language instruction may apply as well to children as to adults we are only concerned with their use for teaching adults.

In order to be a successful adult educator we have to understand how adults learn best. An adult is a complete person. ‘Adults have special needs and requirements as learners. Below, is a common list of the common learning characteristics of adult language and literacy learners:

Adult Language and Literacy Learning Principles are:

- 1) Adult learners are goal-driven.
- 2) Language and literacy are social processes that involve interaction with others.
- 3) Language and literacy development require risk taking.
- 4) Language and literacy develop when the target language is slightly above the current level of proficiency of the user.
- 5) Language and literacy development require focus, engagement and practice.
- 6) Language and literacy are multi-dimensional and require different kinds of interactions with different kinds of genres.
- 7) Language and literacy develop through interactions with tasks that require cognitive involvement.
- 8) Language and literacy develop more deeply if skills are connected to an overall topic.⁷

That is, adult student has within a capacity for dealing with environment and for providing for student’s needs either directly or by manipulating others. Consequently student is self-directed. Student has a self –image which reflects the

⁴ Krashen, S. (1982). Principles and Practice in Second Language Acquisition. Oxford: Pergamon Press.

⁵ Jespersen London: Allen & Anwin ,Ltd., 1904 quoted from 12th Impression , 1961, p/9

⁶ Collier, V. P. (1988). The Effect of Age on Acquisition of a Second Language for School. New Focus. The National Clearinghouse for Bilingual Education. No: 2, Winter: 1987-1988.

⁷ Taken from Spruck-Wrigley, Heidi and Jim Powrie. 2002. What Does It Take for Adults to Learn? Originally developed for CyberStep.

sum of his experiences. Adult student reacts to new situations according to his own self-expectations. Because student has its own “character”, adult student has less freedom of response than a child who has yet to establish an identity.⁸

It is wisest to accept this description of adulthood for the second language classroom generally and with some reservation. After all, definitions of adulthood will vary accordingly to cultural backgrounds. Many ESL teachers are surprised by the fact that native culture of students has enormous influence in the classroom. Adult students come with their own cultural view of:

1. What a teacher should say and how will a teacher behave.
2. What should happen in the classroom.
3. How the English language should be taught.

For example in many oriental cultures, the teacher in general is highly respected individual and there is immense social difference between students and teacher. In other cultures there is less distance between students and teachers. Dealing with different culture may mean that teacher may have to adjust some of behavior in order not to offend students and gain their respect as their teacher. It also may mean that teacher will have to clarify to some of students the differences in the cultural expectations and encourage them to move towards the norm of the society in which they are currently living.⁷ Therefore, the suggestions which follow must be implemented judiciously and with the cultural background of specific students in mind.⁹

The Adult Self-Directivity

If we can consider most adult learners to be self-directive¹⁰ the teacher of an adult class need not to be authority’s manipulator. The teacher can help the student to define his language needs and then to satisfy them. Take the case of a banker who wants to pass a trade examination. Student’s motivations for studying English are clear to student, and, ideally the teacher should help him to develop his language skills within the context of the language demands of his trade. Reece & Walker (1997), express that motivation is a key factor in the second language learning process. They put a stress that a less able student who is highly motivated can achieve greater success than the more intelligent student who is not well motivated. Sometimes students may come highly motivated and the task of the teacher is only to maintain motivation of the students. The task of the teacher is to maximize the motivation of their students.¹¹

To sum it up, the adult learner, unlike the child, usually knows why he is studying a language and what his goal is. The teacher must respond to this motivation by preparing contextualization language instruction or, if the orientation of this

⁸ Frederick Perls, *Gestalt Psychology Verbatim*. Lafayette, Calif., 1969.

⁹ Ray C. Grahm & Mark M. Walsh, *Adult Education ESL Teachers Guide*, Adult Education Center, Texas A&I University Kingsville, Texas, 1996, pp. 9

¹⁰ Malcolm S. Knowles, *The Modern Practice of Adult Education*, New York, 1970

¹¹ Reece, I & Walker, S. (1997). *Teaching, Training and Learning. A Practical Guide*. (Third Ed.). Great Britain: Business Education Publishers Limited

contextualization is not a general class interest, individualizing instruction. Since the student is aware of what he wants from the course, he is most motivated by instructional activities which are immediately applicable to his own situation.

The Optimal Classroom and Learning Climate

Once the teacher has helped the student define his motivations for learning and has begun planning to contextualization his language instruction for the needs of his students, he must develop the most suitable climate for learning. Educators disagree as how the best climate for learning may be most affectively achieved. The usual classroom with students sitting in rows is acceptable and workable but not ideal environment¹². Some would suggest substituting comfortable chairs for desks, informal conversation for classroom procedure in effect, moving the classroom into the living room etc. Others would suggest that because adults experienced the school system as children, they expect authoritarianism when they return to school as adults. It would seem that the best climate of learning must be achieved through compromise of these two positions and good sense of timing.

The strictly controlling teacher will intimidate language learning because he denies free exchange in favour of rules of procedure. But the opposite extreme, the “living room” atmosphere may be equally intimidating, because it is too casual. Initially, eliminating regular classroom procedure may be more destructive than helpful, because it puts additional burden of socializing upon an adult who wishes to focus on learning. Generally, adults, who are highly motivated, will complain if the ritual of the classroom is too informal. Also teachers should see themselves as educators, facilitators or just simple as helpers. As Knowles (1970) said: ‘The adults self-concept of self-directivity is in direct conflict with the traditional practice of the teacher telling to student what to learn. It is even in conflict with the social philosophy that society has right to impose its idea about what he needs to learn on him.’¹³

The danger of the authorities’ position is that it does not allow for sufficient class response. The danger of the” living room “approach is that it is artificially imposed by a teacher on a group that may be unable to function effectively in it; and because it is artificial it also may inhibit freedom of response. The classroom should be dynamic, and after normal procedure has been established the students will generate the most relaxing, most stimulating classroom atmosphere if they are allowed the freedom to do so. And the good teacher recognizes when the time is right.

At first, routine classroom procedure gives the language student a sense of security in a situation which may be somewhat uncomfortable for him; it provides him with a stable framework for response. Later as he begins to feel a part of the class (as a opposed to being an isolated student), student will express preferences as

¹² James J. Asher , PhD. 1977 Sky Oaks Production, Inc. Los Gatos, California 95031

¹³ Knowles, S. Malcom, *The Modern Practice of Adult Education*, 1970, Association Press, 291 Broadway, New York, N.Y.

a member of a group. The gifted teacher uses this unique group personality in striking a balance between strict authoritarianism and complete informality.

Assuming that you are confined to the limitations of a classroom teaching situation, you still can help students to feel comfortable. You can do that by showing a genuine interest in your student, begin by learning their names. Be aware that each of your students has a unique wealth of experience and knowledge which, quite happily for the language teacher, they are anxious to communicate. Therefore, whenever possible move your exercise from academic textbook questions to more personal questions. Show genuine interest for your students.

The variety of the adult's experience and knowledge should allow the English language teacher to use a variety of techniques. The teacher can use common situations for instruction since the adult is capable of role-plays and of stimulating real life experience. It is a good practice to supply adults with role-play frames within a wide range of situation contexts, and based on language features which have been taught. The adult student can translate their own personal experiences and personality into the idiom of his new language. And a oft-quoted Chinese proverb: *Tell me and I'll forget; show me and I may remember; **involve me and I'll understand*** is true.

The physical set-up of the classroom itself should express a personalized instructional approach. The teacher should make different desk arrangements to suit his immediate instructional objectives. Desks in the classroom do not need to be arranged in the traditional regularity of rows, with the teacher as head. Instead, they might be arranged in a circle or semi-circle with the teacher as a part- and with no back or front or side. In this way, each student may feel that he is a necessary part of unified class. Other teaching situation may suggest smaller groupings of desks of four etc.

Remove classroom items which may produce negative associations in the minds of students. Even a teacher's desks with a heavy arm chair for example, may be associated in the mind of a student with authority and repression. Always ask yourself: Do they have a place a language class whose purpose is active communication by students?

In varying the structure of the lass it is sometimes wise to place the adult student in the role of teacher. Let students give each other use in exercises. Allow students to develop different role-plays. Encourage students to enter into real communication in problem solving exercises.

Also it is wise to allow the students to assist in the diagnosing of their own needs; it is also wise to allow them to assist in the evaluation of their own and other students' performances. Furthermore, it is sometimes useful to supply the adult with a copy of an examination and let them create an examination questions. These questions could be then be compiled and given to students as an exam. Experience seems to indicate that adult students do be pleased about tests as objective measures of their knowledge. Certainly the student, with the teacher in consultation, should be directed to the self evaluation of what they are capable. A language test is only one measure, and perhaps the last accurate, but may be a useful motivational tool for adults.

Problems in Adult Learning Instruction

Perhaps the greatest dangers to an adult language instruction are the simplifications and gradations contained in most levels of second language instruction. But we must be careful that our simplifications and gradations are in language and not in content. We, also, must be particularly careful in the selection of situations for conversational teaching and reading items, not to insult the intelligence or feelings of our students. Adult students appreciate real adult situations and context and adult reading material. ESL teachers must be sensitive not only to students' limitations in the language but also to the mature demands of their own self images. We must be careful to make our teaching materials to the maturity of our students.

Finally a word should be said about the complicated inter-weaving a language with a culture. It is extremely important to realize that learning a second language is not a remaking process. What we intend to give the student is the language to communicate with and, if possible, to appreciate their new culture. We are not replacing their own language or students own culture. We must be very sensitive to students feelings of estrangement of or "anomie" in their new language. Therefore, exercises which presumptuously extract religious values are to be avoided. Whenever evaluation or opinion is required, let the students respond freely. For example, an example drill contextualized to the English scene might not be consistent with the experience of many students: For example, on every Sunday morning I go to church.

Since it might not be consistent with the experiences of some students, it seems pointless to drill it in repetition or to insist it as answer to: "What did you do on Sunday morning?" And it might be offensive to students who have different religion then their teachers.

There are many different types of classes such as program for language skill program, bi-lingual program for particular language groups etc. Some programs have classes daily, other two or three night a week, every day etc. Most classes have up to 15 students, a size small enough to allow for the individualize attention which language learning requires.

It is also difficult to generalize about the type of adult who enters the variety of language programs. These adults have different motivations and goals. In a program for house-wives one is likely to find students who attend classes as a means of making a friend. In many evening programs one is likely to find people who are very tired after a long day's work and their attendance may suffer. There will be students who have been number of years in United Kingdom and who have been embarrassed by their English. These adults may feel a growing isolation from their children who are quickly adopting English ways and isolation from their neighbors and other people who do not belong to their cultural group.

There will be different styles of learning. Some students may require homework in order to feel that they are learning something. Others may not have time to do it. Some adult learners due to hearing loss will find it very difficult to listen and difficult to pronounce words, other adult learners might find it embarrassing or humiliating to repeat after teacher. Some adult learners will find games and songs amusing and others may find them childish and a waste of time.

Summary:

Teaching English to adults is a real art. Specific approaches must relate to the individual cultural background of the students. Foremost among principles of adult learning is the belief that adults enquire considerably self-directivity in all pursuit including educational ones. The controls of second language teaching must not inhibit the natural, self-directive capacity of the adult. Also if teacher wants to be successful adult, ESL teacher needs correct student assessment and evaluation. It is very important that student is properly placed otherwise they will very quickly lose their interest in studying English language and they will soon give up. If the material you present in your classroom is too easy, students will become bored but if the material is too hard they will not return for the second class. Besides, it is very important to establish positive relationship with your students. Adult students come with many fears into the classroom, they may feel they are too old to learn English, some of students had negative experiences with school or they may have left their schools or universities as dropouts. Therefore it is very important that teacher establish a friendly and positive environment for their students. In order to create an effective learning environment of highly motivated students, teacher needs strong interpersonal and social interaction. Even though students fear level is very high, it can be broken with teacher positive attitude, with a teacher's friendly smile and pleasant small talk.

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