TEACHING ENGLISH TO ADULT LEARNERS

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ABSTRACT: *TEACHING ADULTS IS A CHALLENGE AND ALL TEACHERS MUST BE AWARE OF THE FACT THAT THEY ARE DEALING WITH INDIVIDUALS THAT HAVE A LIFE OUTSIDE THE LEARNING ENVIRONMENT, ONE WITH A VERY BUSY SCHEDULE MOST OF THE TIME. THERE ARE SEVERAL THINGS A TEACHER MUST CONSIDER: THE FACT THAT ADULT LEARNERS HAVE SPECIFIC NEEDS; THAT ADULTS CAN BE CRITICAL OF THE TEACHING PROCESS; THAT THEY CAN FACE LINGUISTIC PROBLEMS OR WORRY THAT AGE CAN INFLUENCE THEIR LEARNING ABILITIES. THAT IS WHY IT IS OF UTMOST IMPORTANCE FOR TEACHERS TO PLAN AN APPROPRIATE COURSE, TO IDENTIFY ADULTS' LEARNING STYLES. TEACHING ADULT LEARNERS HAS SOME ADVANTAGES THAT CAN MAXIMIZE THEIR POTENTIAL FOR LEARNING. FOR EXAMPLE, ADULTS ARE AUTONOMOUS LEARNERS, THEY ARE MORE ORGANIZED AND HAVE A SET OF STUDY SKILLS ALREADY ACQUIRED. ADULTS ARE MOTIVATED LEARNERS AND CAN BRING AN INCREDIBLE AMOUNT OF KNOWLEDGE TO THE CLASS. ALL THESE ASPECTS CAN HELP TEACHERS TO CHOOSE AND USE TECHNIQUES BETTER SUITED FOR THE PURPOSE OF LEARNING.*

KEY WORDS: *ADULT LEARNER, NEEDS ANALYSIS, LEARNING STYLES, TEACHING STRATEGIES*

The acquisition of a foreign language by adult learners is often slow, discouraging and even frustrating. All learners want to use the foreign language with confidence and spontaneity, in the same way they use their mother tongue.

The teacher who works with adult learners has to perform a thorough analysis of his/her students in order to get to know them better. The way to success is a maize full of traps through which teachers pass when and if they pick the right clue. That is why gathering information on students' characteristics, on their motivation to study another language or on their learning styles is a must in the attempt to find the right approach and then design the appropriate course.

Adult learners may be grouped according to their preferred learning styles. Using multiple learning styles for learning is a relatively new approach to teaching. Differences in cognitive styles influence learners' priorities for a particular approach to learning.

Learning styles are 'specific actions taken by the learner to make learning easier, faster, more enjoyable, more self-directed, and more transferable to new situations' (Oxford, 1990). According to Richards and Lockhart (1996), the common learning styles for each type of learners are: *concrete, analytical, communicative and authority-oriented.*

Concrete learners use active means of processing information. Analytical learners prefer logical and systematic presentation of new acquired material. Other researchers also call them logical or mathematical learners as they prefer using logic, reasoning and systems. Communicative learners prefer a social approach. They may be also referred to as social/interpersonal learners (they prefer to learn in groups or with other people) or verbal/linguistic learners (they prefer using words, both in speech and writing). Authority-oriented learners prefer the teacher's authority.

Other researchers describe learning styles in a more detailed manner and add to the list above *solitary* or *intrapersonal learners*, who prefer to work alone and use self-study.

Most of the studies investigating learning styles accept the following main categories: visual, aural and kinaesthetic learners.

Visual or *spatial learners* learn through seeing, so they prefer using pictures, images, and spatial understanding. They need to see the teacher's body language and facial expression to fully understand the content of a lesson. They tend to prefer to sit at the front of the classroom in order to avoid visual obstructions such as other people's heads. They may think in pictures and learn best from visual displays (e.g. diagrams, illustrated text books, overhead transparencies, videos, flipcharts, hand-outs, etc). During a lecture or classroom discussion, they often prefer to take detailed notes to absorb the information.

The strategies that could be applied for visual learners are: creating visual analogies, visualising facts, relating key concepts to visual images such as symbols, writing a skeletal summary when reading, listening to lectures, doing pair-work or using colour to highlight main ideas.

Aural or *auditory-musical learners* learn through listening. They prefer using sound and music, so they learn best through verbal lectures, discussions, talking things through and listening to what others have to say. Auditory learners interpret the underlying meanings of speech through listening to the tone of voice, the pitch, the speed and other nuances. Written information may have little meaning until it is heard. These learners often benefit from reading text aloud and using a tape recorder.

Some strategies for auditory learners are: sharing notes and asking peers for feedback, making audio-recording notes and listening to them, verbalizing answers first in one's head before writing them down, orally summarizing and discussing short fragments of a reading passage, reading to oneself aloud or having someone else do it.

Physical/tactile or *kinaesthetic learners* learn through moving, doing and touching, so they prefer using their body, hands and sense of touch. They learn best through a hands-on approach, actively exploring the physical world around them. They may find it hard to sit still for long periods and may become distracted by their need for activity and exploration.

Learning a series of facts while doing some form of exercise, engaging in activity-based role-plays, linking language to learning through processes involving physical activity, physically highlighting key language and pieces of information are only a few of the strategies that might be applied when working with this type of learners.

Learning styles group common ways that people learn. Everyone has a mix of learning styles. Some people may have one dominant style of learning, with far less use of the other styles. Others might use different styles, according to the circumstance they find themselves in. The truth is that nobody can talk about some right mix of learning styles. Moreover, someone's learning styles are not fixed. For instance, one can develop ability in

less dominant styles, as well as further develops styles that somebody else already uses well.

By recognizing and understanding one's learning styles, teachers can use techniques better suited to their students. This improves the speed and quality of learning.

Learning styles are determined by the needs an adult learner has. Knowing as much as possible about adult learners' needs will definitely help teachers improving their methods of teaching.

Adult learners can be defined through a number of special characteristics: 'They can engage with abstract thought, have a range of life experiences, definite expectations about the learning process, their own set patterns of learning, and are more disciplined than children. On the other hand, adult learners have a number of characteristics which can make learning and teaching problematic: can be critical of teaching methods, anxious and under-confident because of previous failure and worry about diminishing learning power with age' (Harmer, 2000). They also face certain linguistic problems (e.g. 'fossilized' errors such as persistent deviations from the second language norm or language transfer), which have a negative influence on the productive skills.

Adult learners may also have different reasons for learning English, different personalities and ways of relating to and working with other people, different skills, aptitudes and abilities, different topics they find interesting, different learning styles, different previous learning experiences, different speeds of working and learning.

Contrary to young learners who enjoy variety in the field of activities performed in class, adult learners are far more selective. For instance, they generally dislike role-plays and made-up stories, probably because of their practicality and life experience. Although they claim they would like to drill and do grammar exercises, they do not enjoy these activities.

Another important aspect of their way of studying is that they generally avoid doing homework or any other additional tasks that might help them to consolidate structures and vocabulary. They keep complaining about shortage of time, work load and family commitments. Nevertheless, activities of listening and speaking spontaneously are among their preferences.

Motivation is an important part of learning. Adult learners, contrary to young learners who can study for the sake of a good grade or other indirect rewards, put forth sustained efforts for some other goals than the immediate enjoyment of the activity itself.

Internal and external factors that promote learners' reasons for learning are challenges and promotions at work, requirements for English literacy, overseas assignments and trips, workshops and conferences in English, welcoming foreign visitors, professional differentiation and specialization, e-communication.

Moreover, learners have distinct, individual reasons for being in a class and learning English. Teachers teach better if they know more about all those reasons.

A thorough analysis of both learning styles and adult learners' needs is meant to enrich any teacher's approach to teaching a foreign language, being of great help in designing an appropriate course.

The experience of planning and designing an appropriate course that suits adult learners can be very challenging, as teachers are often faced with various complexities and problems. The solution is to perform an appropriate analysis of the learners' needs. If a

group of learners' language needs ca be accurately specified, then this identification can be used to determine the content of a language programme that will meet these needs.

Although there are various ways of interpreting 'needs', the concept of 'learner needs' is often interpreted in two ways:

- as what the learner *wants* to do with the language. This is the goal-oriented definition of a needs analysis and relates to terminal objectives or the end of learning;
- and what the learner *needs* to do to actually acquire the language. This is the process-oriented definition of the needs analysis and relates to the transitional, to the means of learning.

Traditionally, the first interpretation was widely used and accepted. However, in today's globalised teaching and learning contexts, courses for adult learners tend to relate to both at the same time, focusing on the process-oriented approach in aligning learners' needs with their present working scenarios.

In view of these concerns, researchers have discussed criteria for adult courses design in terms of: length, assessment, goals, teacher's role, focus, course-content, course materials, and learner characteristics. Concerns surrounding course design could be listed in the form of question such as:

Should the course be intensive or extensive?

Should the learners' performance be assessed or non-assessed?

Should the course deal with immediate needs or with delayed needs?

Should the role of the teacher be that of the provider of knowledge and activities, or as facilitator of activities arising from learners' expressed wants?

Should the course have a broad focus or a narrow one?

Should the course be pre-study or pre-experience or run parallel with the study or experience?

Should the materials be common-core or specific to learners' study or work?

Should the group taking the course be homogenous or heterogeneous?

By asking these questions prior to planning course design, the adult learner teacher can be better prepared.

In the literature of needs analysis, some of the following aspects are often recommended by experts:

- *placement testing*, that is administering tests designed to assess general English ability and ability to perform adequately in work contexts, might help determine the starting level of the course;
- *linguistic needs analysis* helps to identify skill development, linguistic structures, lexical items, language functions and levels of formality;
- *learning needs analysis* helps identify learners' attitudes towards different kinds of methodology, learning tasks and activities;
- *learner perceptions analysis* discovers learners' perceptions of themselves and others as part of their company culture, and their relationships with people from other company cultures.

In analysing course design issues in any teaching and learning context, it is generally an accepted fact that the process of matching aim and method is not simply a mechanistic one, of finding out what is the aim and then finding an appropriate method to achieve it. In the process of performing a needs analysis a vast amount of information is usually

collected. It is a difficult task to decide what may or may not prove to be relevant clues towards the choice of methods and materials to be used.

A course of teaching the English language will be definitely better designed if teachers are willing to make use of training strategies aimed to adult learners.

One of the important goals in learning a foreign language is to develop the skill of listening comprehension. Listening activities often prove to be time-consuming. After listening to some passage, most of the adult learners usually make complaints about all being too fast. Or different learners recall the passage differently. Moreover, they often misinterpret the recorded information and claim that they have definitely heard it.

The best approach in this case is to lengthen pauses during the listening activity, according to the scheme listening – pause – listening – pause etc. These pauses give adult learners the 'thinking time' they need to process information. At first learners might need longer pauses after a brief listening, but gradually they will develop the ability to process longer passages without any pauses and get the information right.

The issue of developing speaking skills for adult learners is particularly difficult. The major reason is that oral and listening skills are interrelated: the better listening comprehension, the better speaking skills. That is why they should be developed simultaneously.

Competence in speaking skills is also hard to develop as factors like emotions, self-esteem, empathy, anxiety, attitude, motivation, uneasiness, self-doubt or frustration come into play, making the teachers' task even more difficult.

Teachers dealing with adult learners must remember that adults are always concerned with how they might be judged by their peers. 'They are very cautious about making errors in what they say, for making errors would be a public display of ignorance, which would be an obvious occasion of 'losing face'…' (Shumin, 1997). This sensitivity to making mistakes is the explanation for their inability to speak without hesitation.

Consequently, the teachers' efforts should be directed towards encouraging learners to speak out their minds on all aspects of covered materials and persuading them that making mistakes is a natural process of learning.

Reading a text in a foreign language might be challenging too. Many adult learners easily give up doing it, as they feel they do not know all the words and need the dictionary all the time. They usually classify the activity of reading as time-consuming and boring.

Teachers might find useful to make their students enjoy this activity by providing them with the following tips: decide on why you are reading the text; find the right place to read; survey the text in order to find out how long it is, if there is a table of contents or a conclusion; if there are any unfamiliar words look them up in a good dictionary; read headings and diagrams; during reading, try to summarize the main idea of each paragraph and if there are no subheadings, create your own; make some bullet point notes as you proceed through the text; if there is a conclusion of the end of one chapter, read it first.

Adult learners may be assessed through writing, speaking or observing. In writing, the learners might be asked to fill in a questionnaire (e.g. about their work, interests, previous study, etc.); take a language test, write a paragraph about topics set by the teacher, write a letter/e-mail to the teacher.

Before taking up any of these activities, the teacher should indicate his/her learners the main steps to follow when writing in English: write a short outline, write an

introductory paragraph, write a topic sentence for each paragraph, follow the topic sentence with supporting details, and write a conclusion.

In speaking, the learners might be interviewed individually or in pairs, asking them informally for advice about what would be useful to work on during the future lessons or showing the intended course-book or materials for the course and discuss them together in order to select the most appropriate ones. Or teachers might collect oral feedback comments about the course at the end of the lessons.

Through observing, the teacher sets the learners tasks to do in class. This will allow him/her to observe them working, speaking, and using the language. The teacher will be able to diagnose the learners' language or skills problems and discover more about what they need.

A method is a way of teaching. The choice of a method is dependent on the teacher's approach, namely what he/she believes about how people learn or how teaching helps people learn. Any teacher then has to make methodological decisions about the course aims, the teaching techniques, the type of activities, the methods of assessment.

Despite the various methods that could be approached by language teachers, many of them nowadays do not follow one single method. Over the years, they develop a personal methodology, built from their own selection of what they consider to be the best and most appropriate of what they have learnt about.

There are individual preferences regarding how learners like to communicate and learn.

A complete repertoire of teaching and learning approaches improves learning. Learners who approach the learning process with a wide range of strategies have more options available for meeting expectations. Increased student awareness of different learning styles builds multiple perspectives, which help students to better understand others and to work within their learning community.

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