

Teaching foreign languages to adult learners

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Abstract

There is no need to discuss about the importance of foreign languages nowadays. Apart from the students of all school levels we find also a great number of adult learners in the language classes. A lot of attention is paid to the finding of the best methodologies, techniques and procedures that provide the fastest language acquisition in the shortest amount of time possible especially for adult learners as they have an immediate need for immediate results.

This paper will concentrate on the need of teaching methods for adult learners which have to be different from those used for school or university students as these groups of learners have different characteristics and as a result different needs and expectations.

This paper will cover some definitions of the adult learner, the differences between the adult learner and the young learner, the main theories on adult teaching and learning, and at the end it will be discussed about how important it is for the teacher to take into account that the adult learner is not only different from a young learner, an adult learner, product of a culture and a political,

social, economical situation, is also different other adult learners, and as such he/she might respond in different ways to different methods, techniques and activities.

Introduction

Foreign language teaching and learning is a very complex process but with the growing of mobility and globalisation it has become a necessary requirement for everyone. The amount of time spent for the study of foreign languages in school has risen considerably and more and more people come to study after school to get different training and mostly foreign language classes. A lot of attention is paid to the finding of the best methodologies, techniques and procedures that provide the fastest language acquisition in the shortest amount of time possible. And this is especially the case with adult learners as they have an immediate need for immediate results. In order to create the right class climate and find the proper methods, techniques and procedures for the adult learner it is very helpful to firstly identify the main characteristics of adult learners and adults as language learners, and secondly the difference between the adult learner and the young learner.

Who is the adult learner?

Adults are babies with big bodies Robert W. Pike. Before moving on with the adult learners and their exigencies I would like to clarify firstly who is generally called the “adult learner”, if it is possible to define him/her.

Adult learner¹ (mature student) is a term used to describe any person socially accepted as an adult who is in a learning process, whether it is formal education, informal learning, or corporate-sponsored learning. Adult learners are considered distinct from child learners ...they fall into the category of nontraditional students, whom the National Center for Education Statistics defines as meeting at least one of the following seven criteria:

- 1 Delays enrollment (does not enter postsecondary education in the same calendar year that he or she finished high school).
- 2 Attends part time for at least part of the academic year.
- 3 Works full time (35 hours or more per week) while enrolled.
- 4 Is considered financially independent for purposes of determining eligibility for financial aid.
- 5 Has dependents other than a spouse (usually children, but sometimes others).
- 6 Is a single parent (either not married or married but separated and has dependents).
- 7 Does not have a high school diploma (completed high school with a GED or other high school completion certificate or did not finish high school).

¹ Wikipedia definition

From another source we have some assumptions from Dirkx and Lavin (1995) and Pelavin (The Adult Learner) who offer some characteristics of the adult learner based upon the research and theory of andragogy and social learning theory. They assume that in the field of Adult Education, it is generally agreed that learners possess the following characteristics²:

1. Adult learners are diverse, bringing a wealth of life experiences to the learning situation. Active forms of learning help connect the content to the learners' own meaning structures. They:
 - a) vary widely among ages, abilities, job experiences, cultural backgrounds, and personal goals;
 - b) range in educational backgrounds from no formal schooling through many years of schooling;
 - c) carry well-developed personal identities;
 - d) carry reservoirs of personal experiences, which are learning resources.

2. Adult learners want to be able to relate content to specific contexts in their lives. These contexts are often in the form of a problem issue or concern in their worksite - i.e. the ABE classroom. They:
 - a) tend to be pragmatic learners;
 - b) study to improve their performance in other social roles;

² <http://literacy.kent.edu/~nebraska/curric/ttim1/aaal.html>

- c) let their schoolwork take a back seat to other responsibilities, such as jobs and families;
 - d) expect their class time to be well spent;
 - e) hope their courses will help them solve problems in their daily lives.
3. Adult learners prefer to have some degree of control over their learning. They may evidence a greater or lesser degree of self-directedness depending upon their maturity level and familiarity with the content. They:
- a) tend to be voluntary learners;
 - b) believe the decision to return to school is an important one;
 - c) believe that education will be helpful;
4. The adults' sense of self has a significant influence on the meaning of the learning situation for that person. Learners have differing degrees of self-efficacy and awareness of their own learning styles. They may:
- a) feel embarrassed about returning to school;
 - b) feel embarrassed to join classes with younger students;
 - c) hold negative impressions of their own abilities;
 - d) hold negative impressions of schools and teachers.

Here we have a division made by the psychoanalyst Erik Erikson who describes the physical, emotional and psychological stages of development and relates specific issues, or developmental work or *tasks*, to each stage. He identifies eight of them, respectively; Infant, Toddler, Preschooler, School-Age Child, Adolescent,

Young Adult, Middle-Age Adult, and Older Adult. As we see there are three specific stages about the adult and their characteristics are as follow;

<u>Young Adult</u>	<u>Middle-Age Adult</u>	<u>Older Adult</u>
Intimacy vs Isolation	Generativity vs Stagnation	Integrity vs Despair
Learns to make personal commitment to another as spouse, parent or partner	Seeks satisfaction through productivity in career, family, and civic interests	Reviews life accomplishments, deals with loss and preparation for death

Differences between adult learners and young learners

I have noticed sometimes that teachers are mostly more worried about the mastering of the content rather than trying to understand and to know their students, their needs and their differences and peculiarities. One of the differences teachers should bear in mind is the one between children and adult.

The following table³ shows some main differences between the general characteristics of childhood and adulthood. The content of this table would help teachers to better approach their adult learners, by better knowing the adult learner.

³ The above list comes from "Plan instruction for adults, Module N-4," The National Centre for Research in Vocational Education. (1987) Ohio State University, Columbus, OH http://ed.fnal.gov/lincon/staff_adult.shtml

CHILDHOOD	ADULTHOOD
<p>Children depend upon adults for material support, psychological support, and life management. They are other-directed.</p>	<p>Adults depend upon themselves for material support and life management. Although they must still meet many psychological needs through others, they are largely self-directed.</p>
<p>Children perceive one of their major roles in life to be that of learner.</p>	<p>Adults perceive themselves to be doers; using previous learning to achieve success as workers, parents, etc.</p>
<p>Children, to a large degree, learn what they are told to learn.</p>	<p>Adults learn best when they perceive the outcomes of the learning process as valuable--contributing to their own development, work success, etc.</p>
<p>Children view the established learning content as important because adults tell them it is important.</p>	<p>Adults often have very different ideas about what is important to learn.</p>
<p>Children, as a group within educational settings, are much alike. They're approximately the same age, come from</p>	<p>Adults are very different from each other. Adult learning groups are likely to be composed of persons of many different ages,</p>

similar socioeconomic backgrounds, etc.	backgrounds, education levels, etc.
Children actually perceive time differently than older people do. Our perception of time changes as we age--time seems to pass more quickly as we get older.	Adults, in addition to perceiving time itself differently than children do, also are more concerned about the effective use of time.
Children have a limited experience base.	Adults have a broad, rich experience base to which to relate new learning.
Children generally learn quickly.	Adults, for the most part, learn more slowly than children, but they learn just as well.
Children are open to new information and will readily adjust their views.	Adults are much more likely to reject or explain away new information that contradicts their beliefs.
Children's readiness to learn is linked to both academic development and biological development.	Adults' readiness to learn is more directly linked to need--needs related to fulfilling their roles as workers, spouses, parents, etc. and coping with life changes (divorce, death of a loved one, retirement, etc.).
Children learn (at least in part)	Adults are more concerned about

because learning will be of use in the future.	the immediate applicability of learning.
Children are often externally motivated (by the promise of good grades, praise from teachers and parents, etc.)	Adults are more often internally motivated (by the potential for feelings of worth, self-esteem, achievement, etc.)
Children have less well-formed sets of expectations in terms of formal learning experiences. Their "filter" of past experience is smaller than that of adults.	Adults have well-formed expectations, which, unfortunately, are sometimes negative because they are based upon unpleasant past formal learning experiences.

Main theories on adult teaching/learning

“...instruction ought not to abandon individuals the moment they leave the schools ...it ought to embrace all ages ...there is no period of life when it is not useful and possible to learn ...this supplementary instruction is so much the more necessary as that of infancy...” CONDORCET (1743-1794)

Adult teaching and learning, but mostly learning, goes back much further than the time these words were written. As the first educators were mainly philosophers it is normal that teaching and learning were addressed to adults. But times have greatly changed and we are not talking anymore about continuous education as “supplementary instruction” but as a mean to survive and maintain the standards of living one sets for him/herself and

his/her family. In our modern society we are never having enough qualification, we never have a secure employment, there is always someone with more certificates and diplomas that threatens our place.

And from speaking about not all people having the same needs we pass to Knowles who was convinced that adults learned differently to children.

⁴Malcolm Shepherd Knowles (1913 - 1997) was a central figure in US adult education in the second half of the twentieth century. In the 1950s he was the Executive Director of the Adult Education Association of the United States of America. He wrote the first major accounts of informal adult education and the history of adult education in the United States. Furthermore, Malcolm Knowles' attempts to develop a distinctive conceptual basis for adult education and learning via the notion of andragogy (a learning theory for adults distinct from "pedagogy" one concerning children) became very widely discussed and used.

The initial four concepts of Knowles's work regarding adult learning are as follow;

- Change in self-concept.
As we grow and mature, our self-concept moves from total dependency (the reality of the infant) to increasing self-directedness.
- The role of experience.
We accumulate an expanding reservoir of experiences that are a rich resource and provide a base for new learning. Teaching techniques that involve practice, reflection, and analysis (discussion, simulation, case

⁴ <http://www.infed.org/thinkers/et-knowl.htm>

study, field experience, and role play) are particularly appropriate.

- Readiness to learn.

Adults are less motivated by biological development and academic pressure than by the task related to social roles. Rather than presenting what ought to be learned, the teacher offer choices to enable students to concentrate on what is important at a particular point in their development.

- Orientation to learning.

If children are subject-orientated in their learning, adults tend to be problem-focused. They come to the classroom because of some gaps in their knowledge; they want information and skills that can be applied in the real world.⁵

⁶Andragogy, initially defined as "the art and science of helping adults learn," has taken on a broader meaning since Knowles' first edition. The term currently defines an alternative to pedagogy and refers to learner-focused education for people of all ages.

The andragogic model asserts that five issues be considered and addressed in formal learning. They include (1) letting learners know why something is important to learn, (2) showing learners how to direct themselves through information, and (3) relating the topic to the learners' experiences. In addition, (4) people will not learn until they are ready and motivated to learn. Often this (5) requires helping them overcome inhibitions,

⁵ M. Knowles, *The Adult Learner: A Neglected Species*, 2nd ed., ch. 3.

⁶ <http://agelesslearner.com/intros/andragogy.html>

behaviors, and beliefs about learning.

Unfortunately, andragogy usually is cited in education texts as the way adults learn. Knowles himself concedes that four of andragogy's five key assumptions apply equally to adults and children. The sole difference is that children have fewer experiences and pre-established beliefs than adults and thus have less to relate.

In the information age, the implications of a move from teacher-centered to learner-centered education are staggering. Postponing or suppressing this move will slow our ability to learn new technology and gain competitive advantage.

How can we expect to analyze and synthesize so much information if we turn to others to determine what should be learned, how it will be learned, and when it will be learned?

Though our grandchildren or great-grandchildren may be free of pedagogic bias, most adults today are not offered that luxury. To succeed, we must unlearn our teacher-reliance.

We must take it upon ourselves to meet our learning needs and demand training providers do the same. To know our demands, we must know how we process information.

Conclusion

The main topic of this paper has been the adult learner and the differences between him/her and the young learner. All this information is necessary for a teacher to get acquainted and master it in order to better meet the needs of their students. But what I personally think is that understanding this main difference and studying about the adult learner is not enough. An adult

learner is not only different from a young learner, an adult learner, product of a culture and a political, social, economical situation, is different from other adult learners, products of a different culture and a political, social, economical situation. And as such he/she might respond in different ways to different methods, techniques and activities.

Knowing the characteristics of the adult learner and the difference between the adult learner and the young learner makes it possible for the teacher to create a suitable and safe environment that provides acquisition possibilities.

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