Tatiana ŢEPLIC
magistru în filologie
Universitatea de Stat din Moldova
Departament Lingvistică Germanică şi Comunicare Interculturală

TEACHING ADVANCED ADULT LEARNERS

Articolul tratează problemele legate de învățarea limbii engleze pentru adulții aflați într-un stadiu avansat. Acesta analizează particularitățile cognitive și psihologice ale percepției unei limbi străine și procesul de învățare al persoanelor de peste 25 de ani, care sunt profesioniști în domeniul lor și sunt conștienți de nevoile lor în limba engleză. Autorul acordă o atenție deosebită problemei selecției materialului textual, metodelor de demonstrare a progreselor cursanților și problemelor legate de corectarea erorilor.

More and more adults of different nationalities seek the help of English instructors because they want to find employment abroad, to communicate more effectively at work, to resort to overseas travels, or just to enjoy various types of social situations. In any of these cases, the English learners are highly motivated to study this particular subject. However, the teachers of adults learners must be aware of the differences between the teaching – learning patterns specific to adults, on the one hand, and those that generally function with children, on the other. In the given article the term "adult learners" refers to persons over the normal age of traditional schooling (more specifically, over 23-25 years old), who freely choose to get involved in a particular form of instruction, in order to serve a professional, social or personal need or interest

Another aspect which is worth special attention is the fact that teaching advanced ESL students may be more challenging than teaching beginners or intermediate students. This is especially true for adults who are working professionals with very high levels of English having no serious issues with accent, grammar, etc. Many of them work full time and have small children, which means they basically have zero time in between lessons to do even the most basic kind of "homework." Even during the lessons, they may seem too tired to do anything mentally challenging.

First of all, the teacher should know the students' needs. That is why teachers, especially one-to-one or business English teachers, routinely do

Needs Analysis at the start of a course. The students might know all the grammar' and have better vocabularies than a lot of native speakers in their professional field. But they might still experience some difficulties in understanding fast, strong accent academic speech, and this is the skill they are expected to be proficient in while attending some lectures at a foreign university, professional development courses or participating in a conference. The teacher should find out the basic needs of the student and his or her plans of English use in future.

In the field of the teaching methodology, the interest in adult learners emerged from the idea that mature students learn somehow differently from the young ones. Building on this idea, the American educator Malcolm Knowles developed the principle of "andragogy", which represents the art and science of adult learning. Knowles (1984) states that adults can direct their own learning themselves, relying in the rich life experiences they have. He also asserts that adults are task or problem solving oriented in learning. They are ready to learn when they assume new social or life roles and are willing to apply new learning immediately.

Knowles declares that adults are generally motivated to learn due to internal rather than external factors (Knowles, 1984, p.12). Unlike younger learners, the adults almost always have a sound reason why they are studying, and that reason will be their primary motivation. Advanced level learners have very distinct priorities and many of them may have sizable goals they are working toward with their language skills. Moreover, as Harmer (2007) points out, "many adults are able to sustain a level of motivation by holding on to a distant goal in a way that teenagers find more difficult" (p. 84).

Resent research (e.g. Harmer, 2007, p. 81) shows that adult learners have greater cognitive capabilities and conceptual complexity than the younger ones. They have a longer attention span, are cable of abstract thought and have a more developed understanding of how language works. Adults are self-directed learners, whereas younger students are adult dependent learners. This therefore means that adults often challenge new information with the younger age group simply accepting it. These cognitive characteristics of the adult learners imply that although younger students are better at acquiring pronunciation, the adults are still perfectly able to reach high levels of proficiency in a foreign language (Lightbown & Spada, 2006, p. 73). Teachers must adjust the instructional materials

and the teaching methods in order to accommodate the students' skill and maturity levels.

The adult learners' greater cognitive capabilities and conceptual complexity should represent an advantage for the English teachers. But, one of the challenges they face when teaching advanced learners is finding texts that will engage and be relevant to all students. As it has been stated above the teachers should survey the students about their interests and try to select texts, they feel the students will relate to, but catering to the inevitable range of interests across the class might be a hardship. For such situations Jon Hird in his article "Teaching advanced learners – finding texts that will engage and be relevant to all students" suggests a checklist based on Johns and Davis's (1983) criteria: TAVI, TALO and TASP.

According to TAVI criterion any text suggested to students' reading should contain either some new information or at least offer an unusual or fresh angle on it. The text performs the function of acquainting the reader with some new ideas which is reflected in the name of the principle TAVI (text as a vehicle for information). Jon Hird insists that a text should interest the teacher himself first of all, but still he warns against assuming that the students will be interested in all the stuff the teachers are interested in.

Next criterion to be taken into consideration is TALO, which means "text as a linguistic object". The main function of a text here is to contain and reveal some useful and meaningful linguistic phenomena. Having looked at the text from TAVI perspective, the teacher should identify the language in the text that he can focus on during the lesson. This may be specific language phenomena that is to be taught or reviewed, some textual elements such as style or genre features, grammar or vocabulary issues, or both. Is being taught. "When a text naturally presents multiple examples of one or more relevant grammar pattern and/or a number of (possibly related) lexical items that are appropriate and useful for the leaners or some other pertinent textual feature, then this text" corresponds the TALO criterion.

The potential of the text to be used for some kind of post-reading productive task is the essence of the TASP (Text as a Springboard for Production) criterion. Depending on the nature of the text, productive tasks can include the students' discussion of what they have learned

from the text (or expected to learn, but didn't), discussion of what they agree or disagree with, sharing their own experiences relating to the text, preparing a summary of the text (to tell someone else what they have learned), debating issues and points of view presented in the text (maybe as a role-play or real-play), critical assessing aspects of the text (such as the validity or reliability of information), a presentation about the text, using the text as a writing model or writing a response or follow-up to the text. A good text should provide the teacher with more than one of the post-reading activities. Jon Hird insists that only the text which was positively assessed from a TAVI, TALO and TASP perspective is worth considering in teaching advanced adults.

As it has been mentioned above, the mature learners' instructional process is generally supported by a high level of motivation, but this motivation is also accompanied by these students' high expectations with regard to their instruction which are very much influenced by the methods used by their former teachers at different educational institutions the adults have attended. If these expectations are not met, the learners may become critical towards the new context of instruction. As a result, it often happens that the students prefer the more traditional teaching methods at the expense of the modern, communicative ones.

Another negative attitudinal factor which affects the instructional process in the advanced classroom is the mature students' anxiety about making mistakes and "losing face", which becomes greater with older age. Adults tend to take errors personally and are more likely to let them affect their self-esteem. Because of the students' feelings of anxiety, the teacher should pay particular attention to the process of error correction, focusing also on the positive aspects and on the progress that learners are making.

In this regard Stacey Hughes raises the issue of ingrained mistakes and suggests several ways of dealing with them. She declares that such mistakes should be dealt with only If they impede communication or have an impact on the way the person is viewed by other speakers. But the most important she considers the attitude of the learner towards the necessity of improvement. Here the researcher emphasizes the role of self-correction and self-assessment. These release the mentioned above anxiety of the mature learners and heighten the feeling of being in control of the learning process that is very important for such learners.

When students take control of their own learning, the teacher's role changes from supplier of information to facilitator of learning and learning becomes student centered. Mature students prefer taking responsibility for what they learn and how they learn it. Teachers only help students notice the mistakes and understand their origin. Students correct them themselves and continue self-improvement using techniques suggested be the teacher. Here on going self-assessment, writing mistake logs, making action plans for achieving a distant linguistic goal, keeping journals, creating language portfolios, self-recordings come to the forefront of the student's assurance of his or her progress.

In conclusion, teachers working with adult ESL students should be well aware of their students' practical needs, of the specific cognitive and psychological features of these learners and be able to implement the appropriate methods and techniques in their everyday practice. The teachers' proficiency, skillfulness, persistence, flexibility, resourcefulness and empathy play a crucial role in their professional success and competitiveness.

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