ASPECTS OF ADULT LANGUAGE LEARNING

Asistent univ. Adrian NĂZNEAN
Univeristatea de Medicină şi Farmacie, Târgu-Mureş

Abstract

There are numerous issues to take into consideration in establishing a productive learning and teaching environment in adult classes. Firstly, it is essential to determine who an adult learner is. A chief characteristic of adultness is the need of self-directing. Adult learners have attributes which can make learning and teaching challenging. In some cases, new teaching patterns and innovative activities make them feel uncomfortable since their earlier learning experiences make them be critical of these teaching methods. Many adult learners are anxious that their intellectual powers diminish with age – they are concerned about keeping their creative powers alive.

Secondary school pupils worry more about doing well at school than anything else in their lives while they also worry about university entrance whereas adults are more likely to be self-motivated, they are able to work independently, and possess strong study and organizational skills.

Children differ from adults when it comes to learning. Some of the basic differences between children and adults as learners are:

Children	Adults
1. Rely on others to choose what is important to be learned 2. Accept the presentation of important information 3. Have expectations that what they are learning will be useful in their long-term future 4. Have little or no experience upon which to build	1. Decide for themselves what is important to be learned 2. Need to substantiate the information based on their beliefs and experience 3. Expect that what they are learning will be immediately useful 4. Have much experience upon which to build

When adults undertake to learn through their own initiative, they start with an existing experience. Then they observe the experience, reflect on it and identify what new knowledge or skill they need to acquire in order to perform more efficiently. They create abstract notions and generalizations. Consequently, they test their concepts and generalizations in new situations, thus gaining new experiences.

Adults bring a wealth of personal experiences to any learning situation. Anything that is presented in a learning session will be filtered through those personal experiences. Encouraging and inviting adult learners to participate in this way also encourages them to be active learners who take responsibility for their own learning. It also demonstrates the fact

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that the teacher values and respects their experiences which may be a key tool for the success of adult language teaching.

During childhood, language acquisition is a natural effect of long-lasting exposure to a language. A child does not need to be formally taught a spoken language in order to acquire it. Any young child will acquire native fluency in any language if exposed to it on a regular basis in a social environment. A child will naturally acquire native fluency in more than one language under such circumstances.

In the vast majority of individuals, though, this natural skill to acquire a spoken language without deliberate effort begins to diminish roughly at about the age of puberty (12-14 years of age). Teenagers exposed to a new language after this age will acquire it with definite interference from whatever language or languages they had been exposed to before puberty. Practically speaking, language acquisition by adults is in fact language learning, that is, a deliberate, thorough, intellectual process that rarely, if ever, results in the level of native fluency acquired so naturally by any young child, despite intellectual ability or personal motivation. The deficiency is mainly obvious at the level of phonetics, and adults who learn second languages usually speak them with some recognizable non-native accent. Thus, language acquisition by children and language learning by adults are noticeably distinct phenomena.

If every child, regardless of intellectual stage, is equally gifted at acquiring language, the case of adults is entirely different. Some adults can learn a second language with something close to native fluency; others will retain a distinct foreign accent even after years of practice which might make us think that some adults possess a special ability for learning languages after the critical age. Although any adult can learn a second language, not all will do so with equal results.

Differences in adult ability to master the grammar of a second language appear only partially connected to individual differences in general intelligence. The ability to learn languages in later life seems to be a talent apart from what is usually called general intelligence. In rather rare cases some adults may possess childlike abilities to master languages. Adult language learning ability seems to be a separate aptitude, like musical or artistic talent. Differences in adult abilities to learn languages are even more evident in the case of phonetics. The talent for phonetic imitation in adults does not depend at all on general intelligence.

Apart from these, there are other individual factors which need to be taken into account. Exceptional memory in some adults seems to be another factor that greatly aids second language learning. Memory is also in part an inborn talent separate from general

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intelligence. Most people who learn several languages during the course of their lifetime forget all but the ones they use on a somewhat regular basis. Old languages become inactive as new ones are learned. Only a few individuals are able to acquire and maintain fluency in several languages.

Although there are differences in the ability of individual adults to learn a second language, any adult of reasonable abilities, if given enough time, enough opportunity, and, probably most importantly, having enough desire, can learn to communicate in any language. But the degree of eventual fluency achieved will differ considerably from one individual to another, unlike the situation with child language acquisition, where every child achieves perfect fluency if there is enough exposure. Successful adult language learners usually learn language through conscious effort, that is, deliberate learning, rather than acquire it passively without a significant amount of deliberate intellectual effort as children do. Motivation is a significant aspect in language learning, and societies that praise or emphasize the value of multilingualism will increase the motivation level of learners and thus increase the success of second language learning in general. When adults realise that their learning makes sense and is important according to their values and perspective, their motivation emerges.

Since language acquisition in adults is really language learning, how can a second language be taught to an adult? Various viewpoints exist concerning adult language learning and teaching. But there is no single philosophy or method which is universally best for all teachers and learners. Each approach has brought about positive contributions to language teaching and each one can be negative and limiting if carried to an extreme.

Two such well-known philosophies and approaches to language teaching are:

1. Contrastive hypothesis. The structure of the first language is viewed as a powerful linguistic aiding medium and becomes the main vehicle for the learning of a second language. Emphasis is placed on testing and direct correction. Grammar is presented and explained in the native language of the learner. Drawbacks: learners taught exclusively in this way are not prepared to use the language in a natural environment as it greatly ignores the creative aspect of language. It is an artificial way to learn language but, for biological reasons, all adult language learning is artificial when compared to child language acquisition.

2. Identity hypothesis. This way of language learning tries to minimise the difference between first and second language acquisition. Exposure to language will bring about good results and active engagement in the language will bring about the best results. It is a natural approach and it tries to approximate and imitate the environment in which the language would be learned by a child. The use of target language in class is almost at the maximum, use of realia and play acting is also frequent. It attempts to make the learner feel at

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ease and not under pressure to perform and actively take part in the process. It also tries to bring out what childlike abilities are still in the adult. Drawbacks: unfortunately, using the natural approach alone cannot convey all the subtlety of human language or the complexity of the grammar. Some deliberate intellectual approach must enhance it, such as grammatical explanations and structured drills and exercises.

Conclusion

There is no single, best way to teach language, because there is no single type of learner. Some learners require a more formal presentation to learn the language thoroughly; others can acquire more through less structured immersion in the language.

The question of the most favourable linguistic environment for the adult second language learner is a question of obvious importance to the teacher and language student. There are several ways in which a classroom can promote language acquisition. Intake is available via meaningful and communicative activities and tasks supplied by the teacher, the most direct way the classroom can promote language acquisition.

What is considered the most essential component of language instruction, explicit information about the language, and mechanical drill, may be the least important contributions the second language classroom makes. Although any one person can certainly study grammar on their own, attending a second language class is a lot more efficient way of learning the language as learners can thus gain intake from the teacher, the classroom exercises, and from fellow students. The chief value of second language classes is their ability to provide the acquirer with appropriate intake. Acquisition occurs even in intake-rich informal environments, but it does suffer in intake-poor classrooms. Thus, the acquisition-rich classroom might be extremely efficient, perhaps the most efficient solution for the adult second language acquirer.

Regardless of the methods employed, the most important tools for adult language learners are determination and consistency, as well as exposure to the proper language form. Without these, the adult second language learner will most likely be faced with failure.

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