IN-HOUSE ADULT LANGUAGE TEACHING AND LEARNING OF ENGLISH

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Abstract

Language learning in the contemporary global village has become more than a mere necessity. Due to the constantly growing exposure to both international and incoming students, the non-teaching employees of the University of Medicine and Pharmacy of Târgu Mureș faced the challenge of having to speak English as a foreign language. In order to improve their language proficiency skills, English language courses were organised as part of an internationalisation project.

Keywords: non-teaching staff; English language proficiency; adult language learning; language courses; English as a foreign language

1. Introduction

The Commission of European Communities, Brussels, accepted in 2003 a declaration which highlighted the importance of adult language learning in the European Union. "Every Adult should be encouraged to carry on learning foreign languages, and facilities should be made readily available to make this possible. Workers should have the opportunity to improve the language skills relevant to their working life. Cultural activities involving foreign music, literature or films, holidays abroad, town-twinning activities, voluntary service abroad can be promoted as opportunities for learning other cultures and languages" (*Commission of the European Communities, 2003*).

In order to improve quality, success, and productivity on the international market and to overcome competitiveness with other higher education organisations, the University of Medicine and Pharmacy of Târgu Mureş ran a project to give employees the chance to learn a foreign language. As part of an institutional project of internationalisation, English language courses were offered to employees in different fields. Thus, employees who come in direct contact with international students were targeted, groups covering staff from library services, the administrative staff, secretaries, security guards, nurses, and dental technicians from the Faculty of Dentistry, as well as different departments such as laboratories, the project department, etc.

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2. Adult language learning

Lately, as a result of globalization (internationalisation), more and more adults have started seeking the support of English tutors, either for finding employment abroad, or simply because they need to communicate more efficiently at work. The concept of "adult learners" can be defined as a term that refers to people who are over 25 years old and who choose to learn a foreign language in order to use it for social, professional, or personal purposes.

Lifelong learning involves a whole range of student types with different needs and objectives, and, consequently, it should be adapted to such plurality (Castañeda 2017: 2). Unlike pupils, adults possess a great cognitive maturity and come to class equipped with professional and significant life experience. Nevertheless, as stated by Castañeda, adult learners of a language encounter two barriers, they have cognitive limitations that limit second language learning, and they also face affective limitations.

The American adult educator, Malcolm Knowles was the first who developed the so-called theory of adult learning, namely "andragogy". Mezirow defines andragogy as an "organized and sustained effort to assist adults to learn in a way that enhances their capability to function as self-directed learners" (Mezirow, 1981: 136). Thus, the term andragogy refers to adult learning and teaching by incorporating both theoretical and practical principles.

According to Lavasani & Faryadres (2011: 195) andragogy is instruction that targets adults who focus on the meanings of processes but pay less attention to contents. The andragogical model varies from the pedagogical one, the latter having been accepted by the majority of teachers, as it is based on the suppositions that the only thing adult learners need to know is what the teacher teaches. Besides this, self-concept, experience, willingness to learn, life-centred orientation to learning, and, last but not least, motivation are also important in case of adult learners (Knowles 1990: 63). Jeremy Harmer (Harmer 2007: 81) emphasizes that adults are cognitively more capable of learning a foreign language than younger ones. This means that adults can be attentive for a longer period of time and they truly understand how a language works as their knowledge of grammar is more advanced. Thus, all the methods and materials the teacher uses need to be adjusted in order to suit students' needs. Additionally, as Harmer indicates (ibid.: 84), "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". Adults are more cooperative, they are more familiar with learning and they exhibit certain expectations, all these being necessary for a proper understanding and learning of a foreign language, in our case English.

If we compare adult learners with younger ones, adults seem to be more disciplined and "they are often prepared to struggle on despite boredom" (ibid.: 84). They do not ask irrelevant questions during the class, thus ensuring a pleasant instructional process. Foreign language courses for adults are mixed and are classified according to Alan Rogers and Naomi Harrocks (Rogers and Harrock 2010: 12) as formal (e.g. schools, universities), extra-

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formal (e.g. professional associations, mass-media), informal (e.g. informal groups), and self-directed (e.g. correspondence courses, magazines and journals). Recently, in-house or in-company courses have become available for employees, courses financed either by the employer or through different projects.

The University of Medicine and Pharmacy of Târgu Mureş offers undergraduate medical training in three languages: Romanian, Hungarian, and English. The English teaching programme was designed for international students, although Romanian citizens can also enroll. While many non-teaching employees of the university are bilingual and speak both Romanian and Hungarian, the need for English language skills is on the rise partly due to the growing number of international students, as well as to the growing number of incoming students or outgoing staff for training purposes in partner universities and institutions abroad.

This exposure of the employees to the contact with speakers of English was a key factor of the Internationalisation Project (O nouă dimensiune a procesului de internaționalizare a UMF Târgu Mureș - IntUMFTGM – IntUMFTGM - A new dimension of the internationalisation of the University of Medicine and Pharmacy of Târgu Mureş) for which the University applied.

3. Learners and language courses

3.1. Learners' linguistic background

In order to succeed in teaching a foreign language to adults, it is important to examine the target group. As such, at the first course employees were required to introduce themselves in order to find out more about their studies and linguistic background. Most of the learners had acquired a higher education degree, fields ranging from economics to law. A few learners had acquired only a high-school leaving certificate. Many had not studied English at all, some had studied some English in high-school, and some were self-educated due to their interest in the language and the need to speak it whenever abroad. Nevertheless, even employees who had studied English previously had had little or no contact with the language on a regular basis.

3.2. Learners and groups

No needs assessment was initially carried out due to the fact that only four groups of language teaching could run through the project and because of time constraints until the conclusion of the project. Apart from their linguistic background, which was the main criterion, learners were also grouped according to their fields of expertise, as such, the majority of the members of a group worked in related departments (secretaries from deans' offices, registrars, library staff, security and doormen, etc.). As a result, learners were divided into four groups according to self-assessed and self-declared levels of English language proficiency. Consequently, three groups of beginners and false-beginners, and a group of intermediate learners were created. An approximate mean age of the learners was 46 (minimum 30, maximum 64).

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One of the most difficult tasks was to motivate employees to attend courses. Studies (Gardner 1993: 158) have emphasized that motivation is a key factor in efficacious language learning. According to Penny Ur, teachers should motivate their students (2000: 275) as motivation leads to success. On the other hand, one advantage for the employees was the fact that the courses were offered at the beginning or the end of their working hours, a privilege decided upon by the governance of the university. Despite this advantage, a 36.4 % drop-out rate was recorded. While initially 96 learners were included in the project, only 61 took part in the final assessment. Drop-out was owed to the fact that some of the employees worked in shifts (doormen, security guards) and, as such, could not attend courses on a regular basis. Another reason was that, although some learners found themselves in the wrong proficiency group, they failed to join the group which was closer to their level of English language, and thus, never completed the course. Additionally, although 96 learners registered for the course, some of them (8.5%) never attended any. While most learners attended nearly all courses, some employees from different services (deans' offices, registrars) were unable to attend consistently due to the huge workload at the beginning of the academic year.

3.3. Course providers and course design

All four teachers who were assigned one group each own degrees in English language teaching (EFL – English as a foreign language). The topics for the three beginner groups were decided upon by the three teachers providing the courses for these groups, whereas the topics for the intermediate group allowed for more flexibility in terms of coverage and were selected in cooperation with the group members.

Some of the topics covered by beginner courses were: introducing oneself, telling the time, giving directions, describing jobs, home and family, filling in forms, talking about daily routine, etc. Topics for the intermediate group included: talking about oneself (family, job, hobbies), travelling, challenging experiences, music, personal/ professional achievements, as well as enactments of real-life scenarios, which gave the students the opportunity to practise real-life speaking, without the pressure of an actual situation. The teachers were all given the freedom to design and tailor their own lectures according to the level and needs of the group, bearing in mind the specificity of the learners' fields and jobs. The teaching materials used comprised both self-designed and published materials to better cater for the language skills of the learners.

3.4. Learning environment

As a university with high standards, the University of Medicine and Pharmacy of Târgu Mureş has well-equipped classrooms where the English courses were held. The equipment for the language course, the lighting and layout of the room, were all features that were taken into consideration when choosing the appropriate classroom necessary for the learning process. Chairs were arranged in semi-circles (Edge 1999: 52) because teachers wanted interaction between employees to be more natural and easier to accomplish.

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Teachers considered that in this way they could encourage employees to get to know one another and to communicate with each other, as the main objective of the courses was to enhance employees' speaking skills. Classroom activities were aided by an interactive whiteboard, a flipchart, a laptop, a CD/ DVD-player, and handouts which were given to each student at the beginning of the course.

3.5. Beginner learners

The first course taught was introducing oneself, a topic which implies performing various communicative activities. Initially, the learners were rather reluctant to do pair work activities which may be due to the fact that they found the setting of the classroom unusual since they had not been involved in some form of organised education for many years, and also due to a feeling of discomfort towards speaking to their peers in another language. Another concern of the learners was that by doing pair work speaking activities, they might disturb the other pairs and thus, they did these activities in a low voice. However, after a few courses, the participants gradually gained more confidence and became more accustomed to the typical communicative activities used in ELT and did not find speaking activities disruptive.

One great disadvantage was the fact that attendance was not constant with all the learners. Thus, after a week or two of absenteeism, some learners found it difficult to "reconnect" to the pair work atmosphere in the classroom. On the other hand, pairs had initially formed depending on seating. This seating became somewhat repetitive and traditional, and participants found it uncomfortable to change their pairs and to "bond" with another member of the group. For a while the fear that the partner may be a better speaker also posed a concern. However, towards the end of the 14-week course, learners gained more and more confidence in their speaking abilities and found it easier to switch partners.

Writing activities were not oftentimes used because the main focus of the course was the development of speaking skills, since these employees were more likely to find themselves in situations when speaking to a foreign student was necessary, rather than the production of a written text. Consequently, some of the writing activities covered topics such as: daily routine, family relationships, telling the time, etc. A recurring problem with most of the learners was spelling. Many spelling exercises were employed in order that learners become familiar with the spelling of the newly-acquired vocabulary. Such exercises included words with missing letters, word corrections, etc.

Because the course focused on communication and fluency rather than accuracy, grammar issues were approached only when it was necessary. As such, learners became familiar with the three most important verbs in the English language, specifically "to be", "to do" and "to have", two present tenses, namely simple and progressive, the future tense, the plural of nouns, genitives.

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3.6. Intermediate learners

Similarly to the other three groups, the intermediate group included staff from various services: administrative, secretarial, laboratory, etc. Regarding the topics for this group, there was much more flexibility and, consequently, topics were selected in cooperation with the participants. However, course material was tailored in such a way that it catered for the needs of the learners with variable English language skills. Of the 24 participants who registered for this group, 15 attended regularly, while 2 (13%) attended only occasionally.

The speaking activities were very engaging for the learners, giving them the opportunity to activate their knowledge of English language. Hence, such activities represented a significant step towards a more autonomic use of the language, but also, on the other hand, they gave the teacher the opportunity to identify the language problems they might be experiencing and adapt the material accordingly. Grammar topics were approached less from a formal, controlled, exercise-based perspective; rather, after the necessary theoretical explanations, they were integrated in the general design of the course, that of developing "speaking-as-a-skill" since the goal of language learning has always been the development of useful communication skills (Savignon 2007: 208). Thus, past tenses were practised through exercises such as telling personal or other people's stories and anecdotes, adjectives and comparison through topics such as favorite objects, descriptions of famous people, etc.

One of the main purposes of the course was to make the learners confident enough to speak in English. With this view in mind, all the participants were encouraged to engage in conversations and the teacher refrained, as much as possible, from interrupting the speakers. Grammar and vocabulary mistakes were explained after the speaker finished talking, so that he/ she might not feel embarrassed and find it even harder to speak in English in the future. Whenever necessary, the teacher intervened in the learners' activities or conversations, encouraging further elaboration and self-expression.

The slightly heterogeneous character of the group represented a challenge. The learners who seemed to possess a less confident command of the language sometimes felt frustrated by the difficulties they encountered when trying to keep up with their more advanced colleagues. However, each learner was encouraged to use their knowledge as foundation for further development, through a productive, positive process of self-monitoring, as well as through active engagement in the speaking activities.

4. Learning outcomes and final assessment

Research suggests that neuroplasticity decreases after adolescence, making it rather difficult for adult learners to acquire a near native level of foreign language knowledge (Castañeda 2017:3). According to Bartolotti & Marian (2017: 110), understanding written texts fluently is only possible if the reader can cover 98% of the words in the text, which implies that a learner of English is expected to know approximately 8-9000 base words along with their inflected forms. This desideratum was unachievable in the beginner groups

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due to the duration of the course and the level of the students. The courses ran through a 14-week period and concluded with an oral and written assessment in all four groups. Final results were in a rage from 10 to 100, the minimum pass score being 50. On the whole, 61 employees took part in the final assessment. Group 1 results had a mean of 69.66 (maximum 90, minimum 58), group 2 had a mean of 70.31 (maximum 90, minimum 55), whereas group 3 results had a mean of 83.81 (maximum 99, minimum 67). The situation was somewhat different regarding the results of the intermediate group, thus the mean was 88.57 (maximum 100, minimum 80).

5. Conclusion

Speaking a foreign language, especially English, has become a vital skill at the workplace. With an increasing number of international and incoming Erasmus students, the non-teaching staff of the University of Medicine and Pharmacy of Târgu Mureş is constantly facing exposure to English, staff from the deans' offices, library, secretarial staff having to communicate with international students. In order to meet the needs of these employees for English language skills, the IntUMFTGM project facilitated in-house language courses delivered by teachers with a degree in EFL. While the adult learners were initially reluctant to certain types of exercises and approaches to language learning, their degree of language acquisition during the 14-week course was highly successful, catering for their need to communicate with international students.

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