

ASPECTS OF TEACHING ADULT LEARNERS

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Introduction

We were involved in teaching English to adult learners within the Twinning Project. The course was designed for Schengen Information System (SIS) technicians who needed English for their work and careers. Although they had learnt English at school, its level was much to be desired. Our goal was to improve their English language skills, and give them practice in speaking, listening, writing, reading and translating. We investigated features of teaching adults and differences between adult and young learners, problems they face in acquisition of the L2, and the ways of helping them out to cope with difficulties.

The aim of this article is to report the issues encountered in teaching adult learners, examine ways of solving difficulties and draw some recommendations on the ways of teaching middle-aged learners.

Differences and Similarities Between Adult and Young Learners

The acquisition of the second language by adult learners is slow, discouraging and often frustrating. All learners want to use a foreign language with confidence and spontaneity, in the same way as they use their mother tongue. The major complaint that teachers hear is ‘I can’t say anything off the top of my head’ (Rivers, 1992). Moreover, ‘none of learners can talk on unrehearsed topics without constant and painful hesitation’. The latter point is also applicable to young learners. It is noteworthy to examine how adult learners differ from young learners.

Adult learners are notable for a number of special characteristics (Harmer, 2000): “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”. They more often than young learners face certain linguistic problems like ‘fossilized’ errors – persistent deviations from the L2 norm, language transfer - negative influence of the mother tongue on the productive skills.

Research in error analysis shows that over half the errors are interference errors. Adult learners are believed to be focused on form or correctness: “they are particularly conscious of deviations

from the established networks, and seek to understand the nature of the rule system” (Rivers, 1992).

In one respect, however, adult learners are similar to young learners. All may be grouped according to their preferred learning styles. Differences in cognitive styles influence learners’ priorities for particular approach to learning. Learners employ different learning strategies, i.e. “specific actions taken by the learner to make learning easier, faster, more enjoyable, more self-directed, and more transferable to new situations” (Oxford, 1990). The common learning styles for each type of learners are (Richards & Lockhart, 1996):

- concrete - learners use active means of processing information;
- analytical - learners prefer logical and systematic presentation of new material;
- communicative - learners prefer social approach;
- authority-oriented - learners prefer the teacher’s authority.

Needs Analysis

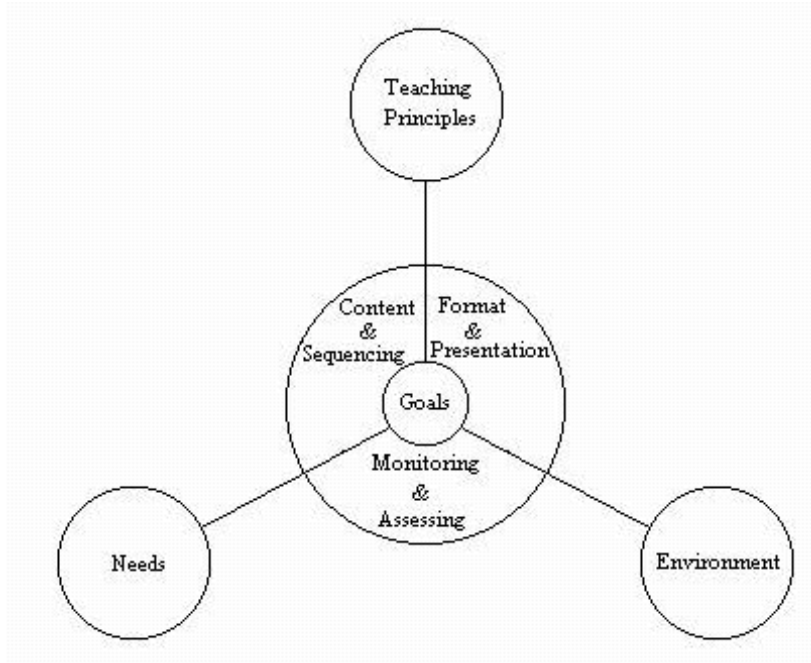
In the early stages of our work, we had to assess the future learners’ aptitudes, analyze their needs and expectations and design appropriate materials for learning. Learners’ grammar and listening skills were tested before the course, and they were divided into two groups according to their performance.

Needs analysis in the form of questionnaire helped to establish priorities and varieties of topics for the content of the course. The answers to the questionnaire were rather vague. What all the learners requested was practice in communication activities, making phone calls and presentations, and comprehension of formal ESP vocabulary and texts.

Customers’ wishes have been regarded as a must, because “it is usually the students who with the help of the teacher direct the selection of the activities” (Hollett, Carter, 1989).

Course Design and Goals

The lengthy 150h course was specially designed for the Schengen Information System (SIS) technicians and consisted of two major parts: General English Course and English for Specific Purposes (ESP) Course. Designing this course we applied a systematic approach based on a model of course design and described in detail by P. Nation (2000):



The ESP course was designed for all participants irrespective of their mixed abilities, because learners' need was to understand and apply the Schengen Agreement in their jobs.

The General English course included selected topics that met learners' needs. During the course, however, some materials had to be adjusted to the changing wishes of the learners.

The goals of the designed course were clearly formulated to learners: communicative practice in simulated everyday situations, developing listening and oral fluency skills, reading comprehension of formal ESP materials, writing effective e-mails and formal letters, socializing in English, making efficient presentations.

Techniques of Research

We used various techniques to study learners' learning styles and strategies and investigate learners' progress: observation of learners' performance during classes, self-assessment and peer assessment questionnaires, analysis of learners' likes and dislikes, evaluation of learners' progress throughout the course, testing learners' performance, self-assessment of presentations and listening tests.

Research Data and Discussion

Heterogeneity aspects

The learners in both groups were heterogeneous in terms of proficiency, goals and learning preferences. The heterogeneity highlights the fact that learners had different degrees of aptitude for language learning. The learners did not differ much in their age: they were in their early thirties and forties. The small difference in age did not have any significant influence on their learning.

The learners demonstrated different learning styles and strategies. It is well known that "some individuals learn more by memorizing, others by analogy, others by rules, systems and systematic cataloguing" (Smolinski, 1993). Adult learners' differences in amount of learning, speed and quality were great. Some learnt three times as much as their peers. In view of these differences,

students were not forced to change the pace of their learning.

Learners' experiences in learning English had also been different. They referred to lessons at school, where the old-fashioned grammar-translation method had been used. This method did not benefit their language use for communication purposes. Some of the learners had attended the language courses at their institutions and travelled abroad. In the everyday work, the learners have to deal with documents in English as well as use computers on the everyday basis for sending e-mail messages. The most important point that adult learners wanted to achieve was to learn fast and to see the results as soon as possible.

Issue of listening skills

One of the important goals was to develop the skill of listening comprehension. These activities proved to be time-consuming. Having listened to the passage, majority of learners usually made complaints 'it has been too fast', and different learners recalled it differently. Moreover, they often misinterpreted the recorded information and claimed that 'we have definitely heard it'.

We puzzled over this phenomenon for some time before finding the answer in literature (Rivers, 1992). It is based on the psychology of perception. Here is the quotation which explains this phenomenon: "Much of listening comprehension is drawing inferences... Listeners store the message they have created, not the original linguistic output... Later, it is listener's interpretation of what they heard that they recall, not the speaker's original message... This phenomenon is called false recognition memory." This quotation gives insight into the ways of processing information that learners use. The tips how to improve the listening skills: "Much of the processing of incoming information takes place during the pauses in speech... speech that has been speeded up within segments is still comprehensible if the pauses are slightly lengthened".

We have applied this feature of perception psychology, i.e. listening – pause – listening –pause- etc. to teaching listening comprehension. Pauses gave adult learners the 'thinking time' they needed to process information. It is noteworthy that at first learners needed longer pauses after a brief listening, but gradually learners developed an ability to process longer passages without any pauses and get the information right.

Issue of speaking skills

The issue of developing speaking skills for the L2 learners is particularly difficult. The major reason is that oral skills and listening skills are interrelated – the better listening comprehension, the better speaking skills - and should be developed simultaneously.

Competence in speaking skills is hard to develop, because it depends on a number of factors: age, aural medium, socio-cultural and affective factors (Shumin, 1997). The affective factors like emotions, self-esteem, empathy, anxiety, attitude, motivation, uneasiness, self-doubt, frustration, and apprehension are very hard for teachers to tackle, but "the affective side of the learner is probably one of the most important influences on language learning success or failure" (Oxford, 1990).

Teachers dealing with adult learners must remember that "adults, unlike children, are concerned with how they are judged by others. 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' ..This sensitivity of adult learners to making mistakes has been the explanation for their inability to speak without hesitation" (Shumin, 1997).

Our efforts were 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. Naturally, if learners make no errors, they have already got nothing to learn. This reasoning had no effect: some learners preferred listening to others than speaking themselves. Another aspects of

oral skills is grammatical accuracy. Inaccuracies in learners' speeches persisted throughout the course in spite of grammar training sessions. The major cause of grammar errors came from earlier learning stereotypes: 'fossilized errors' proved persistent and very hard to correct.

ESP materials

The basic reading materials for the ESP course comprised the Schengen Agreement Articles relevant to the SIS technicians. The emphasis was placed on reading and translating formal texts, identifying professional vocabulary and formal speech patterns as well as discussing learners' views on relevant problems.

Translation as a teaching method has been out of favour since a communicative approach to language learning/teaching became dominant. However, translation as a teaching tool can enhance learners' general proficiency. It allows to examine and compare the lexical and structural properties of the two languages, and appropriate exercises can consolidate the L2 constructions for active use and expand vocabulary. Keeping it in mind, we encouraged learners to examine formal texts thoroughly and seek comprehension of the meaning, not word-for-word.

At the early stages, adults were trying to produce word for word translation, which hindered their comprehension. Encouraging them to identify a main idea in the sentence or paragraph helped to grasp the content points and make the activities more lively. In the follow-up stages of activating ESP vocabulary and speech patterns, learners demonstrated a good command of the target language.

Learner training

Learners were trained to self-assess their progress throughout the course: after each lesson to reflect on their achievements and failures, and express their suggestions for improvement and change in activities. However, teachers' efforts to adjust the course to the learners' wants often went astray because of their poor attendance, which was slightly over 50 per cent. Poor attendance was the major factor that prevented learners from achieving their potential. The learners' desire for fast learning remained wishful thinking.

Motivation

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 promoted learners' motives were: new 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.

Learners' likes and dislikes

Contrary to young learners, adults disliked role-plays and made-up stories, probably because of their practicality and life experience. Adults did not enjoy drilling and doing grammar exercises, although that was what they had claimed they would like to do. The adult learners avoided doing homework or any other additional tasks that would have helped them to consolidate structures and vocabulary. They kept complaining about shortage of time, work load and family commitments. Nevertheless, activities of listening and speaking spontaneously were among the learners' preferences.

Issue of Information Technology (IT)

There is a modern, well-equipped centre at the Law University of Lithuania, where learners can use computers equipped with CD-ROM, e-mail and Internet access. The obvious benefit of using computers is ability to work individually and monitor oneself, to choose the activities and materials that are interesting and beneficial to a particular learner, to take charge of one's own learning and become more autonomous.

With these advantages in mind, we compiled a list of various websites with interactive activities, grammar exercises, puzzles, crosswords, reading and listening activities. After a couple of computer sessions, however, learners declined the suggestion to perfect their language skills in the computer class. Their major arguments against IT were: computers in the class were too slow for their liking, preference for face-to-face activities to computer activities, virtual interaction lacked enjoyment, used computers at work.

Conclusions

The outcome of the research addressed in this article may be summarized as follows:

- adult learners' likes and dislikes were identified and taken into account,
- ' fossilized errors' of adult learners were hard to overcome,
- adult learners' progress was hindered by a negative attitude to autonomous learning.

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