

TEACHING ENGLISH TO ADULTS: STRATEGIES AND TECHNIQUES

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Predarea limbii engleze adulților este o profesie plină de satisfacții și interesantă. Din moment ce începi predarea limbii engleze ca limbă a doua și întâlnești oameni din domenii și culturi diferite, înveți despre cultura lor, diferite expresii, politica și structurile sociale care sunt diferite de a ta. Fiecare oră de studiu este o oportunitate de a ajuta adulții și de a preda, dar este, de asemenea, o șansă de a învăța și de a primi anumite informații.

Atunci când avem grupe de adulți, trebuie să fim conștienți de atitudinea lor, de experiențele anterioare, obiceiurile, opiniile și culturile lor. Trebuie să înțelegem perspectivele lor și să fim capabili a-i ajuta să descopere cât de utilă poate fi pentru ei o schimbare în comportament și acțiuni. Trebuie să-i implicăm în procesul de învățare și să-și ajutăm să-și îndeplinească scopurile precis definite. Dacă vom putea demonstra adulților că vor obține beneficii din programele noastre, ei vor avea succese mai mari, iar beneficiile vor dura mai mult timp.

Teaching English to adults is a rewarding and interesting profession. Moreover, since you start teaching English as a second language and you meet different people from different fields and cultures you learn about their culture, expressions, politics, and social structures that are different from your own. Every class is an opportunity to help and to teach but it is also a chance to learn and to receive.

Still, teaching a foreign language to adults, like teaching to children, has many controversies. This comes from 19th century when the term of *andragogy* was firstly used by Alexander Kapp and later developed by Malkhom Knowles. The later asserted that *andragogy* (Greek: "man-leading") should be distinguished from the more commonly used *pedagogy* (Greek: "child-leading"). *Andragogy* consists of learning strategies focused on adults. It refers to some special requirements that adult education needs: special teachers, methods and philosophy.

In Katie Chasey's opinion, an experienced ESL and English tutor, 'teaching adults English as second language is very similar to teaching children because the foundation of the language is learned through labeling things, drawing pictures and pulling from personal experience' [1]. Some different considerations we meet in Adriana Vizental's book 'Metodica predării limbii engleze' where she stresses the impact of age groups upon the entire educational process (the teaching material, the strategies and activities used). Normally, when people learn English as a second language and they learn it when they are children or young people, it makes it easier for them as their brains are still absorbing new material. It is much more difficult when they are adults because the areas in their brains have slowed in accepting new information and it is much harder to acquire a new linguistic system. On the other hand, 'adults have developed cognitive skills and abilities for abstract thinking, therefore they prefer rules and schemes that offer a systematic view of the language, they also have a much longer attention span' [3].

There is no typical adult ESL student. Generally every class will have a wide range of backgrounds, skills and interests. For example, in some groups of students the teacher is a highly respected individual and there is a social great difference between pupils and teacher. In other studying classes there is less social difference between students and teachers, and students expect to have more interpersonal relationships with the teachers. Taking this into account, you may have to modify some of your behavior so as not to offend your students and gain their respect as their teacher.

The first step to being a successful adult education ESL teacher is to understand your students and their motives for attending your class. According to Malkhom Knowles, six assumptions related to motivation of adult learning can be stated:

1. *foundation* - experience (including error) provides the basis for learning activities;
2. *motivation* - adults respond better to internal versus external motivators;
3. *readiness* - adults are most interested in learning subjects having immediate relevance to their work and/or personal lives;
4. *self concept* - adults need to be responsible for their decisions on education, involvement in the planning and evaluation of their instruction;
5. *need to know* - adults need to know the reason for learning something;
6. *orientation* - adult learning is problem-centered rather than content-oriented [4].

When speaking about life experience, I consider that adults bring to the classroom setting a lifetime of experience that should be mutually shared. Sharing experiences makes the content of the class practical and relevant to daily living. They have the capacity to learn and to problem solve in real world settings of more or less complexity. This ensures that the content of your instruction includes life-coping skills and it stimulates the motivation of the adult students. In addition to that, they have a knowledge base that includes their native language (Romanian or Russian), both lexicon and syntax.

Yet, these adults come from diverse backgrounds and have widely differing experiences with literacy in their first languages. A number of factors influence the ways that adults' English literacy develops and the progress that different learners will make in learning to speak English. They include the level of literacy in the first language and in English, and the structure and writing system of the first language. These factors must be taken into account in all areas of instructional program planning, learner placement in classes, and instructional approaches.

Many adult ESL students are literate in a Roman alphabetic language. Like those literate in a non-Roman script, these learners have already developed reading skills and formed reading behaviors in their native language. They know that written language can represent speech. Their educational background and literacy skills may be an important part of their self-image. They can study English texts, take notes in class to learn new vocabulary or structures, and read outside of class. The English alphabet will be more familiar to them than to others whose native language does not use the Roman alphabet; many of them may appear to have little difficulty reading English, especially those from languages such as Russian that have a Slavonic alphabet.

Yet Roman-alphabet-literate learners still need to learn English sound-symbol correspondences before they are able to read well. They need to know that English does not have the same level of correspondence between sound and written form that other orthographies or spelling systems do, that there is not necessarily a one-to-one correspondence between letter and sound. For example, some letters are pronounced more than one way depending on the letters/sounds that follow (e.g., *c* in *citation* and *car*), and some sounds are represented by more than one letter (e.g., the hard /k/ sound can be written as *c*, *k*, or *ck*, often depending on the letters/sounds that precede and follow it). Sometimes letters in English are silent as are the *g* and *h* in *right*. At the syllabic level, readers should learn, for example, that the combination *ough* can be pronounced as in *tough* and *rough* or as in *bought* and *sought*. Readers also need to learn the various pronunciations of vowels, including their sounds in stressed and unstressed syllables.

Why do people enroll in English classes? Adult students for the most part are highly motivated. They attend class of their own free choice usually at some personal and financial sacrifice. Occasional absences are due more to family obligations rather than a lack of motivation. If the lesson fails to satisfy their needs they will simply stop coming. Their immediate goals may be the following: *survival*- they realize that learning English is essential to satisfy their basic physical and social needs when they go to an English speaking country. They should know the language to get food, clothing, shelter, medical attention, as well as to participate in social and political institutions; *getting a job*- people tend more to learn a foreign language for the last 15 years in order to get a job or advance in their job position; *education*- today more and more families enroll their children to English classes in order to obtain performance or attend a college or university; *social interaction*- some students attend ESL classes for social reasons. They enjoy meeting new people and this class is a place where they can fulfill their needs.

One thing should be remembered about adult students: they have very specific and immediate goals. They are not looking forward to some long range academic achievement rather they need English today to get a job tomorrow. Besides, we should not forget that many adult learners are afraid to return to school for a variety of reasons. They lack the uninhibited enthusiasm of small children. The undereducated adults, in particular, are convinced that they cannot learn or are too old to learn [5]. Adults-just like small children-get frustrated and bored if the course is too difficult. It is helpful for them to have some periods during the class that are relatively low stressing. Explaining some parts of your lesson can help create periods where your students can regroup and regain focus if your English has been difficult for them to understand. In particular, explanations of grammar can often be done more easily in their native language.

Regardless of the students' motivation, goals, self-concept, age, a good instructor will always direct his lesson to fulfill everybody's expectations. Enjoyment is an important factor that maintains the students' motivation. Thus, a long, boring lesson on grammar should be filtered by some interesting and exciting

activities that will entertain your students and more than that will contribute to assess the material better and faster. New teaching sources, like 'New English File', 'New Headway', etc. are a great help to both teachers and students in this way. They provide a large spectrum of activities. In G. Ray Graham's opinion 'activities should provide opportunities for real social interaction and getting to know other people in a relaxed and, sometimes, even humorous ways. If activities are exciting enough, students will not want to miss class because they know they will be missing the "action." If you help your students develop feelings of respect and friendship for one another, those ties will also draw them back to the class' [5].

Another thing that matters is the sense of progress, which contributes greatly to students' motivation. 'As progress for most adult language learners can be slow and incremental, they need to know that they are moving forward anyway. They are to be made sure that their expectations are realistic and they have got all opportunities for success. What is more, we should help our students learn to recognize and acknowledge their own progress' [2]. Simple tests, corrected homework will prove that they succeed and should continue attending the ESL classes.

Summarizing the ideas above, the following tips for teaching English to adults can be formulated:

1 – Make sure your adult students understand why each thing you teach them is an important part of the learning;

2 – Respect that your students have different learning styles. There are three general learning styles: visual, auditory, and kinesthetic. Most people use all three styles while they are learning, and of course, this is logical since we all have five senses, barring any disabilities, but one style almost always is preferred. Conducting a short learning style assessment at the beginning of your class will tell you about the student's style;

3 – Allow your students to experience what they are learning. This includes small group discussions, experiments, role playing, skits, writing or drawing something specific – activity of any kind. Activities also keep people energized, especially activities that involve getting up and moving about;

4 – When the student is ready the teacher appears. This means that when a student says or does something that triggers a topic on the teacher's agenda, we should be flexible and teach it right then;

5 – Encourage your adult students. The job as a teacher of adult students includes being positive and encouraging. We should give your older students time to respond when we ask a question. They may need a few moments to consider their answer. Give them words of encouragement whenever the opportunity arises. Most adults will rise to your expectations if you are clear about them;

6 – And last but not least, we should remember that even though adults cannot express complex thinking in the new language, they are nevertheless intelligent adults with mature cognition and adult emotions. They need respect for those deeper thoughts and feelings that may be "trapped" for the moment by a low proficiency level. Moreover they should not be treated like children by: calling them "kids", using "caretaker" talk (the way the parents talk to children) or talking down to them.

To sum up, when we become teachers of adults we need to be aware of learners' attitudes, past experiences, habits, opinions and cultures. We need to understand their perspectives and be able to help them discover how useful a change in behavior and actions can be for them. We need to engage them in the learning process and help them achieve their precisely defined expectations. If we can show them how our programs can benefit them practically, they will perform better and the benefits will last longer.

References:

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