

REFLECTIONS ON ADULTS' LANGUAGE LEARNING EXPERIENCES

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The purpose of this article is to raise awareness of how language learners' performance and attitudes to learning foreign languages are shaped and influenced by several factors through the whole language learning process. Having taught adults for several years working as an ESP (English for Special Purposes) teacher in higher education for almost three decades I have had the opportunity to teach adults of different ages with various professional backgrounds and I have often discussed with my students their language learning experiences in order to learn from them as a teacher. From these informal talks, students' narratives and the semi-structured interviews that I conducted recently I have collected some typical features of language learning from the learners' perspective that may help teachers and instructors understand "both sides of the coin". After explaining the theoretical background of the topic in the first part of my paper, in the second part of my paper I intend to quote some extracts and identify some of the most typical elements affecting learners' experiences and attitudes that appear in the semi-structured interviews conducted with adults of different ages. In this way I would like to answer my research questions: What are the main factors that can contribute to positive or negative language learning experiences? How can language teachers help students develop and maintain a positive attitude to learning languages which will facilitate their lifelong language learning process? What challenges do language teachers face in adult language courses?

Keywords: adult education, language learning, lifelong learning, foreign language, communication

Foreign language communication as a key competence of lifelong learning

The development of the essential skills and attitudes, i.e. the key competences for lifelong learning has always been included in the educational strategy of the European Union. Eight key competencies were defined as basic requirements for lifelong learning.

Communication in foreign languages is the second one of the eight key competences defined by the EU. If we examine the *definition of competence*,

we can see that it involves “attitudes appropriate to context” as well. From the point of view of foreign language communication, we should be aware that it is *not only language knowledge and skills* that we need to acquire and improve *but also adopt the right attitudes* to be able to develop foreign language competence, i.e. being able to communicate effectively in a foreign language. Therefore, one of the most important tasks of foreign language teachers is to raise interest, curiosity and respect for foreign cultures and traditions, which will help their pupils to develop a positive attitude to learning languages.

With the continuous expansion of international relations, foreign language communication competence is one of the basic needs for today’s professionals. Foreign language skills can not only provide a competitive edge in any career but can also facilitate people’s integration into today’s globalized society.

Foreign language learning as part of the lifelong learning process in Hungary

In spite of all the negative statistical figures on the language competences of the Hungarian population language learning has never been so popular among Hungarian adults as in the past few decades. As a result of technological development, the world today has become a “global village” where people can reach each other, access and share all kinds of information even from the most distant locations via the World Wide Web almost any time. Within so easy reach of foreign cultures we feel the importance and even more highly value the knowledge of foreign languages. In spite of so many difficulties concerning language learning, today the majority of Hungarian citizens agree that foreign language skills are essential for them.

As far as the motivations of more elderly, retired people are concerned it is a well-known fact that as they gradually outnumber the active, working population, there is a growing need for services that meet their specific demands for an active ageing process. The wide range of opportunities offered to them include travelling abroad and various tourism-related activities as well, which can boost their motivation to learn foreign languages. In addition, scholarly literature claims that the activity of learning can improve people’s general quality of life from several points of view. Although adults may have more physical, biological difficulties related to the ageing process, e.g. hearing, vision, memory, which may put them at a disadvantage in language learning, they definitely have a number of advantages as well. Their stronger motivation and self-directedness in learning combined with their more developed learning strategies and skills are considered their greatest strengths. Brain research findings have proved that one can stay both mentally and physically healthier as a result of activating their brain cells by learning foreign languages. This is an activity to keep one stay open and maintain contact with the world around. Language learning keeps you engaged through performing a wide range of tasks and using all your mental skills at the same time. Interaction or communication with other people can provide for our social and emotional needs, too.

However, success in language studies depends on several factors. The issue of foreign language learning and teaching has been in the focus of attention in Hungary for several decades and has now become a rather delicate and controversial matter in today’s Hungarian society. One reason for this might be that in the past decades a high number of graduates have not been able to take their college or university degrees formally because

they could not pass the required language exams required for getting the document of their qualifications. As more and more mature adults face the challenge of training or retraining to get further formal qualifications, the requirement of an acceptable level of foreign language skills for them often seems a basic difficulty. Who or what is to blame for their failures? Is it students, teachers, schools, economic conditions or frequent educational policy changes concerning foreign language education?

As research findings suggest, adults' previous language learning experiences can play an important role in and influence their attitudes to language learning all through their lives. What are the most important factors that influence adult language learning?

Identifying some of the typical elements of language learning experiences based on learners' written accounts and semi-structured interviews

Changing educational policy, context of language learning

As Éva, a 59-year-old woman writes about language learning in the 1960s is typical of her generation: "It's a pity I didn't have the opportunity to learn English or other European languages at school. *Learning Russian* because it was compulsory was such a waste of energy, I never used it in real life, I can only remember some silly words of rhymes, no more. Now I joined a language course to learn English because I love travelling and it's such a shame that I can't make myself understood and feel so helpless abroad! I'm so happy that at last I can learn something useful."

Andrea, 58, shows how her language learning motivations changed all her life: "*In primary school I really enjoyed learning Russian because my teacher was a very kind person who always smiled, we sang a lot and the lessons were very funny, I always got a good mark. Later I learned English in secondary school but I couldn't imagine myself ever being able to use the language in real life and travel to England. We we didn't have any contacts. How could I imagine ever getting into contact with native speakers? So I didn't learn much, I could hardly avoid failing the subject. I completely lacked motivation at that time. At the age of 20 I got acquainted with a Dutch boy and I realized how useful my English knowledge was. It was communication in real life that gave me the confidence and belief that I am able to learn English. Now I work in the field of tourism where I need to know foreign languages so I started to study Italian, too. Luckily, my employer contributes to the costs.*"

The role of language teachers

The professional knowledge and teaching methodology are the instructors' 'people skills' that can be a decisive factor in the effectiveness of learning. Their more flexible approach to the whole learning process in which they act rather as facilitators than teachers in the traditional sense can create a motivating atmosphere. In the context of adult language learning the teacher's role shifts toward being a tutor or coach who helps and gives guidance and support to learners. It is one of the basic principles of andragogy, i.e. adult education.

All the students' accounts, narratives and interviews that I conducted for research purposes mentioned the teacher's role in influencing their motivations to learn. It seems that even with the most up-to-date technology

available for learning, the teacher, i.e. 'the personal element' is undoubtedly essential for learning languages.

For example, Anna, 44, said she liked to study English because she had "*a nice teacher who was very friendly and praised*" her a lot. At secondary school she had to study German as a second language but she didn't like it at all because "*the teacher was very strict*", they didn't enjoy the lessons that they spent mainly with grammar. Now she regrets not learning more at that time because now she could find better jobs even abroad.

Kati, 27, said: "*I have enjoyed one-to-one English lessons most. I'm very grateful to my parents who could support me and pay for these private lessons. It was so good that we could spend the lesson concentrating only on my interests so I could develop much faster this way. The teacher helped me understand basic grammar, talked a lot about everything and we could practise all the skills very effectively. We even became friends with her. I wish I could afford to go to private lessons to study other languages like this as well. Another method that has helped me improve a lot so far was going to Scotland for two weeks to visit a friend and I used the language in native environment. This can 'do wonders', I think.*"

Atmosphere and group dynamics

It has long been evident in pedagogy that emotional factors hugely influence learning. Language learning should ideally take place in a totally stress-free, friendly atmosphere where the students dare to talk and making mistakes is naturally accepted as part of the learning process.

Group dynamics, i.e. the quality of the relationships between the group members can also be a very important factor. Therefore, teachers are advised to create "cohesive learner groups" by applying some special teaching methods available for this purpose, e.g. relevant communication activities, group work, pair work, project work and all kinds of co-operative tasks can prove very useful for students to learn about each other's feelings, problems, share their ideas, anxieties and joys, i.e. get to know each other as a person.

As Anita said, "*I enjoyed the English lessons very much because we always had a good time, we talked about interesting topics and didn't care making mistakes. The teacher said that she would like us to speak fluently. She corrected us only after the discussion. There were lots of interactive tasks, group and pair work and at the end of the course we even dared to make individual presentations in English on freely chosen topics. This lesson was the best one during my college years because I could get to know my peers and even formed lasting friendships there.*"

Methods

If we look at the history of language teaching we can see how various methods appeared, evolved and changed all the time according to the social, political, economic and cultural requirements of the age. This is why probably there is no ultimate solution as to which method is the best. In my opinion, we should always consider the whole context of language learning including the individuals' learning styles and emotions as well. What I find most important in adult learning is teaching useful and relevant content in a way that suits all types of learners, i.e. auditory, visual and kinesthetic learners as well. Variety makes the lessons more interesting and can maintain motivation.

I draw some examples from the interviews with middle-aged adults: Katalin complained about German lessons where the main activity was dealing with grammatical rules and translating boring texts. She missed practising conversation. There were not any discussions in groups or pairs. Bernadett mentioned that she was bored with cramming words and writing vocabulary tests every lesson but they never practised the new words in context so she soon forgot them. Klára related that they always used to watch subtitled films at the lessons, which she enjoyed then but the Hungarian subtitles prevented her from paying attention to the foreign language. Now she regrets the teacher never set them any tasks in connection with the films so they wasted a lot of time. Now she has to attend expensive language lessons after work to be able to take the language exam required for her college degree.

Methods should vary depending on learners' ages and needs. Adult courses should be designed on the basis of a *needs analysis* and the instructors should select the most *relevant teaching materials* to suit expectations. Adult learners are mostly motivated by relevant content, i.e. usually *language for special purposes* for working adults whereas general knowledge and communication skills for those who just want to *study a foreign language as a leisure time activity*. Language teaching sometimes can be a vivid, lively and amusing "get-together" for 'the lucky' ones who just learn the language for amusement and do not have any formal obligations.

We can conclude that language teachers should always adapt their teaching methods to a wide range of needs on adult language courses.

Evaluation, assessment

The question of evaluation and the assessment of knowledge and achievements can be one of the most crucial elements of the learning process that influences motivation and performance. If we compare successful and motivated language learners' descriptions of their experiences with those of such unsuccessful learners who find it difficult or even dislike studying languages, we can find that evaluation methods have played a vital role in encouraging or discouraging them to learn. Summative evaluation, i.e. marks or grades, often used without explanation in an authoritative manner can be very demotivating. Assessment methods can have an impact on learners' self-confidence in the long term. This is how Zsuzsanna, 32, a mature higher education student, describes her previous language studies: "*I was bored with grammar and I usually got very bad marks on my tests. Gradually I totally lost my interest in English, I hardly ever dared to speak, I feared that the other students would laugh at me. Then, luckily we got another teacher who had totally different methods for evaluation. She was helpful, always gave advice and marked us on the basis of our progress and not only written tests.*"

As higher education is getting more and more involved in the formal training, retraining and continuing education of mature adults of all ages, I am convinced that evaluation methods should be one of the first to be adapted to meet the requirements of adult learning. Summative evaluation based on the traditional one-to-five grading system, like in public education, is not suitable for mature adults who would rather like to see and need feedback on how they progress, which can encourage them to study further. In my experience, both the teacher and the students themselves should make regular assessments of their progress by discussing the problematic areas

one-to-one and the teacher should give guidance on learning strategies. I think, the teacher's understanding attitude and advice can be very motivating for mature adult learners and, in addition, it can contribute to self-directed learning which is essential for language learning.

Conclusion

As a result of all the well-known reasons, e.g. globalization, ageing, etc. mentioned earlier in the paper, one of the greatest challenges for language teachers today is teaching adult learners both in formal and informal settings. Currently, with the number of non-traditional adult learners rising in all forms of education, language teachers' professionalism should be more widely extended to adult learning dimensions. In my opinion, adult learners' experiences can be a valuable source for development.