The Adult Learner

AS A TEACHER, the first problem that you will need to address is your general philosophy of language teaching. When beginning as an instructor or tutor, many volunteers and untrained teachers hearken back to their own early educational experiences and teach their students in the way they themselves learned as children. However, this can be a mistake, as working with adult learners is substantially different from working with children.

In recent years, some research has been done related to adult learners and the most effective methods of teaching them. For a review of recent relevant Language Acquisition research, see Moss & Ross-Feldman (2003). Malcolm Knowles and his theory of "andragogy" (as opposed to pedagogy, the teaching of children) has been very influential in the recent discussion about how adults should be most effectively taught.

According to Florez & Burt (2001):

Malcolm Knowles' principles of andragogy, the art and science of facilitating adult learning, are still seminal to many of today's theories about learning and instruction for adults.

✳ *Adults are self-directed in their learning.*

✳ *Adults have reservoirs of experience that serve as resources as they learn.*

✳ *Adults are practical, problem-solving-oriented learners.*

✳ *Adults want their learning to be immediately applicable to their lives.*

✳ *Adults want to know why something needs to be learned.*

In general, this picture of the practical, purposeful, self-directed learner is representative of adults, whether they are native or nonnative English speakers. All adult learners need adult-appropriate content, materials, and activities that speak to their needs and interests and allow them to demonstrate their knowledge and abilities.

The implications for the classroom are that adult learners learn more effectively when they feel that the teaching is responsive to their immediate or long term-needs. In general, they are not highly motivated by external factors, such as the need to attain a high grade to pass the course. Instead, they want practical infor-mation. Therefore, if the learners do not feel the information that they are learning is of use to them, they will abandon the class. Hence, the high attrition rates often seen in adult education classrooms.[1] In order to retain adult learners, it is crucial for the teacher to know what his/her learner's needs are and respond to them in planning lessons for the course (Moss & Ross-Feldman, 2003).

The literature additionally suggests that adults will be more motivated, and more successful at learning, when they have some say in what they are being taught. Therefore, it is frequently recommended that teachers of adults follow a *learner-centered* model of instruction, which is to say that the teacher should identify the learners' needs and interests in learning and incorporate these into his or her lesson planning, and allow the learners to learn from each other as much as, or even more than, the teacher. The instructor should see him- or herself as a partner in the students' learning process, rather than as an absolute authority, and the curriculum should be developed as a collaboration between the learner and the teacher.

Also, adults usually bring a wealth of personal experience to the classroom that younger learners do not have. This brings both advantages and disadvantages. The advantages are that adult learners already possess the knowledge of how to learn, in many cases how to behave in the classroom, and have some ability to self-discipline. The disadvantage is that they may have pre-conceived notions about education that may run counter to the teacher's own teaching methods.

Even though learners may be more accustomed to a teacher-centered classroom, a learner-centered class is generally recommended. This includes activities such as pair- and group-work, as they allow the adults to take more responsibility for their own learning and incorporate the teachers as partners, rather than authorities. Project-based learning is also often recommended, as it allows adults to pursue their own interests during the process of studying English. Furthermore, authentic material should be incorporated wherever possible, as this material relates more directly to the adult learner's daily lives (more on this topic in later chapters).

It may be difficult for you to convince your learners to accept a learner-centered teaching style if they are conditioned to a traditional, teacher-centered one

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1. In my experience, attrition rates of 40-50% or even more are not unusual for adult ESOL classes.

(Florez & Burt, 2001). However, it is important for you to try. Both research and practical experience have shown that this is the best method of teaching adults.

FURTHER READING

Online

Florez, M. C., & Burt, M. (2001). *Beginning to work with adult English language learners: Some considerations.* Washington, DC: National Center for ESL Literacy Education. Available from www.cal.org/caela/esl_resources/digests/beginQA.html

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Harmer, J. (2007). *How to Teach English, new ed.* Essex: Pearson/Longman