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Difficulties in Processing the Acquired Language Knowledge to Adults

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ABSTRACT

Encouraging adults to learn a foreign language (English in our case) may be considered a challenge not only for the person involved in the acquisition process but also for the one that performs the teaching act. It is a complex process since adults' expectations are higher than children's; they generally believe that their mental abilities, the maturity and the seriousness specific to the age would make them acquire everything that they are taught easier and faster. They are anxious to make proof of immediate improvement in the use of the language and, in case they don't feel a relevant progress from the very beginning, they are discouraged and tend to consider the study of a new language an impossible and uninteresting act. Their main difficulty is not certainly related to remembering the grammar rules, the vocabulary items and other structures taught in class but it has to do with the ability to process them in various situations, different from the patterns in which they were used during the course. The main idea is that they are not willing to use the creative spontaneity, courage and facility that generally characterise children's communication. They are hindered by various personal misconceptions and fears. This is an essential issue that I intend to develop and thoroughly analyse in the present paper.

KEYWORDS: *processing, vocabulary, adults, abilities, effective communication*

Adults' learning needs

There are many reasons that determine adults to start learning a foreign language. Some of them perceive it as a sort of hobby, an interesting and enjoyable way of spending their free time while others consider it a necessary and indispensable task they have to fulfil in order to get a better job, to be promoted or, in some cases to maintain their present job; other simply want to be in touch with the current technology and, as English is widely used in these situations, adults feel the need to acquire and develop the necessary language skills which are vital for their virtual communication. However, whether English is studied by pleasure or by obligation, the teacher has to find the right way to turn the teaching process into an enjoyable act that stimulates different adults with different needs and motivations.

At the very first sight, it doesn't seem to be so complicated. After all, every teaching act involves a constant effort from the part of the teacher to transform the subject that he/she teaches in a pleasant and stimulating performance (act). But, in the case

of adults the acquisition of a foreign language is not part of their compulsory daily tasks (as it is in the case of schoolchildren); it is an additional effort and challenge to their everyday work. Therefore, the English teacher should focus more on the selection of materials (which should be in accordance with the adults' main purpose for studying the language) and on identifying the proper means to turn the lesson into an attractive extra work activity that teaches them a lot without making them feel stressed or uncomfortable. Moreover, the teacher should have in view the length of time that the adult intends to study English in order to use it. While some adults don't set an exact limit to the length of time they want to learn the language, others are pressed by certain job circumstances or other situations to develop their fluency in English in quite a short period of time; in this case, there is a sort of pressure that the learner may feel and a fear of not being able to accomplish the target they were imposed or that set from the very beginning. It is essential for the teacher to have in view all these aspects before proceeding to the teaching process itself. Ronald Carter and David Nunan bring all these points into discussion in their book entitled "The Cambridge Guide to Teaching English to Speakers of Other Languages":

The key defining feature of ESP is that its teaching and materials are founded on the results of needs analysis. The first question when starting preparation for teaching an ESP course is almost always: What do students need to do with English? Which of the skills do they need to master and how well? Which genres do they need to master, either for comprehension or production purposes? (...) However, in ESP, one can be more precise about learners' needs; their needs are defined by learning or occupational situation in which English plays a key role (...) in contrast, for students not immediately using English, or about to use it, needs are much more general.

(Carter & Nunan, 2001: 131)

It's not easy to choose the right English books to be used; besides learners' needs, the teacher should set his/her correct language level on the basis of a placement test and these are not obviously all the matters to be taken into account. However once the English teacher decided what to do in class, he/she should not stick exactly to a book. Additional exercises or fun like activities are useful in developing skills or abilities that learners may not master really well. Some students need more practice of the listening skills while others may feel reluctant to speak. Decoding the message of a reading passage or formulating written paragraphs may be difficult as well. Lately, it has been widely spread among methodologists the idea that the basic four skills of the language (reading, listening, speaking and writing) are easier to acquire if used in proper contexts, derived from everyday situations.

Decoding the meaning of instant messages

In the case of vocabulary, useful commonly met conversations are interesting and stimulate the adult to acquire and remember better new words and set phrases. Lists of antonyms, synonyms and all kinds of word enumerations improve the acquisition process. Still, in time, some words are remembered, others are forgotten. In other

cases although the adult knows the meaning of a word, he/she may not be sure if it is properly used in another situation different from the one in which he/she was presented. Learning words, remembering and using them are complex issues that give rise to a large number of questions and debates.

Central to research into vocabulary learning are key questions concerning how words are learned. Teachers help learners with vocabulary directly or “explicitly” by means of word lists, paired translation equivalents and in variously related semantic sets. They also help learners by more indirect or “implicit” means, such as exposure to words in the context of reading real texts. Over many years a key question asked by teachers and researchers is “What does it mean to learn a word?” A definition of learning a word depends crucially on what we mean by a word on how a word is remembered over what period of time and in what circumstances it can be recalled and whether learning a word also means that it is always retained”.

(Carter & Nunan, 2001: 42)

It is impossible for the teacher to present all the situations or set phrases in which a word may be used. Therefore, he/she should encourage students to be “flexible” and adapt their vocabulary knowledge to each particular situation they come across. Learning by heart new words is pointless if students cannot cope with them in different contexts. Several months ago, I had to teach a business course to the employees of a well-known international company which produces cars. There were mainly managers that had been previously trained in the use of the English language and needed to improve since they had to deal with many foreigners from different countries. One of the course attendants told me about a situation he had to go through while discussing with a Belgium colleague. It was something of the kind:

The Romanian employee: “Did you send the email with the proper sketch to the new English manager?”

The Belgium colleague: “No, I didn’t. I preferred to hand it to him. Have you met him in person?”

The Romanian employee: “No, I’m sorry. I haven’t had the occasion so far”.

The Belgium colleague: “Oh, he’s such a proper gentleman!”

The Romanian employee: “I can’t understand. What do you mean?”

The meaning of the first word “proper” is “appropriateness” or “suitability” while the second is intended to describe a person that follows the conventions of the social behaviour. Being accustomed only with the first use of the word, the Romanian employee couldn’t grasp the sense of the other sentence. Thus, the acquisition of vocabulary items cannot be reduced only to retaining them in fixed set phrases or situations. It is a much more complex matter that has to do with the teacher’s attitude in class and the students’ participation. Better said, the teaching process should rely on the learner, not on the teacher. The learner has to be stimulated to be independent in performing the communicative tasks.

When teaching is learner centered, the role of the teacher changes (...). Learner-centered teachers are guides, facilitators and designers of learning experiences. They are

no longer the main perform, the one with the most lines, or the one working harder than everyone else to make it all happen. The action in the learner-centered classroom features the students. Teaching action expedites learning. This includes the careful design of experiences, activities and assignments through which the students encounter the content.

(Weimer, 2002: XVIII)

Generally, English teachers tend to give too much attention to the language skills they possess instead of directing their efforts towards learning. This is because there is a general belief that the learning process is the obvious result of a good teaching. This is only partially true. We cannot assume that an effective teacher will always “produce” well-prepared students. Students have their own duties they must fulfil and play an essential role in achieving a successful acquisition of the language.

The learning outcomes of teaching cannot be assumed or taken for granted. (...) Being learner centered focuses squarely on learning what the student is learning, how the student is learning, the conditions under which the student is learning, whether the student is retaining and applying the learning (...). This learner-centered orientation accepts, cultivates and builds on the ultimate responsibility students have for learning. Teachers cannot do it for students. They may set the stage, so to speak, and help out during rehearsals, but then it is up to students to perform.

(Weimer, 2002: XI-XVI)

In other words, adults have to bring their own personal substantial contribution to the acquisition process. They have to be willing to involve themselves in various ways by allowing some time for personal study, by achieving the tasks required during the course, by being ready to overcome some inner obstacles that generally hinder them such as: “I can understand the lines of the conversation but I cannot reproduce them”; “I am no longer young so I don’t think I’ll be able to learn English”, “I have tried to study English before, by myself and I think it’s a really difficult language”, “I don’t have the courage to speak...I’m sure I’ll make a lot of mistakes and I’ll make a fool of myself”, etc. Adults need constant encouragement to overcome such misconceptions; a foreign language can be learned at any age and the progress is made step by step, not all of a sudden. They have to be patient and not to wait for an overnight miracle. Nothing can be done if all of these aspects are not discussed and removed since they can seriously affect the teaching process.

Another tendency that adults often have is the fact that although they are used to memorize a large quantity of information and they can remember vocabulary items or grammar rules easier than children, they find it really difficult to transfer their language knowledge to practice. The personal fears and misconceptions that I have already mentioned previously sometimes stops them from reaching their goal. Moreover,

Some people think that (at least with behaviourist psychology) that one size fits all for learning; give the same to all students and they will learn equally- at least that is how it should go, but we teachers know a different reality, one that shows that each student

reacts in a different manner to what is in a text, (...) in contrast, (...) socio-cognitive psychology stresses that people learn by chunking new information with existing knowledge and that meaning plays a key role in forming those chunks. In other words, leaning cannot take place in isolation from what learners already know about a topic and meaning provides a purpose for that learning because it enables deeper thinking to take place.

(Farell & Jacobs, 2010: 58)

Expanding thinking skills in class is perhaps one of the most difficult problems English teachers confront with. It is not easy to make an adult think in a foreign language he/she hasn't used before or has used (but not always in the good way) and develop his/her particular abilities to adapt to each particular situation by using the information taught in the course. I really believe that this is the aim that should be attained and the teacher can bring much of his contribution to realize it. Still, we don't have to forget that this achievement cannot be done unless the adult involved doesn't take the trouble to work well enough in order to become a successful communicator in English:

Among the many strategies that our students need to acquire and use to succeed in our classes are those that involve going beyond the information given and utilizing and building their Thinking Skills (Paul & Elder, 2006). Critical thinking for teachers of second or foreign languages generally means education language students to think about their thinking, and then to decide if it needs improvement (...) "critical and creative thinking" (...) can be learned while at the same time recognizing the uniqueness of individual students.

(Tomlinson, 2008: 87)

Teaching adults is a complex issue. The English teacher has to weigh their needs, to understand their fears, to adapt his/her materials according to their intentions, to enforce their thinking spontaneity in the use of the language in new contexts besides the ones they were familiarised with in the course, to stimulate independent oral and written communication, to create an enjoyable atmosphere by involving them in games like activities that disconnect adults from the stress of being in touch with a foreign language, etc. Elsa Auerbach provides some "guiding principles" derived from her own experience related to teaching English as a foreign language.

- Start with learners' needs and interests.
- Involve learners in determining the content of instruction.
- Focus on meaning, not mechanics.
- Contextualize work on form (connect form to function and meaning).
- Center instruction around themes drawn from learners' social reality.
- Encourage dialogue and critical analysis of social realities.
- Use a variety of participatory tools to explore themes.
- Move toward action outside the classroom.
- Involve students in evaluation.

(Auerbach, 1996: 77)

All in all, the English teacher should bear in mind that each adult is a special individual and should be treated as such. Therefore, flexibility is essential both on the side of the teacher who has to be ready to adjust the course to the needs of the adult learner and on the side of the adult who has to be willing to learn and ready to change his/her attitude towards the acquisition of a foreign language, if this is not the appropriate one.

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