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# TEACHING ENGLISH TO THE MATURE LEARNERS: OBJECTIONS AND METHODOLOGICAL IMPLICATIONS

In close connection to the fact, that since 2016 all Ukrainian scientists are to present a B2 level certificate proving their language skills (in any official language of the European Union) in order to be granted with an academic rank of docent or professor, the English language has assumed greater importance in adult education. Correspondingly more and more adult learners seek the opportunity to pass international exams like IELTS, FCE, PTE and others approved by the Ministry of Education and Science in Ukraine.

This paper will discuss the special characteristics presented by the mature learners and consider possible methodological implications for the process of teaching English to mature learners.

In this article we will refer to the experience kindly shared by the English teachers who have already gained sound expertise in the field of teaching seniors [1; 2] as well as our own observations based on classroom routine over the last two years.

It is important to clarify the key notion used in the paper, the one of "the adult learners". While surveying the available sources on the topic we have observed the whole range of applied terms like "seniors, mature students, elderly students, students of elegant age, older adults", the majority of which refer to people over their 60s. In our case we will be talking about working professionals between middle 30s and 50s, i.e. the *mature learners*.

One of the first well-articulated notions of obviously existing distinctions in "young learners via adult learners teaching" dates back to 1984 when *Malcolm Knowles* published his paper "*Andragogy in action. Applying modern principles of adult education*". Since then a number of works presented by interested in the problem of adult learning theorists, researchers and practicing teachers appeared in print [4; 5; 6; 7; 8].

To begin with it is important to understand how the young learners differ from the mature ones in terms of *cognitive, attitudinal,* and *behavioral* characteristics.

The general belief that adult learners are less capable and slower in the language acquisition compared to more *cognitively* flexible younger learners appears to be disputed by the research. The ground study revealed that, indeed, younger students may be better when it comes to acquiring pronunciation, but, otherwise, adults are perfectly able to reach high levels of proficiency in a foreign language" [4, c. 73]. Methodologists also accentuate "adult learners have greater cognitive and linguistic capabilities and conceptual complexity than the younger ones" [9, c. 2]. Thus, English teachers should always bear in mind and take it as a



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starting point that since most adult learners "can usually communicate confidently and effectively in their first language [...]" so they "may code switch between several other languages" [9, c. 2]. The mature students benefit from the fact that they have already built language competencies and are familiar with complex notions of advanced grammar, conjugation, word order, complex sentences, as well as punctuation and spelling. In other words, teaching materials and instructional materials must be tailored to the previous learning experience of the mature students and aimed at helping them link their complex background knowledge to the structures of a new language they study.

The other characteristic which deserves special consideration is *motivation* or *attitude* which is widely agreed to be a factor of paramount importance for successful language acquisition. The majority of mature learners already completed education in their rather distant past. As a result, being back to school they are fully aware of their reasons and goals. Teachers claim that "adults are certainly more cooperative learners, and, what is more important, their cooperation comes as a natural consequence of their seeing the point of the various instructional situations in which they are involved. In this way, the teacher no longer has to "camouflage" learning by resorting to entertaining activities, such as games or songs, although, if properly selected and used, they may be sometimes appropriate for students of an older age" [8, c. 75].

The good point of having learning experience in the first language is that their already mastered own set patterns of learning can be used by the teacher as a teaching tool. However, this experience can be a source of problem as well. "Adults come to the English classroom with certain expectations about the learning process, and, in case these expectations are not met, the learners may become critical towards the new context of instruction", states M. Cozma [1, c. 1211].

The other common attitudinal reaction of adults who return to school is "*impostor syndrome*" regarded by Stephen Brookfield in his work "*The skillful teacher: on technique, trust, and responsiveness in the classroom*" (1990) [10, c. 55-69]. The educator describes learners' fears of looking foolish in public caused by feelings of inadequacy and chronic self-doubt [10, c. 222].

Finally, *behavioral* characteristics resulting from the ability of adults for greater self-control underlie tolerant behavior and active involvement in learning activities for longer time despite tiredness. Teachers report adults to be more disciplined and eager to study [5, c. 84], for instance, they tend to warn beforehand if they have to miss the class and almost always do their homework. Still, due to their busy lifestyle adults could run late for classes or leave earlier. Moreover, mobile phones cause certain problems during the lesson as even having a class adults keep performing their professional duties and cannot turn the device off.

Given all the points above, whereas teaching the mature students is rewarding in many ways, it definitely challenges teachers who must be prepared to handle this difficulties.

Firstly, the mature learners usually come to the evening class after work so the level of their energy is lower and they are naturally tired by the end of the day. Thus, teachers should not take the learners' temporarily detachment for resentment



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to study. Help them switch from the outside the classroom environment to the content of study. In case of preparing for the English international exams, revision of phrasal verbs could help, especially if the members of the group arrive one by one and it distracts the already present learners. The other good way to overcome apathy in the classroom is to demonstrate a video recording of speaking session taken from the official websites of exams. It helps to break the ice of dead silence while practicing speaking. Since the activity is goal oriented, the adults easily associate it with the real exam situation and immediately apply the acquired knowledge into their own speaking skill and get involved easier.

Secondly, due to physical and cognitive factors associated with aging memory reaction time could be sometimes slower in the mature learners. Nevertheless, methodologists [11, c. 4] and practicing teachers [1, c. 1212] claim, and it fully corresponds to our personal observations, that even if it takes adults longer to do some tasks, their approach is more mindful and focused and is likely to give a solid result. In other words, give the mature learners more time to submerge, do regular throwbacks to studied grammar, vocabulary or "how to go about a certain type of the exam task" sessions and eventually they will build confidence in themselves and your methods of instruction.

Kieran Donaghy, a conference speaker and teacher trainer, suggests teachers the following advice on how to overcome cognitive decline and to help seniors develop and maintain their cognitive ability. "Integrate memory exercises into classes. Use visual and auditory mnemonic devices, examples and memory associations to help seniors rehearse and later retrieve vocabulary and expressions from long-term memory. Systematically repeat and recycle grammar, vocabulary and expressions. Encourage students to draw on their wealth of experiences and to use cognitive strategies they have used successfully in the past in their current language learning environment. Allow more time for students to produce language without being interrupted" [2].

Thirdly, attitudinal factors often underlie the lack of confidence in this kind of learners. Being highly overloaded with working and family responsibilities adults want to receive a quick result, which is almost impossible in case of preparing for international exams.

On the one hand, they might lack motivation if the methods of instruction or a course content do not correspond to their high expectations. Surprisingly though, but it is not only learners who experience embarrassment in the classroom, but also the teachers who work with adults as well. As M. Cozma points out they (teachers) "sometimes feel more nervous than they normally are with children, and this happens because the adults are more aware of their learning needs and, at the same time, of the manner in which their needs are met by the course they attend" [1, c. 1212].

On the other hand, the "impose syndrome", which we have addressed above, may stipulate the feeling of anxiety, which occurs because the learners feel they do not progress fast enough. Practicing teachers stress that, in this case, the mature learners "are reluctant to speak during the English classes, or because they are afraid of making mistakes" [1, c. 1212].



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Moreover, research in error analysis revealed that typical mistakes made by the mature students are due to the negative influence of their mother tongue on their productive skills. As Wilga M. Rivers (1992) states, 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 [12, c. 53].

K. Donaghy stresses that "older learners need to feel comfortable and trust the teacher and the other students before they participate fully in the language classroom. A key role of the teacher is to reduce anxiety and build trust and self-confidence in the senior learner". The teacher trainer also articulates some teaching tips how "to reduce stress and build self-confidence in older adult learners. Find out what our older learners' motivations are for learning a language and adjust our methodology accordingly. Use humanistic techniques to build empathy between the teacher and students, and among the students. Reduce the focus on error correction to build learners' self-confidence and to promote language production. Avoid timed tests which may make senior learners anxious. Give senior students more time to complete activities. Promote a friendly and relaxed atmosphere in the classroom" [2].

On balance, teachers should be prepared to adjust teaching materials to learners needs: making vocabulary cards for quick review, giving detailed analysis of grammar in the form of presentations or lists which will help the mature learners to classify and systematize foreign language structures, allocating more time on controlled practice writing and speaking activities. To reduce the fear of making mistakes it is advisable to set group activities when the learners socialize with the peers without direct control of the teacher. Finally, whereas the mature learners are excellent self-directed students who bring to the classroom the wealth of their life learning experiences, and have a task-centered motivation to learning, certain age characteristics of this group of learners impose specific demands on teachers in order to meet the learners high expectations.

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