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TEACHING EFL TO ADULT LEARNERS: CHALLENGES FOR TEACHERS

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ABSTRACT:

The current article is devoted to particular challenges teachers face when teaching English to adult learners. Solutions and methods to overcome these challenges are discussed along with the problems themselves. The challenges and their solutions are provided with the specific examples from real life English classroom situations.

KEYWORDS: adult learners, interaction, learner needs, behavioral model, language acquisition, direct instruction

INTRODUCTION:

Each learner has individual needs, and there are also more general factors to consider, like age.The challenges facing adult language learners can be (and often are) very different from those encountered by younger learners.

Consequently, the challenges you face when teaching adults English will also be very different.

From Skinner's behavioral model to Chomsky's theory of universal grammar, the process of exactly how humans acquire a language may remain a mystery for some time. But it's no mystery that you can't teach and interact with your adult students exactly the same as you would kids. Doing so would be less effective and, let's face it, probably annoying.

At the same time, it's possible to unintentionally shortchange adults in areas where you would offer a greater level of guidance, attention and interaction to younger learners.So as teachers, how should we treat our adult learners? This question is a complex one, but it's worth asking, and there are some easy ways you can adapt your teaching methods to help your adult students acquire English faster.

Unfortunately, as we age, our brain plasticity (or the ability to form new neural pathways), does seem to decline. But does that mean, as adults, we should abandon all hope of mastering a new language?

On the contrary, researchers have found a strong correlation between bilingualism and the delaying of the onset of Alzheimer's. It appears that the challenge of language learning actually helps to keep our brains healthy, staving off dementia and prolonging our mental health.

This is great news for both you and your students: Aside from purely practical advantages, language learning offers many intrinsic benefits. Surely this is reason enough to persevere despite the obstacles!

METHODS:

Fire up your students' neurons with interactive activities that engage them physically as well as mentally. Don't underestimate the importance of fun in the adult classroom.

Dialogues and role-plays are great ways to practice language patterns, simulate natural conversations and keep your class entertained. Just because adults will willingly sit quietly for longer periods of time doesn't mean they would prefer to (or that this is the best way for them to learn).

When teaching adults, it's extremely important to remember that our students are likely possessed of an array of skills and talents already, even if speaking perfect English isn't

one of them. Over our lives, we develop a wide range of abilities, often to a very high level. Our adult students can be easily put off at the slightest hint of being patronized, especially if they cannot express this frustration in the new language they are studying.

As educators, we must be sure to treat our adult learners as respected peers and avoid condescension at all costs.

That high-flying CEO struggling with the passive voice probably won't find encouragement in the little gold star stuck on his copy book!

It's important when discussing various topics not to assume ignorance on the part of your students. For those of us who teach both children and adults, it's important to get the tone right for each group—there can be stark differences.

The first rule of comedy ("Know your audience!") applies to teaching, too. Register is everything. When introducing concepts to an adult class, sentence starters like "As some of you may know" can be very helpful.

If you have an "expert" on a topic among your students, take the opportunity to ask them to speak on their knowledge. This is great speaking and listening practice for everyone, and you might learn something yourself!

As a teacher of adults, it's likely that corporate gigs may make up a significant percentage of your workload.

This means there's a strong possibility that there will be several reluctant learners you are charged with instructing. Under-motivated students jumping through professional hoops at the behest of the boss can be some of the most challenging students you face.

As is the case with any adult audience, lack of enthusiasm can be an issue. The solution is to engage the student as an individual. Employ their specific interests in your lessons where possible. Think of point 2 above. Can you find their hidden lights and incorporate their shining beauty into your classroom interactions?

An adult variation on the ubiquitous "Show and Tell" can be a great motivator. Generally, people enjoy talking about themselves and the things they care about. Can your reluctant learner share an interest they have with the class? You can tailor the time allotment according to what they can handle.

If they're not ready for this, try to make time at the end of a session (one or two minutes is enough) to have an informal chat with them. Ask them about one of their interests. Do this after every lesson a few times in a row. Their confidence will grow in speaking on this topic. Soon, they'll be ready to speak in front of the class.

Younger children, especially those below around 7 to 8 years of age, often pick up languages with relative ease. Many attain a proficiency indistinguishable from a native speaker.

However, this is not always possible for the adult learner. The dominance of the intonations, stresses and rhythms of our native language can be a tough barrier to break in acquiring full fluency in another language. Older learners may struggle with the idiosyncratic sounds of the target language.

Making pronunciation a specific focus of your lessons can go a long way toward conquering these difficulties. If you're familiar with the phonology of your learner's mother tongue, it may be helpful to employ it to assist. But be careful it doesn't become a crutch that will hinder learning.

Embarrassment is often a big hurdle to overcome here. Encouragement can help cultivate a positive attitude toward accuracy in pronunciation. Use of multimedia resources, including recordings of the student's own speech, can be a useful and engaging means of undertaking work in this area.

Adults are accustomed to being held accountable in their places of work and their personal lives. This is not always the case with children—oh, to be young again! Adults will, accordingly, recognize the classroom as your place of work and hold you accountable.

RESULTS AND DISCUSSION:

Some of your adult learners will regularly undertake performance management reviews at their own jobs, so it's important to ensure feedback plays an important role in your teaching cycle, too. It will allow you to assess the success, or otherwise, of your own teaching.

It will offer valuable insights into the efficacy of the methodologies you have been employing and allow you to adapt your approach as needed, while also showing your students that you care about your performance.

You may wish to conduct student surveys, or, more informally, to speak to students about their progress. A simple chat at the end of the week can often be enough. Ask your students straightforward questions like:

"What did you enjoy/not enjoy this week?"

"What activity did you learn the most/least from?"

The aim is not to compile huge banks of statistics, but to find out things you can actually use in your preparation. Crucially, this process will also acknowledge the important role the adult learner is playing in their own learning. Grown-ups like that!

Adults are as diverse as children and, as every school teacher knows, kids learn in a multitude of ways. This also stands true for our grown-up knowledge gatherers.

Barbara Prashnig recognizes the importance of individual learning styles in personalized learning. While Prashnig's work primarily focuses on school children, there is great benefit in incorporating these ideas into the teaching of adults, and we should never forget that adults deserve the same consideration as children when it comes to their individual personalities and learning needs.

As educators, it is imperative we acknowledge the visual, auditory, kinesthetic and tactile preferences of our learners.

This is best achieved by planning a wide range of activities affording opportunities for a range of learning styles.

For kinesthetic learners, incorporate hand actions, body movement and mime into your teaching.

Visual learners will benefit greatly with the inclusion of storyboards, flashcards and video.

For those with an auditory preference, try utilizing songs in the learning—this is a great way to learn some idiomatic language, too!

Being stuck in a classroom environment doesn't mean you can't create opportunities for tactile learners, too. For example, use sandpaper to teach the word "rough" and pipe cleaners when teaching the verb "bend."

Get creative! Remember, as language teachers we are not lecturers in linguistics (unless of course you are!). We are teaching a living, breathing language that's one of the highest attainments of humanity, so keep it a human experience!

For many of us, free time is one of our most prized possessions, and we value all our time highly.

Recognize this in your interactions with your adult students. Make sure that as a teacher you are punctual and well-prepared. Keep your lessons moving at a good pace. If an adult learner feels their time is not being used effectively, resentment can ensue. And unhappy students are the most difficult to teach.

Consider this when assigning homework. Is it possible to set tasks that can be easily woven into the fabric of a student's day? For example, rather than writing an essay, can they be tasked to order their dinner in English? The key is to keep tasks meaningful and feasible.

CONCLUSION:

Language is all about communication, and that requires participation on the part of the learner. For some adults, whether due to personality traits or cultural reasons, this is the most difficult aspect of language learning.

Get to know your students' cultural backgrounds. Get to know your students' personal idiosyncrasies. Make use of this knowledge to inform how you plan for groupings and activities. Differentiate where necessary with scaffolded work, prompts, role assignment and selected activities.

Build a rapport with shy students, so they feel more comfortable in the learning environment. Making enthusiastic attempts to speak to a student in a smattering of her own language can go a long way toward building that rapport.

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