

Adult Language Learners: An Overview

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Today, World Englishes and English as an international language (EIL) are of increasing importance in international communication, business, the media, and pop culture. They have also gained importance in research journals and in such fields as civil aviation. Broad estimates of the number of people studying English are extremely large, and this number is growing, particularly among young adults. Graddol (2006) suggests that current trends may result in a spike of some two billion English language learners in the next 10 to 15 years, and he envisions a time when English language ability may well become a baseline skill in countries where English is taught as a foreign language today.

Accordingly, English language education has assumed greater importance in adult education. In this book, we focus on adult language learners in the hope of providing inspiration and ideas to English as a foreign language (EFL) and English as a second language (ESL) teachers, teachers in training, and volunteers. We use the term *adult language learner* to distinguish these learners from younger language learners enrolled in primary and secondary schools; these groups possess very different characteristics from adult language learners.

Adult language learners are goal oriented and direct their learning to fulfill particular needs or demands: to advance their studies, to progress up the career ladder, to follow business opportunities, to pass a driving test, to assist their children with homework, or simply to be successful users of the language. They usually require immediate value and relevance from their studies, and they often learn best when they are engaged in developing their own learning objectives.

These attributes, distinct from those of younger language learners, led to the creation of the term *androgogy*, a word popularized in the 1980s to distinguish the field of adult learning from that of pedagogy. Adults are mature, competent, experienced, multitalented individuals who live complex lives and fulfill a variety of different life roles. They can draw on this wealth of previous life and educational experience for their learning, but they may learn in very different ways. Some prefer a more process-oriented approach with active experimental

problem-solving tasks over memorization, whereas others may prefer learning styles developed during their school years (Knowles, Holton, & Swanson, 1998). This early view of adult language learners as unique, complex individuals coincides with constructivist theory (Williams & Burden, 1997).

As language learners, adults have multifaceted identities in their dynamic and changing lives. They can usually communicate confidently and effectively in their first language (L1) and may code switch between several other languages. They may be immigrants or international students, professionals, workers, or refugees. They may have their own interpretations of their culture and belief systems as well as the ability to reflect and build on their cross-cultural experiences. Some are highly literate in their L1, and others are illiterate. Some may struggle, as many of us do, to move from beginners to capable users of the additional language. Most also want to develop their own identities as users of the language and realize that it is unrealistic to measure their progress against a native speaker model. V. Cook (2002) recognizes language learners as having multiple competencies because their languages create different interconnections in their minds compared to monolingual speakers. He suggests that “learning an L2 [second language] is not just the adding of rooms to your house by building an extension at the back: it is the rebuilding of all the internal walls” (2001, p. 408).

Research has also shown that adult learners have greater cognitive and linguistic capabilities and conceptual complexity than younger learners (Robinson, 2005), although these capabilities (e.g., attention span, information processing of a rich and complex range of input, memory storage capacity) may vary from learner to learner. In addition, adults are able to discuss their learning styles and strategies in ways that children and adolescents are unable to (Cohen, 1998). In recent years a more positive view of adult language learners has developed, despite intense debate and sometimes conflicting research into the central claim of the *critical period hypothesis* that adult learners cannot gain full mastery of an L2, especially native-like pronunciation (Griffiths, 2008).

The humanist approaches from the 1970s also offer insights. Considering the whole person as an entity, with sensitivity to feelings and emotions, fits well with the concept of the adult language learner that can be found in the literature. The importance of developing confidence and self-esteem is paramount (Williams & Burden, 1997), and a relaxed learning environment reduces anxiety, which in turn improves motivation and confidence.

Research into the importance of learner identities, learner competencies in second language acquisition (SLA), and their relationship with learner autonomy has recently been revisited. Autonomous adult language learners show many of the characteristics previously noted in studies of good language learners and lifelong adult learners. Terms and phrases such as *active*, *able to manage*, *critically reflective*, *self-confident*, *self-determining*, *motivated*, and *responsible for learning* are frequently found. Benson (2007) indicates that “language learners are more capable of autonomous action . . . than teachers typically suppose” (p. 24) and

can determine both content and learning strategies. However, learners develop various ways to achieve their different degrees of autonomy, and some may need to embark on a scaffolded process to gradually develop greater autonomy.

Since publication of Skehan's (1989) influential work, adult language learner traits, learning styles, and strategies have been reconsidered alongside developments in cognitive and educational psychology, aptitude, motivation, and SLA. Learning styles and learning strategies are problematic concepts because there are many different typologies that overlap with each other and with personality. Personality factors, such as introversion and extroversion, continue to influence learning because extroverts tend to be more fluent in complex verbal tasks. However, adult language learners can employ strategies to monitor and evaluate their own learning during a particular task. Cohen (1998) points out that learners apply strategies in different ways depending on their individual preferences, their personalities, the task, and a number of other factors.

Language aptitude is now considered to be a combination of several cognitive factors, including working memory, phonological coding and decoding, and L1 learning and literacy skills. Motivation also focuses more on a multifaceted learner who is dedicated not only to today's struggles but also to sustained effort over a period of time. Dörnyei (2006) suggests that learners' goals include a concept of an *ideal L2 self* and a more extrinsic *ought-to L2 self* and the learners move between "the actual self and his/her ideal or ought-to L2 selves" (p. 54).

Certainly, any discussion of adult language learners must mention the influence of the immediate learning situation and the future context. Norton and Toohey (2001) suggest that adult language learners have multiple identities, wide-ranging potential, and a vision of future options, including the possibility of belonging to and participating in an imagined future community context. The dynamics of the learning context both inside and outside the classroom have significant influence. Learners who become involved in local social contexts gain opportunities to interact using language in real and relevant situations.

Both in the community and in the classroom, adult language learners need an accepting, secure, and supportive environment that engages them. So the teacher must foster in students a willingness to cooperate and collaborate with each other. By listening actively, eliciting and asking questions, and sharing opinions, students learn together and develop into a cohesive group. Although Vygotsky's (1978) focus on social constructivism and the dynamic interaction between the learners, teacher, task, and learning context concentrates on young learners, its spotlight on the importance of a secure social context is also relevant for adult learners (Williams & Burden, 1997).

Therefore teachers should access or develop materials that meet the specific needs of the adult language learners in their particular contexts, whether EFL or ESL, workplace or academic. Developing these materials can involve the teacher and the learners in negotiating aspects of the syllabus and setting goals via self-evaluation processes and individualized learning plans. In addition, Jenkins

(2006) advises teachers to consider EIL and whether native-like pronunciation is appropriate in their context. She suggests helping learners find out “about Englishes, their similarities and differences, issues involved in intelligibility, their strong links between language and identity and so on” (p. 173).

Learner-centeredness increased significantly with the advent of the communicative approach to language teaching, although many variations now exist. The focus of communicative language teaching (CLT) on using meaningful language in context involves being able to use language appropriately in situated transactional and interactional environments as well as knowing the rules. Hedge (2000) notes that CLT develops five interlinked competences: discourse, strategic, linguistic, fluency, and the highly contextualized pragmatic competence. She suggests that most adult language learners can already utilize these skills in their L1.

In recent years, the popularity of task-based instruction has led to the investigation of task construction and linguistic complexity. Real-life tasks provide comprehensive input and frequently involve adult language learners interacting in group projects. Task types can be manipulated to develop fluency, complexity, appropriacy, accuracy, and confidence. Integrating tasks with a focus on form means that grammatical competence, once a major focus of language instruction, has regained its value within linguistic competency (R. Ellis, 2005b).

Increasingly, technology also is embedded into language tasks and syllabus design. Adult language learners have opportunities to upgrade their skills via webquests (Dodge, 2007) and podcasts, and to create blogs and broadcasts in order to contribute to and feel part of the community around them. In addition, spoken and written corpora increasingly provide opportunities for adults to expand their lexis through collocations, prefabricated lexical phrases, and fixed phrases rather than from simply using bilingual word lists. In the adult classroom, innovative teaching can integrate stimulating and enjoyable tasks into a congenial classroom environment to provide occasions for engagement, collaboration, investigation, and critical analysis of content, context, culture, and structures.

USING ADULT LANGUAGE LEARNERS: CONTEXT AND INNOVATION



In examining learning environments as varied as Brazil, China, Iran, Japan, Thailand, the United Kingdom, the United States, and Vietnam, *Adult Language Learners: Context and Innovation* deals with three main areas of education. The first section of the book focuses on language teachers as adult learners themselves developing their teaching practice. The second focuses on different means of expanding learner autonomy, an important trait of the adult language learner. The third deals with innovative classroom practices.

The chapters in the book have been selected so as to provide the reader with an overview of important aspects of the field, with emphasis placed on classroom

practice rather than theory. Much of our work as editors of this volume has been to strike that balance between theory and practice.

TEACHER DEVELOPMENT

The first part of this volume looks at teacher development from several perspectives. Brandt (chapter 2) begins by investigating English language teacher certification programs around the world. Drawing on her research, she describes how these programs often overlook the importance of local contexts, and she suggests a number of ways to address this problem. Next, because all teachers need to keep up with developments in SLA that influence classroom practice, McCormack (chapter 3) presents an overview as well as classroom tasks to aid the teaching of SLA to new teachers.

Kim (chapter 4) relates how future teachers can learn both content and new technology when embedded into a teacher education course. In this case, the teachers collaborate to create a permanent resource that they can share. Baker, Crawford, and Jones (chapter 5) also provide a creative approach to teacher education through the use of e-portfolios. They remind us that teachers as well as students need to see themselves as lifelong learners. Ding (chapter 6) discusses the topic of teacher enthusiasm, encouraging teachers to actively engage adult language learners and to solicit their help in assessing teacher enthusiasm so that teachers can maintain and enhance it. To close this section of the book, Duong (chapter 7) describes why memorization is used so extensively in EFL teaching, sometimes inappropriately, and how there might be a larger role for memorization in ESL contexts.

EXTENDING LEARNER AUTONOMY

This second section of *Adult Language Learners* shows how a variety of approaches to curriculum design can promote greater learner autonomy. In a key discussion, Murray (chapter 8) conveys the quintessential features of a self-directed university language course for Japanese learners, and his approach can be employed by teachers interested in developing similar courses to enhance learner autonomy. Moving to a U.S. community college ESL literacy course, Lamping (chapter 9) details how to use a participatory approach to foster mutual support among a group of learners. Then Alexander (chapter 10) demonstrates how teamwork among adult learners working in a graduate research module can be developed when teachers negotiate with students and help them learn how to work together.

In his contribution, Andrade (chapter 11) transforms the familiar book report assignment into an interactive group activity. His structured process and question templates have the extra benefit of making plagiarism, now so common a problem (with book reports and summaries available on the Internet), much more

difficult. Next, Dias (chapter 12) shows how the expanding educational potential of the Web can be harnessed to help students develop critical thinking skills. In this case, the class project (creating online presences for nonprofit organizations) empowers learners to act on issues that concern them.

In the last chapter of this section, Ghahremani-Ghajar, Mirhosseini, and Fattahi (chapter 13), who are Iranian teachers in the highly specialized field of medical English, describe a distinctive language discovery approach. It offers students a means of acquiring language through transferrable personal, community, and Web-based research into the medical conditions of family members and friends.

INNOVATIONS WITHIN A COURSE



The third and final section of the book looks at innovations that can be incorporated into a given course. Strong (chapter 14) describes an ethnographic approach to learning about language and culture through field trips in an EFL environment. In developing oral skills, Stillwell (chapter 15) explains how role-plays coupled with controversial topics can become an effective means of teaching discussion skills. Smith (chapter 16) also addresses discussion skills through a short case study based on a local yet globally relevant issue, which provides an effective means of teaching reading and discussion skills to adult language learners.

Through a radio drama project, Kubanyiova (chapter 17) demonstrates a highly motivating vehicle for adult language learners that can be done relatively simply using tape recorders. Finally, Augusto-Navarro, de Abreu-e-Lima, and de Oliveira (chapter 18) outline how course design, especially in an English for specific purposes setting, should incorporate ongoing needs analyses of the adult language learners, their expectations, and the context.

These chapters have been selected with classroom applications in mind. We hope that by reading them you will gain an overview of recent developments in adult language learning and of ideas and techniques that can be easily adapted to your teaching context.

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