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Teaching ESL to (Young) Adults

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Abstract. The aim of this paper is to provide a share of the authors’ (almost) life-long expertise in teaching English as a second language to (young) adults. In this paper, we shall point out differences in acquiring a foreign language between children on the one hand and teenagers, young adults and grown-ups on the other and suggest methods of addressing the painstaking process of teaching English to essentially heterogeneous classes of students. The authors have taught English to students the age span of whom is 18-22, which qualifies the latter neither as teenagers anymore nor as full-fledged adults. This is what makes them one of the most sensitive age group on the foreign language teaching market. In teaching this type of classes, teachers need to be constantly aware of particular features of young learners that may pose difficulties to the training process. Our first goal, as teachers, should be to understand what motivates our students to learn and consequently apply the most efficient teaching strategies accordingly.

Keywords: young adults, older teenagers, ESL, ESP, teaching strategies

1. Introduction

For nigh on 25 years, the authors have been teaching English to students the age span of whom is 18-22, which qualifies the latter neither as teenagers anymore nor as full-fledged adults. This is what makes them one of the most sensitive age group on the foreign language teaching market. In teaching this type of classes, teachers need to be constantly aware of particular features of young learners that may pose difficulties to the training process. Our first goal, as teachers, should be to understand what motivates our students to learn and consequently apply the most efficient teaching strategies accordingly.

The aim of this paper is to provide a share of the authors’ (almost) life-long expertise in teaching English as a second language to (young) adults. In this paper, we shall:

- point out differences in acquiring a foreign language between children on the one hand and teenagers, young adults and grown-ups on the other and
- suggest methods of addressing the painstaking process of teaching English to frequently heterogeneous classes of students.

2. Research methods

These issues have been dealt with before by a plethora of authors in a very exhaustive manner and with comprehensive research methods. One of the most closely related study on this topic is *The English language needs and priorities of young adults in the European Union: student and teacher perceptions*

by Graham Hall and Guy Cook. With an expertise of more than 20 years in English language teaching/TESOL, Hall and Cook conducted this project, investigating the current English language needs of 18–24 years old students in an environment of ever-growing use of English in social and professional communication. The study was aimed at analysing English usage from three different perspectives in terms of EU membership. For our paper, this study is extremely relevant because of the subjects' age and of one of the groups' citizenship. The three perspectives chosen are those of teachers and students in Germany (a founder member state of EU), **Romania** (a later acceding member state) and Turkey (a candidate). The Romanian respondents were nine teachers and 27 students aged 18-24 "from one state secondary school and one university in the Moldavia region of Romania." (Hall, 2015:13)

In a survey of 27,500 people conducted by the European Commission in 2012 on the usage of English as a second language, only 25% of the respondents aged 55 and above stated that they use English beside their mother tongue as opposed to as high as 41 per cent of younger people (aged 15-34). Out of this entire respondent unit, as much as 33% EU citizens declared that they speak English well enough to sustain a conversation and 25 per cent of respondents said that they can follow radio or television news in English, while a similar percentage reported they can read a newspaper or magazine in English and can use English online. (Hall, 2015:8)

While learners of a foreign language have a fair amount of features in common to be considered by their teachers, there are certain age specific differences that make age a major constituent to take into account when conceiving a course outline. Never before has the generation gap been as wide as it is nowadays in the expanding European Union. Dusty curricula and usage of English by teachers do not always meet the needs and priorities of young adult students who are extremely responsive to change and who have a fantastic ability to adapt and to assimilate new structures in communication, both written and oral. Curricula designers seem not to come to terms currently "as to how English should be taught and learned, and [there is] certainly less agreement over which educational norm is best suited to represent English in the new era." (Modiano, 2009: 59).

As Hall and Cook prompted, "this demographic group is the most likely to move into new communicative environments, speak new forms and varieties of English, engage in multiple language use and make heaviest use of new technologies and the new forms of communication they enable." (Hall, 2015:9) The findings of their project are remarkable because they show the youths' awareness of the pre-eminence of English proficiency both for academic education and further employment and for socialising and online communication alike. Practically, English has come to be regarded as "no longer a foreign language in Europe" (Phillipson, 2007:125).

Consistent with the above-mentioned studies and research, this article is endorsed by life-long practice as teachers of English as a foreign language, mostly in an ESP environment. We consider students of maritime academic institutions, for whom English is not merely a "foreign language" anymore, as it has become common knowledge that English is the international language at sea. The authors have been teaching predominantly students of the deck and engineering departments who later need to become dependent on the usage of Maritime English, but among our students have also been people attending other departments related to the marine field, such as Port Operation, Environment Engineering and Economic Engineering as well.

3. Research results

Most of the students we have come into contact with along the years may have had several years of learning General English before they start an ESP course. Their encounter with the English language may not always have been quite agreeable and as such, some of them turn out to be biased in appreciating whether learning English is fun, or whether they are "good" at languages or not. This may entail decreased motivation and consequently poor participation in the educational process. At the other end, if the students' previous practice of English has been enjoyable, then the chance for them to attend English classes eagerly increases exponentially. Regardless of the prospects, it is indeed essentially in every respect to prepare for them worthy topics that match their needs and their level.

Practice has made us aware that we, as instructors, need to mould our characters and our teaching methods to our students not only according to their level of English but also to their age and maturity in thinking and in responding to language-learning specific stimuli. As stated before, children and adults have different manners to learn, to take part in various activities involving the four skills to be developed in a language and to communicate about what they think and how they feel or about what they did not understand and may need help with.

In terms of learning, **as opposed to children, adults:**

- **are more resilient to new** information and **want to understand the reason** why a particular lesson is taught;
- they are **more dependent on their mother tongue** and, as such, very often need to override other language patterns.

On the bright side, though:

- they tend to **acquire knowledge easier by doing** than by learning by heart
- and
- they feel **more confident when solving “problems” they can relate to, on account of their own reality.**

Moreover,

- they **will learn when they want to**
- and
- more likely **when they really feel that they need to,**
- as
- they **are more mindful of their own requisites in order to attain a goal** in their education.
 - Thus, they **avoid setting** themselves **unrealistic targets.**

In this context,

- they are **more keen on learning things there are forthwith relevant in their professional life.**
-
- **Their life experience will interfere with their instruction** in a foreign language.
-
- They **appreciate and embrace each mistake as a precious opportunity to improve**
- and
- once they **acknowledged their mistakes and corrected them,**
 - they are **willing to** (sometimes unconsciously) **start** what has been known in recent years as ***deliberate practice***, i.e. thinking while they are practicing about how they are practicing. This activity requires focused attention and is conducted with the specific aim of enhancing performance, which is a pursuit typical to adults rather than children.

• Because they **have the capacity to analyse language,**

adults

- can make connections and **learn more systematically**

and

- **take responsibility for their learning,** not needing to rely on their teachers as their only source of assessment and validation.

In addition,

- adult students **are not afraid to ask for further explanations** when they feel they do not understand something in class. This attitude is probably grounded on their driving force mentioned above, i.e. a target to be reached.

A **distinct category** in the realm of adults **are the authors' students** who are neither fully responsible grown-ups nor children or even teenagers anymore. This is what makes it even more difficult for us to steer our educational boat amidst the dire straits of youthfulness. Although most of them respond well to being treated as adults, it is sometimes physiology itself that prevents them from acting as such, no matter how hard they might strive.

The following is but a simple **taxonomy of features** we have designed **based on our professional experience** gained along many years of teaching ESL to **young adults** and is meant to provide assistance to fellow teachers in their approach of students in this age group.

- **Young adults/older teenagers** are **more flexible** when it comes to embracing new language patterns and learn by identifying comprehensive structures.
- Unlike their fully fledged adult opponents, they are **less independent outside the classroom environment**. This is the reason why they **need guidance to finding learning resources**, so it is desirable that teachers provide advice and techniques for them to reach their language acquisition goal.
- Unfortunately, they **sometimes lack the motivation of grown-up learners** either because, while grown-ups are driven by better career prospects, some of our students are forced to take English classes as part of a higher education program or because their parents are paying for their English courses.
- On a related note, youngsters are **less committed** and have a tendency to postponing assignments. Some of them do not have developed time management skills and from time to time need to be reminded of their tasks.
- On an emotional level, youths **find it more difficult to cope with everyday stress** and their learning progress may be hindered because they are not that versatile in leaving problems behind and focusing on their language acquisition goal.

Despite all this,

- we have found that the young are also **more willing to take a leap of faith** and proceed with their instruction against all odds posed by any possible gaps in their knowledge. They have the "audacity" to go on through reading a text, for instance, that contains new words without feeling discouraged.

In this respect,

- while **adults consciously take advantage** more of their life experience and **of their previous language knowledge**, the **younger** sometimes unknowingly **try to elicit the needed information** from the very context of their reading. In a situation like this, when adults find that they lack any props to rely on, they simply stop and ask for the translation of the new words immediately, whereas the younger keep on going without hesitation.

4. Suggested solutions and strategies

It is, therefore, against this background that teachers have to **develop and apply strategies** to successfully tackle ESL/ESP classes of (young) adults in order to ensure that students have sufficient practice for them to make appreciable progress:

- Regardless of the students' age, most of the classes today are rather large and it has become very difficult to pay the same undiminished attention to all students alike. An advisable approach is to **group students in pairs** and have them practice together. In this manner, less proficient students may benefit from advice and instructions from their pair partner, a practice that usually proves to be more agreeable for students than having to interrupt their teacher and ask for explanations.
- Not only have classes increased in terms of the number of students, but also with regard to their individual skills. **Heterogeneous classes** are a genuine challenge. Discrepancy may result from various causes. Some students are merely gifted in language learning and may simply have learned more English or may have had more exposure to English before their academic schooling, while others are what they call "tone deaf", a quality the lack of which turns out to be quite a drawback when learning a foreign language. Thereupon, the former's training is more effective and they attain better skills faster than the rest of their classmates. While it is every teacher's goal to maximise their students' potential, it is equally important to broaden their language knowledge irrespective of their abilities. They say that **repetition is the mother of learning**: while this is beneficial for students of every level, it becomes quintessential for less proficient students. Any language structure or pattern that is not practiced regularly is unavoidably condemned to be discarded from memory.
- In the light of the foregoing, when advanced students finish their assignments faster than their colleagues do, it is helpful to **have extra activities**, so that the teacher may focus on assisting the less-proficient ones. The same activities may be later assigned as homework for those who need more practice.
- At this point, students of all ages find it particularly gratifying to be offered prompt **feedback**. Thus, teachers must bear in mind that feedback has to be closely related to the specific task and the purpose thereof and it should be provided in a constructive manner along with eloquent information regarding the learning outcomes. Beside emphasizing the strong points, feedback is also meant to point out possible mistakes while encouraging and giving advice on how students can improve. This aids significantly to the students' awareness of their own knowledge and skills. Feedback can be offered in writing or orally, individually or collectively as needed.
- At this point, it is worth mentioning that young adults regard it as a **proof of respect** when they in turn are offered the opportunity to give feedback to their teacher. Of course, the teacher should also take their opinion into consideration as a contribution to the way a course is structured. Given that not all classes are the same, this is a good reason for having students fill in mid-term questionnaires on how they regard the course content.
- Another idea would be to have opinion questionnaires on the presented course outline prior to the course beginning, as a needs analysis stage.
- Although in the present case the ESP is part of the compulsory subjects, young adult students are often motivated by the **benefits set forth** by the teacher **at the beginning of the term**.
- People of all ages appreciate a **good sense of humour**, yet with adults and older teenagers humour makes them pay even more attention in class and retain information better because they can later on relate to it more easily, having gained it in an agreeable manner.

- At this stage, experience has also shown that teachers who are **up-to-date with youth English language**, that students use incessantly in their online communication, is a highly motivational factor. This increases their confidence in their teacher and reassures them that they can rely on the latter for knowledge not only in professional but also in extra-curricular language use. In this context, a practical suggestion is to incorporate **informal language** usage among the ESP structures. If a particular specialised term turns out to have a distinct or even peculiar meaning in **teenage argot** and the teacher happens to know and explain it, students are very pleasantly surprised and this results in a welcoming environment in the classroom eventually.
- Last but not least, in terms of confidence that needs to be gained, teachers need to “*take the time to **get to know [their] students**. This can be more difficult than it sounds if you are teaching a number of large classes who you only see once a week.*” (Buckingham, 2013) Yet the reward of more efficient classwork is indeed priceless. When students know for a fact that the teacher not only knows them by their first names, but also acknowledges their individual weaknesses and strong points, they make greater and greater efforts to attain their goal and make the course a successful endeavour in every respect.

4. Conclusions

A typical class of (young) adults in an ESL/ESP academic course consists of students with a wide range of knowledge and this often results in a challenging study environment both for teachers and for the students in question. As busy as they may be with designing curricula, planning their classes, teaching, grading papers etc., teachers could find it beneficial to stop at times and consider any possible issues that may arise in class and attempt different approaches. Considering that not only individuals, but entire generations change along with the developments of our society, new approaches and methods might eventually prove to be just the right thing at the right moment.

In conclusion, there is no absolute recipe for the correct syllabus. In designing curricula for teaching young adults, ESL/ESP teachers need to take into account that the most appropriate syllabus content should:

- be appealing enough to raise and keep the students’ interest and engrossment in the course;
- be at the students’ level of knowledge;
- be adapted to students’ needs;
- teach them new language structures that are immediately relevant to their field of interest, both occupationally and in everyday usage;
- in this respect, provide authentic materials that students can relate to.

A final reminder for teachers of (young) adults is that one can never fail with a well-grounded lesson plan and thoroughly selected materials, diligence and acknowledgment of students’ goals and needs. After all, it is a dedicated teacher who is the real driving force on the students’ road to success.

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