

COGNITIVE CHARACTERISTICS OF THE ADULT LEARNERS

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Abstract:

As globalization has grown significantly, more and more adults seek the help of English instructors because they want to find employment abroad, to communicate more effectively at work, to resort to overseas travels, or just to enjoy various types of social situations. In any of these cases, the English learners are highly motivated to study the subject.

Key words: adult learners, process of learning, foreign language, cognitive characteristics innovative educational technologies, competencies, psychological and pedagogical technologies, case technologies, standard of education.

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However, those who teach adults must be aware of the differences between the teaching – learning patterns specific to adults, on the one hand, and those that generally function with children, on the other. The article will discuss the cognitive, attitudinal, behavioral and methodological characteristics presented by the adult learners of English in today's world, taking into account both theoretical and research data. The ultimate purpose is to arrive at conclusions that are relevant for the English teachers involved in the process of preparing adults for the different situations which require a good knowledge of this foreign language.

The teacher's first responsibility is to teach adult students about the rationale for approach to language learning. For students who are accustomed to more traditional, teacher-centered classrooms, it is critical that they know they will be given direct, follow-up instruction, but that during the problem-solving phase, the teacher's role is to observe and support. Students also need to understand that their goal is to work together to solve a problem, but for the activity to benefit their language learning, they must use only English in their groups.

The purpose of this work is that, with the help of studying we want to gain the required knowledge to be the kind of English teacher that could help the pupils or students to develop their speaking skills. There are some questions we must ask and by investigating these areas we aim to be able to answer them as well as possible.

- What kind of different exercises for adult learners should be used in class? How should these methods be evaluated?

- In what ways can a teacher correct students' mistakes without decreasing their confidence?

Writing and speaking are two essential aspects of any language, including English. To simplify the process of learning, variation is a key word in this case. There

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are endless possibilities for appropriate exercises to improve speaking and it is impossible. We have, however, found some problems, which will be described in this paper. In order to evaluate exercises, the teacher needs to be prepared and know what to focus on in the exercise as it is in progress, but also listen to the students' opinions since they know if they have learned anything or not [2,36]. Correction of spoken errors should be handled cautiously by the teacher but the adult students should be made aware of the written mistakes they make.

If a teacher uses the same writing and speaking exercises over and over again the adult students are less likely to learn than if the lessons are varied. Concerning adult students' speaking development a good example where a student promotes student participation by explaining that students learn a lot more by interacting with others rather than just listening to a teacher. There is a large number of goals that the adult pupils should aim for in upper stages of learning the language.

The most likely guarantee for adult students to develop their speaking skills is that the English language is used frequently during class.

A common myth in the field of education is that adult students are generally more ineffective as language learners than the traditional students, on the account that the younger people are, the more flexible their brains, and, consequently, the better their cognitive functions. However, research seems to challenge this myth, indicating 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

Moreover, some methodologists stressed that adult learners have greater cognitive capabilities and conceptual complexity than the younger ones. This means that adults can offer a longer attention span, and they can engage with abstract thought. Additionally, the older students have a more developed understanding of how language works, being familiar with the more advanced elements of grammar, such as how conjugation works, or what an adverb does. They already know what a well-built sentence is, and have a good sense of punctuation and spelling [3,72].

All these cognitive characteristics of the adult learners involve the fact that teachers must adjust the instructional materials and the teaching methods in order to accommodate the students' skill and some levels.

It is widely agreed that motivation represents a factor of central importance for successful learning. Unlike younger learners, the adults almost always have a sound reason why they are studying, and that reason will be their primary motivation. Perceiving education as a way to improve their self-image and reach various personal goals adult learners are usually highly motivated from the very beginning of the instruction process, and this makes it much easier for the teacher to perform his/ her task as a motivator. Moreover, as Harmer points out, "many adults are able to sustain a level of motivation by holding on to a distant goal in a way that teenagers find more difficult" [1,79].

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.

Additionally, the adult age students have more learning experience behind them, and this aspect can prove to be both beneficial and problematic. Thus, on the one hand, adult students have well-developed learning strategies that have served them well in other settings, and the teacher can help them use these strategies to their advantage in language learning, too. On the other hand, 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.

There are also situations when adults are less confident in their intellectual abilities, and this might make them anxious about learning a foreign language. In relation to the anxieties, insecurities, and fears of the adults who return to school, the adult educator Stephen Brookfield discusses the term “impostor syndrome”, denoting a collection of feelings of inadequacy, of chronic self-doubt which make people think that their accomplishments are nowhere near as good as those of the people around them.

Although the subjects do not consider their students’ mature age as being problematic in itself, however, they point to certain aspects of the teaching - learning process which require more attention due to the adult learners’ specific physical and cognitive characteristics.

Thus, because of their lower energy level, as well as their multiple responsibilities, the adults generally come to the English classroom with a certain level of fatigue. The teacher should be aware of this aspect, and not misinterpret their students’ occasional apathy or lack of involvement as a reaction to the course content or to the teaching methods.

Additionally, even if, as indicated in the previous section, the mature learners are characterized by greater cognitive abilities and conceptual complexity, my subjects note the fact that memory and reaction time is sometimes slower in the case of this type of students. However, in full agreement with some of the methodologists who discussed the same aspect, subjects stress that the adults may be spending more time on their learning tasks, but they are often more accurate than the younger students, and, therefore, are very likely to acquire solid knowledge.

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