

Chapter 48

Adapting to the Needs of Adult Language Learners: A Totally Different Ball Game

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ABSTRACT

Many language teacher training programs prepare teacher candidates to teach in a K-12 setting. However, some of these teacher candidates may one day find themselves in adult education whether as part-time or full-time employment. This chapter will focus on teaching English to Speakers of Other Languages (ESOL), but the majority of what is discussed in this chapter can easily be applied to teaching programs targeted towards other second languages. The main purpose of this chapter is to note some of the flaws in many ESOL adult textbooks and how many teaching programs can easily modify their curriculum to prepare their candidates to overcome these flawed materials by providing more age appropriate and relevant lessons to adult learners. By incorporating minor changes to a current program, teacher candidates will become well-rounded educators who are well-equipped to serve learners of all ages.

INTRODUCTION

Many language teacher training programs prepare teacher candidates to teach in a K-12 setting. Although many of these candidates may later find themselves teaching minors, this may not be their only form of employment. A new analysis of federal data showed that 1 in 5 public school teachers have a second job to help supplement their income (Will, 2018). Granted that not all of these second jobs are related to education; however, it is still possible that these teacher candidates may one day find themselves in adult education whether as part-time or full-time employment. In order for teacher training programs to truly prepare teacher candidates for all types of students, candidates must learn how to adapt lesson plans, textbooks and materials to more mature learners.

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Adapting to the Needs of Adult Language Learners

The idea that adult learners differ from children learners is not a new concept. In fact, andragogy, or the term related to adult learning, was coined by Alexander Kapp in 1833 (Loeng, 2017). Despite being coined in the early 1800s, andragogy was not well known until the 1960's when Malcolm Knowles disambiguated the term by offering assumptions associated with adult education opposed to children (Finn, 2011). For instance, whereas children tend to be dependent learners, adults tend to be self-directed (Finn, 2011). Despite the understanding that adult learners have different needs than children learners, the textbooks and materials created for adult English Language Learners (ELLs) do not always differ from the materials created for children ELLs. This chapter will note areas where many English to Speakers of Other Languages (ESOL) adult textbooks are lacking and share how teaching programs can easily modify their curriculum to prepare their candidates to overcome these flawed materials to be more age appropriate and relevant to adult learners. These minor changes in teaching programs can lead to well-rounded educators who are well-equipped to serve learners of all ages. This chapter will focus on teaching ESOL, but the majority of what is discussed can easily be applied to teaching programs targeted towards other second languages (L2s).

LITERATURE REVIEW

What We Already Know About Adult Learners

Some programs do touch upon the differences between children versus adult learners, but it is often a brief overview. This overview may include discussing the Critical Period Hypothesis (CPH) which states that there is only a short window developmentally when it is possible to acquire a first language or second language natively (Birdsong, 1999). CPH states it is impossible to gain native like pronunciation if an individual acquires a second language (L2) after puberty (Long, 1990). There is a lot of debate surrounding CPH. For instance, Chriswick & Miller (2008) could not find an exact age where there was a sharp decrease in the ability of L2 learners to acquire proficiency in English. Regardless, many candidates are told to have realistic expectations when it comes to L2 adult learners' pronunciation. Teachers should not focus on native-like pronunciation, but rather focus on improving intelligibility, so the speaker is able to communicate effectively.

Each ESOL class comes with its unique set of challenges. One obstacle many adult ESOL instructors face is educating ELLs who also have little to no education in their first language (L1) (Burt, Peyton, & Schaetzel, 2008). However, ESOL instructors may also find themselves teaching a class of adult students who are incredibly well educated in their L1. For example, students who apply to the English Language Institute at the University of Florida must show proof of secondary school completion. In addition to students who may have just graduated from high school in their home countries, there are many students who attended university and had successful careers in their home countries. Therefore, depending on the teaching setting, another possible difference between children and adult learners is that adults have mastered their first language (L1). When these adult ELLs are introduced to a new vocabulary word, they can simply look up the translation in their L1, and the instructor is able to quickly return to the lesson. There are negatives associated with this strategy, such as many instructors do not allow phones or dictionaries in the classroom because they want students fully immersed in the L2 environment. Additionally, there is not a perfect translation for all words, and some online dictionaries may offer incorrect translations. Despite these potential negatives, allowing adult learners to look up unknown words can serve as a time

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