

Meeting the Goals and Challenges of Adult EFL Learners

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Abstract

The paper addresses the goals and challenges of language instruction to adult learners over 30 in Armenia, with emphasis on oral speech. As the number of English learners among adults is growing, it is becoming urgent to study the peculiarities and specific learning needs of adults to organise an adequate teaching and learning environment.

The components of spoken language and the idea of communicative competence are discussed, followed by a consideration of what teaching adults should take into account and how the teaching process can be organised. The target group in this study encompasses three categories of adult learners. One refers to people who take up English for better employment opportunities and/or to meet on-the-job requirements; the second category consists in employees seeking to expand their professional development activities; the last one is represented by an increasing number of emigrants.

Key words: *adult learners, EFL, speaking, social needs and goals, characteristics of adult learners, employment, professional development, emigration.*

Introduction

The vast majority of TESOL research surrounds pre-school and secondary school children as well as young adults (aged 20-25), while little attention is given to language learning and acquisition by adults over 30. Yet, the latter

situation is completely different and should be tackled properly, especially as the number of English learners among adults is growing.

This paper addresses the goals and challenges of language instruction to adult learners in Armenia, with emphasis on speaking. The components of spoken language and the idea of communicative competence are discussed, followed by a consideration of what teaching adults should take into account and how the teaching process can be organised. The target group in this study encompasses three categories of adult learners. One refers to people who take up English for better employment opportunities and/or to meet on-the-job requirements; another consists of employees seeking to expand their professional development activities by attending foreign conferences and reading foreign-written professional literature; the last category is represented by an increasing number of emigrants, including the ones preparing for the IELTS general test.

Social Needs for Learning English

Numerous social needs for learning English depend on the above-mentioned learner category and are related to the following skills:

1) to read, write and speak well enough to meet employment requirements (most employers in Armenia require the knowledge of English, so applicants mastering the language have a competitive advantage over those not speaking English or at least other foreign languages);

2) to communicate with foreign partners visiting the Armenian offices (in this respect, writing skills such as letter-writing, although important too, are not viewed by learners as primary because of the wide availability of sample business letters and reference materials on the Internet, including digital translators);

3) to make presentations and communicate effectively at professional and academic conferences abroad (writing a paper or a speech in English is another important objective here, but in many cases it is accomplished with the help of expert translators, so many learners do not pay due attention to developing the academic writing skill);

4) in case of emigrants, to communicate with their potential employers and/or classmates, to tackle different real-life tasks, to interact with their children's teachers and with authorities at different levels, deal with their new neighbours, take part in community life in mixed-language environments, etc. (Bailey 2006:2).

As can be seen, despite the need to acquire a variety of language skills to meet their goals, the main skill that adult learners strive to achieve is speaking. Admittedly, many become satisfied with their ability to reach their communication goals effectively, even though they may be using elementary structures and vocabulary; at the same time, there are also meticulous adults who need to get the deepest possible knowledge of grammar and sufficient vocabulary to raise their self-esteem and become confident users of the language.

1. At this point, it will be appropriate to briefly review what makes a good oral communication and what components should be covered by an effective oral language instruction. To start with, "speaking means far beyond than simply uttering words and sentences; it involves logical thinking processes and the ability to put into use specific bits of knowledge (such as vocabulary, pronunciation, grammar, function) and skills (including listening, turn taking, non-verbal and cultural awareness) in order to communicate effectively" (Nunan 2003:4).

Keys to Effective Speaking

One of the keys to effective speaking is a good knowledge of **vocabulary**. Without an essential vocabulary, it will be impossible to realise a meaningful and comprehensible interaction using the structure and function alone. The richer the vocabulary, the easier it will be to express oneself. Simultaneously, it is vital to distinguish between oral and written vocabulary and utilise it appropriately. As we learn to read and write, written lexicon gradually comes into its own. As we increase our vocabulary, there arises the need to include idiomatic language. Regrettably, many adult learners attaching importance to vocabulary build-up the limits of the survival vocabulary themselves.

One essential aspect of vocabulary and speaking at large that is often neglected by students (and sometimes by teachers) is **pronunciation**. This refers to the way words and sentences should be articulated to be clearly comprehensible. Rare mispronunciations which do not interfere with meaning and do not prevent the interlocutor(s) from reacting adequately are acceptable (especially as native English speakers in the age of globalisation are becoming more and more tolerant towards foreign accents). With these minor mistakes communication can still occur and develop successfully, and communication goals can be achieved.

Another aspect of language to which some learners do not pay due attention is **grammar**. With the introduction of communicative language learning, the focus on form has been replaced with the focus on meaning. Many adults find themselves tolerably communicating with foreign friends having only basic knowledge of grammar; academic conferences are successfully held by hosting speakers who do not speak English perfectly; international business correspondence is carried on with the help of model letters available in books and on the Internet; important business meetings are held without deep knowledge of grammar. The communication goal is to avoid misunderstanding and get the message across without trying to impress anyone with one's brilliant English. However, it is not always that simple. In more complex life and work situations the inability to combine words in a sentence correctly may potentially lead to confusion, communication breakdown and even more serious outcomes such as contentions with the authorities (police, customs officers, etc.). In case of adults studying the IELTS course, vocabulary and grammar play an absolutely essential role.

The next component of spoken language is **comprehension** – the ability of the speaker to produce meaningful speech having a good grasp of their own stretches of discourse and enabling the listener to decode what was being said. Comprehension of a foreign language also involves some intuition – the ability to make logical connections between words, draw inferences, as well as interpret nonverbal behaviours, which may be quite different from the native ones.

Last but not least, **speech fluency** contributes to communication outcomes too. It derives from all the above mentioned components and implies the ability to speak communicatively, accurately and continuously. Too many grammatical errors, a wrong choice of words, mispronunciation and interruptions have a disruptive influence on the listener's understanding of oral expression and may create false impressions about the speaker.

Taking into consideration the aforesaid speech components, language instruction should provide a well-structured methodology to compensate for the lack of the authentic language environment. "A good language learning setting can be modeled by the following techniques: predominantly using the target language in class, giving learners English nicknames, extending not only vocabulary proper but also conceptual knowledge, assimilating the conversation process to the natural one" (Vitlin 1998:5). A good example can be allowing students to provide an uninterrupted flow of speech and correcting their mistakes later, or using phrases like *Don't you mean... ?*, echoing what was said in the right way, etc. to imitate native interlocutors.

In this country, foreign language education for adults is mostly realised in two ways: as on-the-job training, for one thing, and as private tutorship (whether in small groups or individually), for another thing. However, what needs to be taken into consideration in both types of courses is the need for instructional methods to be relevant to adult learners. Adults, however conscientious and motivated they may be (both intrinsically and extrinsically), have specific social needs and personal characteristics that make them rather hard-to-teach and slow learners.

Firstly, adult learners are too preoccupied to master the language as quickly as possible. This factor explains why many of them want to skip grammar. Secondly, the majority of adult learners are on low levels of English proficiency. Others have probably forgotten what they learnt at school. This is part of Soviet heritage: at that time English was not in high demand and speaking it was not a must-have skill. Taking up a new language at a later period of life and from such a low level requires sufficient time and effort, which adults can hardly afford, if we consider the many responsibilities (work, home, etc.) that they

have to shoulder. Another remnant of the Soviet past is that adults are used to the teacher-oriented approach. They do not tend to work on a task with their peers/classmates, and so their communication skills may suffer. In their firm belief, they can learn little from a classmate, who masters the language no better than they do. They expect the teacher to talk to them and correct their mistakes. On the other hand, the teacher-centred instruction is most likely to bore them, especially as most adults attend classes after a hard day at work, so they may be tired and inattentive. It is hardly surprising that the lesson may not go where you intend it to, as tired students are prone to deviating from the subject. In addition, some companies arrange corporate language courses for their employees as on-the-job training, but the trainees frequently turn to be uninterested and reluctant to learn because they have to fulfil more important duties at home. Still another downside to teaching adults is their persistent use of mother tongue and the tendency to compare structures and sounds in the two languages; hence, they often find it difficult to adopt the new forms if they are different from the familiar ones. Finally, an essential peculiarity of teaching adults is that a teacher cannot use strict measures or put too many restrictions and rules on them. Be prepared that your adult learners may not always be ready for the class, may arrive late, leave early, or miss some classes altogether. The best you can do is to encourage them to do at least a little homework on a daily basis rather than accumulate it for the last minute; get the message across to them that they should work as hard as they can commit to if they do not want to have extra difficulty meeting their language learning goals.

On the other hand, some of the unfavourable peculiarities of adult learning, including those mentioned above, can be turned to the learners' advantage. For instance, if used appropriately, the native language can actually foster foreign language learning and acquisition. Thus adults' established native grammar and lexis may be helpful in understanding target language structures and vocabulary items. If the learners stick to the first language, then use it for giving directions, explanations, etc. while English will remain the predominant language in class to create the near-authentic language environment. In certain classroom situations the teacher can "simulate" not knowing Armenian and

persistently react to the students' questions in English thus urging them to switch to the target language. Fortunately, apart from students repeatedly using Armenian in class, there are those wanting to take risks with the target language, understanding that the language classroom is the only environment where they have an opportunity to communicate in English. What is left to do is bring this idea home to all the learners.

It is also indispensable that adults' social demands for using English be exercised during the lesson. These include asking for directions, ordering a meal in a restaurant, filling out job applications, passing job interviews, conducting business communication via e-mail, giving speeches, and many more. They will help the teacher to make the classroom activities relevant to the needs of their adult learners by integrating EFL instruction with their personal, social, academic and vocational goals. Instruction should create content that is close to adult learners' functioning in real-world situations, such as in the contexts of work, social or interpersonal relations, and so on.

Adults' life experience is an additional advantage to provide adequate instruction. The teacher who designs tasks drawing on the learners' previous experiences and strengths gives them a powerful motive and an opportunity to express themselves demonstrating their expertise. This is especially true for oral and written language development as well as grammar and vocabulary build-up. For example, in reinforcing grammar material, it is more favourable for adult students to make true sentences about themselves using the target structures than drill book-generated sentences, which students do automatically, by rote. In this way, the students also get involved in the learning process creatively.

Moreover, adult instruction should seek not only to link the topics to the students' experience, interests and real demands, but also facilitate their speech production by guiding them with a plan and/or key vocabulary. As argued by J. Dobson (1992:1), "directed conversation practice is probably the most reliable route to true communication". A tried-and-tested method is to prepare separate cards with an individual topic and plan for each student. A sample card looks like ones produced for the IELTS speaking exam (especially for those learners preparing to take the IELTS for emigration purposes) or it includes instructions

and a list of questions to answer in a particular life situation as shown in the cards A and B respectively:

Describe an object you particularly like.
You should say
what it is and what it looks like

- *what it is made of*
- *what it is for*
- *why it is special for you*

At a Job Interview. You should:

- *greet the interviewer(s)*
- *introduce yourself*
- *tell about yourself*
- *say why you want to work for this particular organisation*
- *say in three words how your friends would describe you*

To make it more exciting, allow each student to draw their own card. Assign them a specific time limit to prepare their speeches.

Furthermore, the card method can be used for a complete-a-dialogue assignment. This is a perfect way to integrate speaking and writing skills and encourage adults to speak. Give each pair of students two cards – each bearing part of the same dialogue. The students are to complete the missing parts (their role). Below are the sample cards for a conversation between friends:

How well did you do on your exam, Ann?

Congrats! How much did you score?

Well done! Now you can relax and enjoy yourself a bit.

.....
I passed!

85. It's not too high, but still I'm happy!

Yeah. It's a big relief.

When making the dialogues for your students, make sure the given conversation lines suggest the idea of the missing ones. But when the students'

level allows, encourage them to modify their answers on the spot to keep the conversation going in a natural way (if the prepared answers do not match the partner's).

Due to considerable life experience mature students have established opinions on various life situations and, as a result, want to have a say in class. Once the basic speaking skills are learned and appropriate vocabulary and grammar are mastered, guided monologues can turn into question-and-answer sessions and further into discussions.

For the start, encourage your students to use simple English sentence structures that they know are correct, so that they can concentrate on getting their message across. They are not taking a speaking test to try to impress the examiner with their sophisticated language. At the same time, urge them to be more adventuresome with their word choice because in authentic communication with their native English interlocutors they are most likely to get feedback on vocabulary. Besides, in a natural conversation they are not supposed to translate every single word they say or hear from or into their mother tongue in order to interact successfully, and it will be more than natural to use language “fillers”, such as *well, you know, um, er* to take some time to think (especially if they have forgotten a word). Teach your students to be able to make themselves understood with the help of the language resources they possess by substituting unknown or forgotten words for ones readily available.

Activities and Strategies as a Springboard to Speaking

During the work with adult students we have utilised alternative approaches to traditional activities. In this paper, we would like to share some of the activities and strategies we have compiled from various sources or worked out over time as a springboard to speaking.

Activity 1: Ask your students questions about themselves. There are different ways to do this: a) having them briefly introduce themselves talking about their family, job, house, interests and so on; b) inquiring in more detail about their job responsibilities, etc.; c) having students ask each other questions. Adults like talking about themselves, even if they are on the low levels of

language proficiency. On the first day of class they usually display themselves best in this kind of activity, probably as it is quite familiar to them. The scope of questions and the level of difficulty should be adjusted to the class level. You can start with general and alternative questions and then gradually extend to special ones. Questions can also be adapted to the specific class being taught. In a business English class, for example, this activity would work well to introduce such topics as jobs, employment, personnel, promotion and the like. In particular, ask your students questions directly related to their concerns.

Activity 2: This is a variation of the first activity. It is effective in a class where students are more or less familiar with each other. One student is supposed to be interrogated – subjected to “a lie detector”, which is represented by the other students in the class. The respondent should tell a lie only once. The lie detector (the class) is to figure out which answer is not truthful. The strategy in the two activities above aims at instilling into learners that questions make part of authentic conversation and that questioning each other can be a useful learning technique.

Activity 3: Get your adult learners to collaborate with their peers. Although Armenian adults are not initially good at peer work, as we have observed and noted above, they eventually come to like this activity as they realise that they are not shy talking to someone like them (or someone with a similar proficiency level). The teacher’s job is to observe each working pair not only to direct them and provide help but also to make sure everyone is speaking English, not their mother tongue. At later stages of language development, when the fear of speaking wrong has been overcome, each pair can be invited to perform individually in front of the whole class.

Activity 4: An extension of the above mentioned collaborative work, the traditional role plays are vital for teaching language skills to both children and adults. Role plays model real-world situations and provide a motivating context for practical use of language skills. It is in role plays that students’ ingenuity and inspiration are revealed. The older the learner the more complex roles can be assigned.

Activity 5: One habitual activity in a language class is a discussion or a debate. It is usually perceived by students as the golden opportunity to speak up. However, shy students are most likely to be excluded or overshadowed by more active and ambitious learners. Therefore, we hold to small group discussions, where everyone gets a chance to express themselves. If the class is silent, we ask leading questions to stimulate the answers or, again, personalise the topic by asking different students what they would do in that particular situation.

There is a popular view that what triggers a class debate is a controversial topic. Many instructors would proudly say that the more controversial the topic, the more heated the debate gets leading to the more creative use of the newly acquired language knowledge and skills. While this is true in mixed language class settings, such as in the classroom full of immigrants from different countries, in Armenia a heated debate is most likely to result in your students speaking their native language. During an overly excited discussion our students, both junior and senior, unwillingly turn to Armenian, as their foreign language resources may turn to be insufficient for proving their point and bringing their ideas home to their peers. To avoid such an undesirable outcome, the controversial questions that we raise for a debate are never directly related to students' deep concerns. By contrast, controversial questions work quite well during discussions, where all participants may be on the same wave length and there is no direct confrontation of ideas.

Activity 6: The latest or current news can also generate discussion. Students share what they have heard or read (even if the source of information is Armenian), as well as their own views on the topic. Such unprepared reports are usually based on simple news stories and can be delivered in a simple language, but the activity successfully serves to break the ice and help overcome the fear of speaking.

One beneficial characteristic of adult students is that they like to voice their opinions. A good strategy to flatter their vanity and boost their self-esteem is to ask their viewpoint on matters beyond ones specially raised for discussion. When doing a reading in class, get them to tell you why this or that event is

presented in the passage, what idea they think the author wants to convey, why the character acts in this particular way, what they would do in his/her place, how they would solve the problem facing the character, and so on. Personalise all the questions.

Adults also appreciate having a chance to demonstrate their competence. So why not ask them to restate your explanation, be it for a grammatical issue, a lexical item or a reading / listening comprehension assignment? After all, it is common knowledge that things are learned better through teaching. Delegating the teacher's role for clarifying a point or for checking a home task is still another conventional strategy that works miracles. Of course, the teacher controls the process guiding and helping the student "in charge", but it is the latter who does most of the talking.

Activity 7: One of the ways to elicit opinions is solving problems through brainstorming. It is also a relatively simple task for lower-level students as they do not have to produce full sentences but rather use short phrases. Again, choose the problem relevant to your adult learners' needs and have each participant provide at least one possible solution. Further, each solution can be viewed in terms of its merits and demerits.

Activity 8: Yet another effective method to stimulate speaking is to get the students to summarise the reading/listening passage or the results of a discussion or what was basically done in class. Ideally, the summary is followed by the students' own conclusions or demonstrates their changed or confirmed attitude towards an issue.

Activity 9: As the students' level of language competence grows depending on their educational and social needs, introduce them to public speaking. Presentations with Power Point, Prezi or other presentation software make it a pleasurable experience for learners of all ages, who prepare the slides with genuine enthusiasm and utmost care. Further, through computer-aided presentations the speakers not only feel supported throughout the speech but also are distracted from the audience and the fear of speaking in public.

Activity 10: This challenging but entertaining task is great for more capable students and it involves reading. However, it can also be tried with lower-level

students; just ensure adjusting the size and difficulty of the text (or, at worst, prepare a picture for them to describe). It resembles the game which was once popular with children in Armenia. We call it “Chinese whispers”. The idea is that one student reads a text once or twice, then he tells the content to the student next to him, who then “passes it on” to another student and so on. In the end, the last participant tells the story to the class and the class discusses the inaccuracies that occurred in the transmission process. The more ambitious the class the more precisely the story reaches the last student. But with beginners the resulting version of the text is usually very funny, and apart from sharing a good laughter students practise speaking without fear of mistakes because in this case mistakes actually are what makes the activity more amusing. Admittedly, with young learners there is also a risk that they will make deliberate comprehension mistakes to have more fun, but adult learners approach the activity quite seriously. On the other hand, even if students change the content on purpose, their ingenuity and willingness to experiment with the language should also be appreciated both by the classmates and the teacher.

This activity can also be performed in the form of a competition between two groups. The same text is given to both groups and passed on from one participant to another. Eventually, the last student in each group presents the story and the more accurate version wins.

Conclusion

All the above mentioned activities provide context for task-based and communicative language learning allowing all the students in class to contribute to the best of their ability and overcome their embarrassment and build their confidence. Most importantly, they give an opportunity to link instruction to learners’ lives outside the classroom and create content that can be immediately useable by learners in their roles as students, parents, friends, shoppers, travellers, employees, citizens, etc.

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Անգլերենի՝ չափահաս անձանց դասավանդումը կազմակերպելու առանձնահատկությունները

Հոդվածը նվիրված է Հայաստանում հասուն անձանց անգլերենի՝ որպես օտար լեզվի դասընթացի կազմակերպման առանձնահատկությունների ուսումնասիրությանը: Քննարկվում են ուսուցման նպատակները և դժվարությունները՝ կապված հատկապես խոսելու հմտության զարգացման հետ: Լեզուն ուսումնասիրող հասուն բնակչության քանակի աճը նպաստում է, որ մեծանա նաև լեզուն սովորողների առանձնահատկություններին և ուսուցման հատուկ նպատակներին համապատասխան մեթոդների մշակման անհրաժեշտությունը: Կատարված ուսումնասիրություններում առանձնացվում են անգլերեն սովորողների երեք խումբ. ա) աշխատանքային հնարավորություններն ընդլայնելու նպատակով անգլերեն սովորող անձինք, բ) արտերկրում աշխատանքային որակավորումը բարձրացնել ցանկացող ծառայողներ, գ) արտագաղթի պատրաստվող անձինք:

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