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Module 30: Teaching Adults

30.1 What is an Adult learner?

30.2 Teaching Methods

30.3 Difficulties with teaching Adult learners

30.4 Activities

30.1 What is an Adult learner?

Although we never stop learning throughout our lives, there comes a time where we leave the common surroundings of a learning structure, while usually it would be once graduating from school or university or college however differing between country, culture and tradition. On average people aged 25 years and older would fit under the category of 'Adult learners' however age is the only common denominator to this group since all come with a wide range of educational and cultural backgrounds, adult responsibilities, and job experiences.

After we've acquainted ourselves with the definition comes the obvious question: what does this particular group learn? And the answer? Can't be simpler than - just basically ANYTHING.



Capable, sharp minded, experienced and eager to learn new skills they add an extra value to the teaching and learning journey by challenging themselves and the educators. In this chapter we'll focus on effective and invigorating English learning methods. English like any other language isn't a technicality and should

be taught in the wider spec of culture, communication and business. But before we move on, let's dive in and get to know what CEFR levels mean and why do we need them?

CEFR levels are an abbreviation for Common European Framework of Reference for Languages or in other words it organizes language proficiency in six levels where each 2 levels represent a different proficiency level, starting from basic, moving up to independent and finishing as a proficient. They were



created with no reference to any specific language and they grade progressive mastery of each



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skill. Since this index isn't tailored for a specific language the descriptors are broad but it's a good orientation tool for self-assessment and profiling the main language skills.

30.2 Teaching Methods



While Adult learners have a fair advantage over pupils in schools, they're not forced to sit down in your class which is why keeping them engaged might be a great challenge. In order for both, them and yourself to feel rewarded for the time and effort put in to this, a teaching strategy that maximizes their learning outcomes is needed.

Since these lessons are much more goal oriented the first advice is to 'Know your Students' just as the same logic with business of 'Know your Client' applies. These people are here for a service and you are the provider, know how to custom and tailor made the material so it answers their desires best. If a student would like to use their English in a work place environment context, teach him/her a polite, adequate, business front vocabulary.

You can even practice a business pitch meeting, bringing them closer to practical training while enhancing their confidence in the language. If another favors sports, engage in a game, teach them the terminology and coined phrases.



Always try to keep your lessons relevant. Real world applications or outcomes of your lessons is crucial for Adult learners so that they can understand and visualize how to apply what you teach. Talking about the news, practicing small talk, reviewing books and movies are all great examples of when people use the language for everyday life. The topics might originate from their own experiences, so anything that forms a personal connection helps them retain better.

Approach them in an appropriate manner to their experience, background and age. It's important to not overwhelm with new material while as not to disregard them, so this balance should allow them to follow you without having to decipher what you mean. Bear in mind that



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interests and talking points vary between age groups which would require you as a teacher to be more alert and poses the ability to adjust yourself to your students.

For some, it might come as a surprise to hear that emotions can be channeled to powerful learning tools. Harnessed by the art of storytelling, you can inspire, influence and captivate your students by sharing a memorable story of an educator who was thought provoking, or the reason you started teaching. Any story or personal experience that might excite, encourage and remind them why they decided to enter your class in the first place - strengthens the will to continue learning.



The structure of your class should be into compartmentalized lessons that progress logically as you teach. Use notes and slides to highlight the key points of each lesson and forward them the materials so they can review them on their own, you can even have them summarize the lessons themselves. An organized structure will ensure you frame your lessons and keep them on track.

Make sure you attract their attention, handouts and slides that are too plain might become boring, instead try to incorporate colors, fonts and pictures to highlight important information and make it all more memorable. However do take caution, since too much use of bold colors and images detract from your lesson so focus on one focal point either highlighting key words/phrases and while you're at it add an amusing doodle or a subject relevant icon.



The last tip, although not to withdraw from its importance is to encourage questions and discussions. By allowing students to ask questions and discussing the topics amongst themselves or inside the class you can spot mistakes and correct misunderstood assumptions. Enabling time for queries gives you an insight of how your material gets across and presents an invaluable opportunity to make adjustments in real time if needed.



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30.3 Difficulties with teaching Adult learners

As previously mentioned, teaching adults comes with its own challenges and you might even see that some difficulties they have aren't as different from those of younger students. They might be a bit shy to participate or reluctant to follow regular course books so getting them involved isn't an easy task. Let's start by laying out common hesitations and acts of inclination, explaining what causes them and their possible solutions.

Shyness can disappear as easily as it appears, but your students have to feel comfortable enough in order to build up the confidence for it. Adults usually are already proficient in some aspect in their life but when it comes to uncharted territories – like when learning a foreign language, some don't feel as assured as they would have liked. The reason for this might be because they're not sure how to express what they want to the fullest extent or they're afraid of making “dumb” mistakes. The solution is to reassure them that through mistakes is how we learn! The “dumb” mistakes form a bolder, wittier connection in our brains that eventually helps to remember correctly.

Remember that willingness to speak and participate in vocal exercises will follow once everybody feels comfortable, able, safe and without judgment among teachers and the rest of the peers. Once a friendly connection is established, we'll get to see them blossom.

Now that the first hurdle has been taken care of, we can move to the next; reluctantness to follow regular course books may be due to misconceptions that these text books are only for young learners. Whether this is the reason or any other, the solution needs to be both stimulating and practical which is why using different teaching materials is the best approach.



For kinesthetic learners (learning by touch and movement) incorporate hand actions, body movement and mime into your teaching. Get them into role playing activities, have them learn outside and then talking/painting about what they did, what were the highlights, their experiences and more. Visual learners on the other hand, will benefit with the inclusion of storyboards, flashcards and video. The same goes for students with an auditory preference, only to utilize songs, poems and musical instruments.





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Now that we know how to get them started all we need is to just keep them engaged. Honestly, it's not a 'just so simple' kind of task because you'll soon find out that adult learners can be incredibly impatient if they feel one or more of their activities are time consuming for no apparent reason. In short, they really don't like their time being wasted. In order for them to be satisfied try to be punctual and well prepared, and the best advice is to keep tasks meaningful and feasible so instead of them being time consuming they will be effective. If they have children, ask them to read a bed time story and record themselves, if they're going out for dinner, ask them to order it in English, if they're on the ride back home ask to film it and while in class visualize their way back home with directions and landmarks. Anything that connects between English and their own experiences will benefit them in their daily lives and will be most appreciated.

The last but not least important is to always look for feedback from your students. It could be subtle as small as a face gesture but it's a key factor to ensure your students stay tuned to your classes. To make matters easier, you can hand out a survey, asking them to fill which activities/lessons they liked the most and why and which were not so much to their taste. At the beginning of the course you can hand out an expectations essay, to figure out what they expect to gain the most.



30.4 Activities

Activities

Speaking out loud in front of other people—especially in a second language—can be nerve-wracking for anyone. Which is why it's essential to get creative with ESL speaking activities for adults.

Please note

1. Adults, from any cultural background, still like to have “fun,” but their idea of what's fun may be different from yours.



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2. Adults are likely to be more sensitive to the need for dignity, and won't want to "lose face" in front of others.

Here are some possible speaking activities that you can provide your students:

- Stand up in front of the class and speak. (This is good practice for the speaking part of exams such as IELTS, TOEFL or TOEIC.)
- Stand up in front of the class with a partner and present something together.
- Be part of a group presenting a drama or role-play in front of the class.
- Take part in a whole-class discussion or debate. (Make sure everyone participates. Often the quieter students will sit back and not participate in this.)
- Be involved in pair work where every student must talk with a partner.
- Be involved in small group discussions where individual students are less likely to get left out.

Play Bingo!

Many people think of this game as a listening activity, but it can very quickly become a speaking activity.

There are a number of ESL websites that will allow you to quickly create a set of Bingo cards containing up to 25 words, phrases or even whole sentences. They'll allow you to make as many unique cards as you need to distribute a different card to each student in class. Each card can contain the same set of words arranged differently, or you can choose to have more or less than 25 items involved.

Rather than having students mark up their cards, you can give them markers (such as stones or sunflower seeds) to place on each square as they recognize it. This way the markers can be removed and the game can be repeated.

For the first round, the teacher should "call" the game. The first student to get five markers in a row in any direction shouts out "Bingo!" Then you should have this student read out every item in their winning row.



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