FOREIGN LANGUAGE INSTRUCTION FOR ADULTS: A PROGRESSIVE TEACHING METHOD

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Introduction

There are important differences between language instruction for children and adults.[1,2,3,4,5] While drill is usually a basic tool in foreign language teaching for children and youths, and frequently brings good results, the price is high. Many children fall out of love with studying languages, and on leaving the classroom they stop further learning. Passing time then destroys their hard-earned knowledge. This is important because the ability to learn does not decline so much with age as with the length of the period of the break in learning.[6,7]

One of the most important problems in learning languages, for adults, is that the teaching method and communicated content hardly ever mirror the variety of individual interests and everyday life problems.[8] The same situation is known from the history of psychological IQ tests in the first part of the century. Tests for children, i.e., the Simon-Binet test, or the Wechsler-Bellevue, were presented to adults; the adults failed to score well because the sub-tests did not mirror their life problems and situations.[9]

Adults have more individual differences than children, and a huge variety of likings and interests and special ways of reasoning and thinking.[10,11] All of this has to be respected in adult language teaching. The literature suggests that ability to learn is affected by: the adult's talent; his or her previous experience with learning; the educational level; the interval between the previous and present learning; the intelligence; and his or her present state of health.[12,13,14] Many adults have serious emotional barriers: feelings of anxiety in classroom situations; a fear of failing and losing social prestige; a dislike for competing. These facts strongly reduce the motivation of adults to learn. (Another, incidental, implication is that it is next to impossible to publish a textbook for adults that is universally appropriate.)

Reasons for Language Learning, and Implications

There are two principal sets of reasons for which an adult person usually decides to learn a foreign language. The first arises out of professional, or even existential, necessity, or from deep intrinsic absorption in a subject. In these cases, the learner's motivation is very strong. There are known to be extreme cases of this phenomenon in war time: people whose knowing or not knowing of a language was a question of survival or death were able to learn a foreign language in a very short period.[15]

The second set of reasons includes the wish to be understood in a foreign country, or an inclination toward a foreign culture and a wish to understand it better, or simply a wish to fill one's leisure time fruitfully. In all these cases, the motivation tends to be short-term. We are interested in the second group, that is, in people who have chosen language learning as a leisure pursuit, without a deep commitment generated either extrinsically or intrinsically.

Two Approaches to Language Instruction

We were interested in comparing the traditional language teaching methods with what we will call a progressive group instruction method. The traditional method is characterized by an emphasis on the use of paper - pen - textbook - blackboard, and tends to concentrate on a good knowledge of spelling and grammar. This is the approach that has been used for many years in English language instruction in the Prague Center of Culture.

Our alternative group instruction has the following features:

(i) The integration into the teaching/learning process of many ways of obtaining *feedback* between learners and between teachers and learners. Normally, and in many traditional teaching settings, an adult rarely gets feedback at the effective level. Cooper[16] suggests that to gain new information about one's behavior, attitudes, appearance, personal qualities, in a controlled but supportive teaching and learning atmosphere, is beneficial for adult learning. Our own previous experience[17] has indicated that the better people in a teaching group know each other, and the more positive information they have about themselves, the more intimate and supportive the atmosphere becomes in a class. A teaching group created by isolated adults is hardly ever suitable for successful learning. High levels of anxiety, and fear of losing

54

prestige, result in self-defensive mechanisms such as ironic joking directed at the instructor and teacher. In sociometric terms, one-way relationships are typically found among participants in such groups. In other words, it is important to get at the feelings of the learners, i.e. affective learning.

(ii) Adults are interested in more than just memorizing new vocabulary and grammar, so this approach involves a broader cultural involvement, alongside insight into interpersonal relationships. In other words, the *socio-cultural aspect* of the learning is important.

(iii) This approach takes language learning in a natural way from the *concrete to abstract* thinking. In this approach, this is illustrated by the introduction of "I" as the first foreign word, then "You", and then phrases such as "I like", "I have", "I love", "I am", and their negative constructions. It is also illustrated in the way that verbs are introduced in the context of, and connected to, personal interests and emotional preferences of the participants.

In other words, the emphasis in this approach is to evoke a deep intrinsic motivation among the learners.

Testing the Group Instruction Method

The authors, one as psychologist and the other an expert in pedagogy and English language teaching, wished to put these principles to the test over a reasonably long period. They were able to form three groups of learners, one to be taught by the traditional methods, and two others by the alternative group instruction method. There were 14 to 15 adults in each group, between the ages of 19 and 42, of both sexes, and from various professions and occupations including university students and graduate and manual workers.

The group instruction approach included the following features:

Place - classes were held in localities such as clubrooms, a park, on the street, in a museum, a garden, on the riverbank, in the port, on a railway siding. Participants were seated either in a circle or in some appropriately informal way.

Process - each lesson started with a warm-up game involving grammar constructions and vocabulary. Similar games were introduced during the course of the session, some of which

55

were adapted from games and role-playing exercises developed during the T-group movement. As has been noted above, the early part of the course introduced very simple verbs that are used frequently and that have a strong emotional value, such as "like" and "love" and their opposites. These were built up by linking with nouns and adjectives and with the different tenses as time went on. Participants were required to bring personal objects around which a new vocabulary was built and whole stories created by the participants themselves. In other words, grammar, idiom and vocabulary were built on practical exercises which came out of the interest of the students.

The lessons were evaluated by the students themselves. They provided a combination of symbols comprising hearts and thunderbolts, which expressed their reaction to the teaching and provided feedback to the teacher. Finally, each participant created his or her own textbook during the course, and these were periodically corrected by the teacher.

The sessions included more traditional processes such as formal explanations of grammar idiom and vocabulary, and at the end of each lesson a short dictation which was corrected at the following sessions by the teacher. The most frequent mistakes became the subject of instruction at the following sessions.

Some General Findings

The comparison of the two approaches appeared to confirm the efficacy of the group instruction approach and the principles of that approach which are set out above. Judgement was arrived at not on a quantitative basis, but in terms of the following indicators:

-   absence and late arrivals were recorded in all the groups, and were significantly fewer in the two "progressive" groups than in the "traditional" group.

-   with regard to the intentions of the participants to continue their learning, all but one participant in the two "progressive" groups gave positive responses, one stating that he was not yet sure what he would do. From the "traditional" group, one-third of the participants did not finish the course and of the remainder

another third had not decided, by the end of the sessions, that they would continue.

- in terms of the richness of vocabulary, far better results were observed in the "progressive" groups than in the "traditional" group.

- the ability to engage in prompt and varying patterns of conversation was found to be higher in the "progressive" groups.

- the ability to write correctly was found to be about the same level in all groups.

- the participants in the "traditional" group were better at using and explaining grammar.

- in the two "progressive" groups, there were practically no complaints about the difficulties of memorization, whereas in the "traditional" group, this was frequently cited as a problem.

It is recognized that the attitude and commitment of the teacher in each teaching/learning situation is an important factor. In these three groups the teacher was the same, i.e., the second author, who is an English language teacher.

Conclusion

This experiment was conducted over a period of a year. Its findings as indicated above appear to support the principles of adult teaching and learning that have been cited. They appear to indicate the value of further research into non-traditional methods of teaching English as a second language. The importance of this field is one which justifies such study. From a broader perspective, it has been pointed out by Ananjev[18] that success in learning is in itself beneficial, since it slows down the process of growing old and helps to keep an adult in good all-round condition.

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