5 Points to consider when teaching adults

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With the spread of English as a global language there seems to be a renewed interest in research into teaching adults. What skills do they need? How is their motivation different from that of other age groups? How can they become successful learners?

These are just a few questions which illustrate that the learner is increasingly in the focus when it comes to teaching adults, so the concern of WHO we teach (along with WHAT we teach) is equally valid here.

For us, teachers, it is important to make note of these implications on our daily classroom practice. As an ELT consultant, I have had a chance to talk to teachers of adults over the last few months in an attempt to see how OUP’s latest course, Navigate (which is based on research into how adults learn) measures up to teachers’ expectations. I would like to share a list of the points that the teachers I talked to agreed on, together with the key message for the teacher.

1) Adults have a specific purpose → don’t waste time

Some adults take language courses because of an external requirement, while others have their internal drive, or at least a specific goal to attain (such as a language exam), which very often translates into a practical benefit. Regardless of the reason, all of them will raise the question “Why am I here?”. And they might go on: “What else could I get done instead? Is it time well spent?”

All lessons must have a clear outcome, perhaps even a practical takeaway. We cannot get away with “do the exercises on the page and finish them at home”. It is good practice to spell the benefits out at the end of the lesson and relate it to their individual learning objectives.

2) Learning is more conscious, so they can reflect on their progress → involve them

Adults are more aware of what works for them, what they find difficult or where they need more support. It is crucial and, in turn, very helpful to build on this capacity.

Devote some time to reflect on individual learning strategies and self-evaluation. This will help them build or maintain a sense of responsibility for their learning and achieving their goals. After all, we are talking about adults. Aren’t they the ones in charge of their own progress?

3) Motivation is diverse → variation and flexibility

Motivating adults with all sorts of concerns on their mind? These might include fetching the kids, submitting a report, a shopping list, you name it. Add to that the underlying question of benefit and purpose, and you will realise why motivation is a complex issue.
Be prepared for a variety of negative attitude, leading to reluctance from the learner. The best way to fight it is to be flexible and ready with different approaches, varied content or alternative paths to lead to the same goal: providing a context for meaningful learning. Of course, in that respect they are not unlike younger learners.

4) **A need for immediate benefit → useful language**

Think of something you had to, or still have to, learn as an adult. Driving a car? Finding out how to send a contact card from your latest smartphone? Or, even you yourself might be a learner of another foreign language. You rarely have the time to look at all the wonders a new smartphone (or a language, for that matter) has to offer – you want to find a solution to a particular problem at hand, and right now. The underlying question is: “How can I get this thing to work?”

We have no time to deal with language just for the sake of it. Our learners usually need to accomplish a particular task, or at least see a tangible benefit for the future. Adults want to park that car, send that contact card, or use that piece of language for a practical reason.

5) **Abstract thinking enables seeing language as a system → grammar is fine**

Again, we can draw upon the different abilities of adult learners here. Their need for useful language does not contradict the capacity to treat language as an abstract system. On the contrary: abstract thinking is in fact generalising, so there is no harm in presenting underlying rules.

We have been warned against using grammar tables, linguistic terms and other abstractions in language teaching. These are obviously unproductive if used just for the sake of it, or when relied on to scaffold a lesson plan. But do not hesitate to make use of them if they can help the adult learner understand how a system works.

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