

CHARACTERISTICS OF ADULT LEARNING

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***Abstract:** Nowadays people's professional development cannot end the day they graduate from college or university - it should happen throughout their careers. More and more students and professionals are embracing a mindset of self-directed and lifelong learning as a response to the rapid pace of technological and strategic changes around us. Whereas children learning is based on the concept that they need guidance from their teacher as to what they learn and how they learn it, adult learning is built on different principles. It is assumed that adults already possess the skills that allow them to have control over the what, who, how, why, when and where of their learning. They want education that is more problem-centered than content-centered. Being internally motivated, they need to see that what they are studying in the classroom is relevant to their day-to-day activities. Children and adults have different skills, perspectives and attitudes to learning. They have different backgrounds and experiences that they bring to the classroom. All these differences, which are actually noticeable irrespective of the learners' age, influence their learning styles. Yet, most of the basic principles of learning are the same for both children and adults.*

***Keywords:** adults, skills, challenges, advantages, disadvantages*

1. Is adult learning different from children learning?

Human development is "a continuous process throughout the life-span of an individual, and it is possible to identify a series of broad stages of development, commencing with infancy and progressing through childhood, adolescence, adulthood and finally, old age"¹.

When speaking about adult learning, the first question that arises is whether it is different from children learning. Broadly speaking, adult learning, as a psychological function, is similar to children learning. Researchers point out that learning is learning and that it is the same at every age².

As MacKeracher points out, "the literature in the field of adult education describes a basic difference of opinion about the nature and characteristics of adults as learners in comparison with those of children"³. According to Knowles, the dynamics of adult learning are quite different in many respects from children's

¹ F. M. Quinn, *The principles and practice of nurse education*, Cheltenham, Stanley Thornes Ltd, 2000, p. 46.

² P. Cranton, *Planning instruction for adult learners*, Toronto, Wall&Emerson, 2000.

³ Dorothy Mackeracher, *Making sense of adult learning*, Toronto, University of Toronto Press, 2004, p. 26.

learning, and central to this is the mature, informally learned experience of adults and its inter-relationship with any learning that might be introduced in a formal setting⁴. In his theory of andragogy, Knowles advocates the idea that children learning and adult learning are based on different principles. Andragogy in Greek means man-leading whereas pedagogy means child-leading. Knowles made the following six assumptions about adult learners:

1. Adults need to know why they are learning something.
2. As a person grows older, he/she moves from being a dependent personality toward being a self-directed one.
3. People gain experience which they can use as a resource for learning.
4. People's decision to learn is generated by real-life problems and situations.
5. People's time perception changes from one of postponed application of knowledge to immediacy of application.
6. As people grow older, their motivation to learn is increased by internal stimuli.

Billington is in agreement with much of Knowles' theories on adult learning. She highlights the fact that adult learners need an environment where they feel safe and supported, an environment which should encourage intellectual freedom, experimentation, and creativity and where they should be viewed as equals having a multitude of life experiences and prior knowledge that may be valued, respected, appreciated, and listened to⁵.

Rogers claims that „there is nothing distinctive about the kind of learning undertaken by adults”⁶. This position is not entirely true. According to Illeris, as soon as the issue of adult learning is analysed in relation with concrete learning courses or events, there are „obviously substantial life-age differences, partly because some biological capacities of learning only mature gradually during childhood and youth, and partly because learning is also a social and emotional process, and people's social and emotional situations change with their age”⁷.

2. Why are adults interested in lifelong learning?

Investing in continuous learning, both personally and professionally, can boost people's self-confidence. By increasing their skill set, adults have a big advantage over less-qualified candidates when applying for a job. Lifelong learning helps people keep up with today's constantly changing world. It also increases their sense of self-fulfillment.

3. Why are adults interested in learning a foreign language?

In a globalized world, the ability to speak a foreign language gives graduates a competitive edge over the others as the demand for bilingual workers is rising all

⁴ M. Knowles, *Informal adult education, self-direction and andragogy*, New York, Association Press, 1950.

⁵ D. Billington, *Seven characteristics of adult education/adult learning*, available at <http://meetingsnet.com/adult-learning/seven-characteristics-adult-education>.

⁶ Alan Rogers, *Teaching adults*, Virginia, McGraw-Hill Education, 2003, p. 7.

⁷ Knud Illeris, *Characteristics of adult learning*, Oxford, England, Elsevier, 2010, p. 47.

over the world. Many companies are looking for individuals who can work well in a culturally diverse environment. The ability to speak the same language as your clients or partners helps build a strong rapport which often leads to successful partnerships. Being aware of the importance of language skills in today's world, more and more people are interested in enrolling in language courses in order to boost future career options. Besides, there are various cognitive benefits associated with the learning of another language, no matter how old you are. Studies have shown that bilinguals are more creative and better problem solvers. They also have better memories. Sometimes, studying a foreign language helps you understand your own language and culture better.

4. Are adults as good as children at language learning?

When it comes to studying a foreign language, people tend to believe that it is children who are the most adept at acquiring it. Generally speaking, the younger you are when starting to learn a language, the more chances you have to become a fluent speaker of it. Children are often thought of as linguistic sponges. In other words, they are able to absorb everything they hear. They have a better ear for certain sounds and pick up accents effortlessly. Research shows that they are more likely than adults to develop native-like pronunciation. Adults, on the other hand, have longer attention spans and essential skills that will allow them to develop their language skills. They have better memory capabilities and they are very good at explicit learning.

5. Benefits of learning a foreign language as an adult

Adult learners undertake an English course with a clear goal in mind. They want to study English either to develop themselves or to improve their communication skills that are highly valued in the workplace. Their time is limited, that is why they make great efforts to improve their English as quickly as possible. Engineering students, for instance, know that the ability to speak, write and read in English influences research, collaboration with their foreign partners as well as overall success in their careers. They know exactly what vocabulary they need or are going to need in their future professions. Anything that is out of the syllabus of English for Engineering is often seen as superfluous.

Having clear expectations, adults are independent learners whereas children rely on their teachers to decide what they should learn. Hence, the former are more motivated to acquire as much as they can in as short a period as possible. It is their own decision to study English whereas children study it because it is part of a school program.

Adults have a wealth of experience to draw on. They already know how to learn, which may be a disadvantage because they may show some reticence to new methods and strategies which could be beneficial to them. However, a well-experienced teacher will know how to take advantage of their adult learners' knowledge and experience and use them to the benefit of the whole class.

Adult learners are well-organised, disciplined and they can concentrate for longer than young children. They can carry out tasks by themselves without the

teacher's intervention. ESP teachers may deal with students who work as lawyers or businessmen - people who are used to being in control of any situation. Yet, such students tend to monopolize discussions and to intimidate their colleagues. In such cases, it is the teacher's job to make sure that everyone has a turn to practise their speaking or express their opinion.

6. Drawbacks of learning a foreign language as an adult

Children acquire language rather than learn it consciously. As a person ages, they find it more difficult to acquire a new skill. Researchers show that, as people grow old, their brain undergoes chemical, neuronal and structural changes that affect cognitive abilities. Older students may lack confidence in their academic abilities, especially if they have not been engaged in formal study for several years. They may feel marginalised within a group. At the same time, if they manage to bridge this so-called „generation gap”, they may offer support to their younger peers, who can benefit greatly from their experience.

7. Benefits of teaching adults

Teaching adults can turn out to be challenging, but also very rewarding. Adult learners are individuals who have a life outside of class and some of them already have a profession. Just as adult learning is thought to be different from children learning, teaching adults is seen to be distinct from teaching young learners in some respects.

As Cotterell shows, young learners are unlikely to be able to manage their own learning if they have no idea how learning works⁸. On the other side, adults are usually autonomous learners. They already know how to learn. They are generally easy to work with because they see the world in the same way as their teachers do. They know how to behave in the classroom, how to cope with stressful situations and how to accept challenges. Teachers don't have to make big efforts to persuade them that being able to speak English is a valuable asset for anyone not matter the age and the profession. They are highly motivated to learn it and it is the teacher's job to keep them interested in making progress by finding activities and materials that cater for their specific needs. They have different priorities and motivations and are better at focusing on the task at hand and on their objectives.

8. Drawbacks of teaching adult learners

Adults attending a language course are highly diversified as regards their age, experience, aptitudes, motivation, personality, employment, learning style and socio-economic status. When teaching adults, ESP teachers face unique challenges.

Teachers need to understand and accept the fact that school is not always adults' top priority. More often than not, they return to school with rooted habits that may affect their learning. Some adults have been out of an academic setting for years and this may be the reason why they feel uncomfortable with certain situations that

⁸ Jeremy Harmer, *The practice of English language teaching*, London, Longman, 2013, p. 398.

inevitably occur in a language class. They are not keen on speaking in public for fear of making mistakes and being laughed at. They avoid getting involved in pairwork or groupwork because they feel intimidated by their younger peers and the way they speak English with confidence and enjoyment.

Adults studying English for Specific Purposes may already be experienced in their specialist field. Some of them possess knowledge which their teachers do not have. This may seem intimidating, even threatening, to teachers unless they realise that their learners do not expect them to master such knowledge. As Dudley-Evans and St John show, “business people do not expect a Business English teacher to know how to run a business, they expect a knowledge of how language is used in business - which involves some understanding of business concepts and contexts”⁹. Correcting mistakes is a crucial issue for any teacher irrespective of their students’ age. As far as adults are concerned, they generally react positively to being corrected because they are aware of the importance of being shown their mistakes if they want to make progress. Yet, adult learners who have high level jobs and who are used to being in control of any situation in the workplace may feel embarrassed if they are corrected in front of their peers, which may have a negative impact on their willingness to participate in classroom activities. An ESP teacher dealing with learners in their twenties, thirties or even forties is often faced with the challenge of correcting inappropriate behaviours. The older the student, the less unpleasant it is for teachers to correct lack of discipline coming from people who want to be treated by their teachers as their equals.

9. Main differences between adult learning and children learning

Different age groups are believed to treat language learning quite differently. Young learners learn differently and produce different learning outcomes than adult learners. Teachers are well aware of „the individual differences between students prior to commencing an educational programme, but they also need to be sensitive to the fact that they will have differences at the end of the course”¹⁰.

Children are thought to learn everything within their grasp and to be limited only by their biological development and the nature of their surroundings¹¹. In very young children, language acquisition happens spontaneously through passive listening. As time passes, this unconscious (implicit) learning system works in parallel with a conscious (explicit) one. The latter develops strongly from adolescence. If we compare the way children learn grammatical rules to the way adults do, we can say that the former learn them unconsciously through passive exposure. Adults, in their turn, are better at learning and understanding language rules. The drawback with their style of learning is that they often cannot apply these rules in practical situations and, what is worse, they soon forget them.

⁹ T. Dudley-Evans; M. J. St John, *Developments in ESP, A multi-disciplinary approach*, Cambridge, Cambridge University Press, 2007, p. 188.

¹⁰ F. M. Quinn, *The principles and practice of nurse education*, cited edition, p. 55.

¹¹ Knud Illeris, *Characteristics of adult learning*, cited edition.

As far as students' L1 is concerned, we can say that adults tend to use Romanian in their learning process much more often than children. When encountering a new word, what they usually ask for is its Romanian equivalent, not an explanation of its meaning or an English synonym. Children are better than adults at implementing new language into their active vocabulary.

A close analysis of an ESP class made up of students of various ages shows that younger students and their older peers perform in different ways. A significant number of adults who enroll in an English course have been out of the academic setting for a while, hence they need to make greater efforts to re-adapt than their younger peers who have transitioned directly from college to university. The latter's longer exposure to English which happened inside and outside the classroom helps them use English spontaneously and effortlessly. On the other hand, most of the older students already have a job in technology and science, which means they are familiarised with the technical issues dealt with in their specialist content courses. This gives them an edge over those students who have little technical knowledge.

In conclusion, learning a second language as an adult is different from learning it as a child and the results may not be identical for all aspects of language, but adults can be as successful as children at second language acquisition.

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