The Adult Foreign Language Learner
Some Proposals for Andragogical Language Teaching

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Abstract

This paper provides an overview of what it means to explore, from an andragogical approach, the process of foreign language learning and teaching. The relationship between adults and learning experiences is complex and multifaceted. The conceptual categories of multiplicity and diversity of motivations, needs, expectations, and strategies to which the teaching principles of multiplicity and flexibility of methods and techniques can be applied are relevant. Teaching adults requires assuming new roles and adopting novel teaching methods. On a methodological level, language activities must be linked to the needs, interests, and experiences of the adult, provide appropriate language models, vary in the methods, tools, and materials used, and guarantee greater awareness and autonomy.

Keywords

andragogy; self-directed learning; autonomy; foreign language teaching

1. Who are Adults?

For a long time, human development has been considered as the evolution of biological and psychological structures according to pre-established patterns and criteria of continuity and irreversibility. In this conception, adulthood is considered a well-defined period of life—the moment in which the completeness and stability of an individual representing a primary goal of the development process is achieved—a stage at which, ultimately, one no longer grows or changes (Alberici 2002).

As stated by Rogers and Horrocks ([1986] 2010: 44) a wide range of concepts is invoked when we use the term 'adult'. The word can refer: to a *stage* in the life cycle; to *status*, a form of societal acceptance that the person concerned has completed their novitiate and should be incorporated more fully into the community; to a social *sub-set* (adults as distinct from children).

Research models on adulthood can be grouped into two main categories. The *functional* model can be traced back to Erikson's evolutionary theory, which covers the entire life span based on a succession of developmental stages and psychosocial tasks (e.g. working, parenting) differentiated by age period. According to Erikson, each period of life has a unique challenge or crisis; a necessary turning point when development must progress one way or another, requiring individuals to marshal resources of growth, recovery, and further differentiation to address and resolve it in a positive way (1968: 16). The *structural* model, much like Levinson's research, examines the factors that modify overall personal identity through a conscious reformulation of life goals in direct correlation with daily experiences. The 'life structure' develops through an alternative series of structure-building and structure-changing (transitional) periods in which the individual reorganises goals in an emotional, cognitive, or practical sense or, vice versa, denies what they have experienced and elects to remain fixed on the original personal affirmation strategies (Levinson 1986: 6).

Biological, psychological, psychosocial, anthropological, and sociological research on models of human development developed since the second half of the 19th century have highlighted the impossibility of defining an adult identity by undermining the concept of arrest at a certain life stage. Scholars have focused on the entire course of life (Baltes *et al.* 1980) considering the adult

within a bio-psycho-social conception that sees them committed to growing and developing between moments of continuity and discontinuity throughout the course of life.

These orientations release the adult from a condition of accomplishment and permanence, maintaining them through their life span in a state of formation and growth.

2. Perspectives on Adult Learning

Adult education is a transition and frontier discipline situated in the space of encounter, comparison, and integration between multiple disciplinary areas and political-social purposes that can be defined based on two assumptions:

- the value of the concept of individual development as a plastic and dynamic process lasting a lifetime and that creates the possibility, need, and desire to learn at all ages and is sustainable; and

- recognition that the value of education is not purely and exclusively functional but also involves the desire to achieve aspirations of human development, growth, and freedom (Alberici 2002).

The overcoming of the staged concept of development has opened spaces for reflection on the importance that learning assumes in the various areas of private, social, and professional life, calling into question both the need and intentionality of an educational process that takes place life-long and life-wide.

There is no single, all-encompassing learning theory that fully explains the complex, context-bound, and highly personal adult learning process. However, among the literature of the past century, we will examine Knowles' adult learning theory, self-directed learning, and transformational learning to determine their didactic implications.

2.1 *Knowles' Adult Learning Theory*

The term *andragogy* was coined in Germany in 1833 by Alexander Kapp. Knowles (1968) was responsible for the revitalisation of the term and the subsequent development of a unitary theory of adult learning.

Adult learners have long been *a neglected species*. Knowles offered a paradigm for distinguishing andragogy (adult education) from pedagogy (child education) stating:

The andragogical model, as I see it, is not an ideology; it is a system of alternative sets of assumptions. This leads us to the critical difference between the two models. The pedagogical model is an ideological model which excludes andragogical assumptions. The andragogical model is a system of assumptions which includes pedagogical assumptions. ([1973] 1984: 62)

Knowles' andragogical model is based on six distinctive assumptions.

Need to Know is related to the expected benefits. The adult, before deciding to pursue a training course requiring investment of considerable effort, evaluates both the usefulness, advantages, and expected use of the new skills that they will acquire and the negative consequences of a lack of learning (Tough 1971). In a foreign language course intended for adults, it will thus be necessary to raise awareness of needs, via real or simulated experiences, so that learners discover the gap between the starting situation and final result.

Self-concept is the responsibility that adults assume during training. Although adults may be independent and self-directed in other areas, they may initially exhibit a 'teach me' attitude due to previous school experiences. Therefore, teachers must introduce learning experiences that transform the adult learner from being teacher-dependent to self-directed.

Role of Experience. Adults enter the learning path with greater and quantitatively different experience than that of young people. Notably, experience, typically regarded as a resource, can also constitute an obstacle in that it leads to taking on unidirectional, rigid, and stereotyped visions of reality that limit openness to new ways of seeing and thinking. Adult groups are characterised by a higher degree of heterogeneity in terms of knowledge, learning styles, interests, motivations, needs, and goals. This heterogeneity implies maximum personalization and individualisation of teaching but allows for making comparisons, appreciating cultural diversity, and showing that the richest resources for learning are based on the learners themselves. For adults, experience represents who they are, which is connected to their sense of identity, which, in turn, implies that what is newly learned must somehow graft onto and integrate with previous experiences: every situation in which the experience is ignored or devalued is experienced by the adults as a refusal, not only of their experiences but also of their identity. The most commonly used techniques are therefore experiential ones based on group discussions, simulations, problem-solving activities, case studies, workshops, and peer collaboration activities.

Readiness to Learn deals particularly with what you need to know or how to deal with real-life situations, tasks, and problems. The adults are willing to learn what they need to know or what they feel the need to improve, which implies the necessity of explaining reasons for learning specific skills and focusing on tasks that adults can perform rather than memorisation of content.

Orientation to Learning is centred on real-life tasks and problems rather than disciplines. To obtain maximum effectiveness in acquiring new knowledge, comprehension skills, and abilities, the presentation of knowledge must be contextualised in the subjects' real-life situations. This aspect is crucial in terms of teachers' selection of exposure methods, definitions of objectives and content, and planning of didactic intervention in general.

Internal Motivation. In adults, integrative motivation, which is connected to personal realisations, the growth of self-esteem, and the desire to improve one's quality of life, is stronger than instrumental motivation (e.g. securing a better job or a promotion). Adults also have fixed objectives that are often dictated by a sense of urgency or need to immediately implement new skills or understandings. However, achievement of these goals can be inhibited by a lack of confidence in one's skills, inaccessibility of opportunities, lack of resources or time, and programs that do not consider the peculiarities of the andragogical approach.

The andragogical model is a procedural model. In the traditional content model, the teacher decides in advance what knowledge and skills should be transmitted, divides the content into logical units, selects the most suitable means of transference (lessons, readings, exercises, etc.), and develops a plan to sequentially present units. The andragogical teacher prepares in advance a series of procedures to involve learners. This process typically includes the following elements: preparing the learner, creating a favourable learning climate, creating a shared design mechanism, diagnosing learning needs, formulating objectives that meet needs, designing a model for learning experiences, realising learning experiences using suitable techniques and materials, evaluating learning outcomes, and identifying new learning needs.

The difference between the traditional content model and the andragogical model does not lie in the fact that it deals with content and the other does not. Rather, while the content model aims to *transmit* information and skills, the procedural model aims to provide resources and procedures to *help learners acquire* information and skills (Knowles *et al.* 1998).

2.2 *Self-Directed Learning*

Self-directed learning (SDL) first emerged in the field of adult education in the 1970s, for which Knowles provided foundational definitions and assumptions that guided subsequent research.

SDL, which has been studied, theorised on, and practised for over 50 years, has been described as both a personal attribute of the learner and a process (Brockett, Hiemstra 1991, 2012; Candy 1991; Houle 1961; Knowles 1975; Tough 1967, 1971).

As Merriam and Bierema point out, self-directedness is synonymous with autonomy (2014:147). Therefore, even if this statement could be parsed further, it holds true, at least for the purposes of this paper, and the two terms will be used interchangeably moving forward.

Autonomy in education refers to 'the ability to take charge of one's learning,' which implies having responsibility for all decisions concerning learning such as determining the objectives, content, and progression; selecting the methods and techniques to be used; monitoring the procedure of acquiring proper speech (rhythm, time, place); and evaluating the level of acquisition (Holec 1981: 3).

Approximately 70% of adult learning is self-directed (Cross 1981), and 90% of all adults attempt at least one self-directed learning project per year (Tough 1971).

Autonomous and self-directed adult language learners exhibit many of the characteristics previously noted in studies of 'good language learners' (Griffiths 2008). Good language learners often develop effective strategies that help them make significant progress in learning the target language; however, for every successful, motivated, and independent student, there are many others who, despite their best efforts, struggle to make progress or experience a lack of motivation and confidence. In these circumstances, the teacher's role is critical in providing support and guidance with clear objectives, appropriate resources, and effective strategies to help students become self-directed, independent, motivated, and successful learners (Thornton 2010).

2.3 *Transformative Learning*

Transformative learning (TL) is often described as learning that changes the way individuals think about themselves and their world, involving a change of consciousness.

Mezirow, one of the leading proponents of the theoretical orientation of TL, interested in understanding and explaining under what conditions adults can continuously rethink the course of their lives, sees TL as

> learning that transforms problematic frames of reference—sets of fixed assumptions and expectations (habits of mind, meaning perspectives, mindsets)—to make them more inclusive, discriminating, open, reflective, and emotionally able to change. (2003: 58-59)

TL is, therefore, a profound, constructive, and meaningful process that goes beyond the simple acquisition of knowledge and translates into a change in worldview and a transition from uncritical acceptance of information to reflective and conscious learning experiences that lead to emancipation. For Mezirow, the means by which the transformation takes place is reflection, intended as 'the process of critically assessing the content, process, or premise(s) of our efforts to interpret and give meaning to an experience' (1991: 104). *Content reflection* is an examination of the content or description of a problem; *process reflection* involves evaluating the problem-solving strategies that are being used. *Premise reflection* takes place when underlying assumptions or the problem itself are questioned and lead the learner to a transformation of meaning perspectives (1998).

Mezirow thus defines a concept of adulthood that is non-static but in a state of constant evolution and rebuilding, a fundamental principle underlying lifelong learning: the ability of individuals to rethink and formulate their ideas, beliefs, and constructs.

This brief description of TL indicates its potential value as an educational and didactic approach; Mezirow (2003) argues that effective adult education helps students move towards positions of greater autonomy and that this process must include the development of skills and attitudes necessary for critical reflection.

Approaches that can help students reach these goals include learner-centred, group-oriented, interactive, and participatory approaches. In particular, the literature emphasises the need for

educators to draw on students' previous experiences and engage them in role-playing games, simulations, case studies, critical incidents, group projects, autobiographical writing, and the use of films and stories (see Cranton 2002). In using these techniques, educators challenge students to identify and question not only their own assumptions but also those of others.

3. Adults as Foreign Language Learners

Knowledge of foreign languages is a qualifying element of both professional requalification and existential research. In this scenario, language teaching is called on to respond to the need to create—from kindergarten to well beyond retirement—citizens capable of learning multiple languages utilising linguistic, cultural, and intercultural knowledge and who possess sufficient linguistic-communicative strategies to give meaning to new texts and situations (Balboni 2015).

Smith and Strong (2009: 2) stated that

as language learners, adults have multifaceted identities in their dynamic and changing lives. They can communicate confidently and effectively in their first language (L1) and code switches between several other languages. They may be immigrants, international students, professionals, workers, or refugees. They may have their own interpretations of their culture and belief systems, as well as the ability to reflect and build on their cross-cultural experiences. Some are highly literate in their L1, while others are illiterate. Some may struggle, as many of us do, to move from beginners to capable users of the additional language. Most also want to develop their own identities as users of the language and realise that measuring their progress against a native speaker model is unrealistic.

Teaching adult students is increasingly characterised by a series of components present in the theoretical perspectives we have traced that consider the learner and the learning context. These include the ability to manage oneself (autonomy), the depth and extent of previous experiences and their influence on the drive to learn, the importance of reflection to be aware of the processes of building knowledge and the changes occurring with learning, the link between theory and practice, and the capacity for action.

3.1. *Teaching Adult Foreign Language Students*

The aforementioned components lead us to outline some fixed points that characterise the teaching of foreign languages to adult students.

Self-direction, responsibility, and autonomy. Adult students approach foreign language for a variety of reasons including cultural growth, specific professional needs, and the desire to transfer abroad. Their attitude reflects one of autonomous, motivated, and responsible persons as they have already gained a substantial set of experiences and made life choices that allow them clarity in expectations, needs, and professional goals.

The construction of curriculum should be understood as a partnership responsibility model in an ongoing process of negotiation between teachers and students over the selection of content, methodologies, and evaluation (Nunan 1989). For Tudor (2016), co-designing curriculum involves developing awareness in various areas.

- *Self-awareness* as a language learner concerns adults' motivation to learn the language, the amount of effort they are willing to invest, and their attitudes toward both the target language and the learning process itself.
- *Awareness of learning goals* is related to understanding and the analysis of why they are studying the language, the communication goals they wish to achieve, and the gaps that need to be filled.

– *Language awareness* involves understanding what it means to know a language in its dimensions of linguistic competence (the ability to understand and produce well-formed sentences from a phonological, morphological, syntactic, lexical, and textual point of view); extralinguistic competence (the ability to understand and produce non-verbal language such as kinesics, haptics, proxemics, and chronemics); contextual skills related to the language in use, and therefore sociolinguistic competence (formal and informal registers, geographic or professional varieties); pragmalinguistic competence (the rules of linguistic action that regulate communication acts and moves); and (inter) cultural competence (Balboni 2015).

Orienting students to the development of awareness in these areas does not mean entirely transferring responsibility to students; the teacher remains responsible for actual learning and decides how much and in which areas responsibility is transferred to students (Tudor 2016).

The teacher maintains the role of a *knower*, a source of knowledge of both the target language and the most suitable methodologies. Additionally, the teacher serves as an *activity organiser*, setting and directing learning activities, motivating and encouraging, and providing feedback on student performance. Moreover, the teacher assumes the role of *counsellor*, helping students identify intentions (what they need and would like to do) and resources (what they are able to do), encouraging participation, and maintaining motivation to learn (Tudor 2016).

Previous Language Learning Experience. Experience is central to any discourse on adult learning practices involving the presence of variables that concern an adult's learning methods, the emotional and affective circumstances through which they learn, and the pressures experienced from a plurality of agencies (e.g. school, family). The history of the adult in relation to the learning of foreign languages must also be considered. Students who have previously studied one or more languages are often convinced that they know how to learn a language. However, the didactic methodologies adopted in the past are often obsolete or conflict with more recent methodologies. The teacher will then have to explicitly explain to adult learners the methodological principles to which they should refer (Balboni 2015).

The importance of awareness of the processes of building knowledge and the changes that occur with learning. Learning a foreign language is a process that involves 'thinking about something in a conscious and focused way' (Little and Perclová 2001: 45). This includes all learning stages: before engaging in a learning activity or communicative task (planning), while performing the activity or task (monitoring), and after completion (evaluation).

The language learning path requires reflection that has three objectives:
– reflection on the language, and therefore on the learning content, through the development of metalinguistic skills;
– reflection on the learning process through the enhancement of metacognitive skills, to ensure that the learner is aware of their learning method and the strategies most suited to them; and
– reflection as a means of 'deconditioning' (Holec 1981: 22) from negative behaviours or attitudes related to language learning and hostility to the enhancement of autonomy.

Adults have metalinguistic needs higher than those of children and adolescents, greater abstracting and systematic ability, need stable rules to refer to and correlate with the structures already acquired, and require explicit reflection greater than that offered by many of the teaching materials. The teacher will have to meet these needs using the adult's own cognitive tools, including explicit grammatical systemisation and integrating the didactic materials available (Balboni, 2015; Serragiotto, 2014).

TL outcomes identified in foreign language learning contexts include a deeper and more complex understanding of culture (for both learners' target language and their own), shifts in how learners view and position themselves to the target language and its culture, and changes in how learners see themselves as learners (King 2000; Crane *et al.* 2018; Johnson and Nelson 2010; Johnson 2015).

The teacher can investigate changes in values/beliefs/expectations during language learning through retrospective interviews, action research, scales, surveys, content analysis of various documentation (e.g. emails, journals), and the use of video-recorded interviews.

The necessary link between theory and practice and the capacity for action in facilitating learning. The approach to language teaching, from the European perspective, is 'action oriented' and conceives those who learn or use a language as 'social agents'; 'members of society' who have tasks (not exclusively language-related) to accomplish in a given set of circumstances, specific environment, and within a particular field of action by 'taking into account the cognitive, emotional and volitional resources and the full range of abilities specific to and applied by the individual as a social agent' (Council of Europe 2001: 9). In teaching a foreign language to adults, approaches that involve systematisation of meaningful learning, are oriented toward reality, and involve the subject in its entirety and in the plurality of its roles and social tasks have been found to be effective.

3.2 *The Learning Contract*

The inadequacy of pre-packaged course facilities, the differentiation of objectives, their elaboration based on the concrete needs of the adult, and the training project to be built interactively and in context necessitate a negotiated and concerted planning of the language learning path.

Balboni (2015) repeatedly stresses the need to define, agree on, and illustrate to adult students the objectives and methodologies of the language teaching intervention, referring them to the responsibility and shared nature of the project. This contract between two adults who assume complementary functions (that would be non-existent without each other) as a teacher and an autonomous and motivated pupil is articulated by Daloiso (2009) as follows:

- *a psychological contract*, through which the teacher aims to probe and clarify previous experiences (considered effective or ineffective for language learning) and identify students' motivations and expectations through a variety of tools (e.g. questionnaires, conversations) with the purpose of establishing, in a transparent manner, goals and language teaching objectives shared by the group/class; and
- *a didactic contract* aimed at making, together with students, some teaching choices to achieve the set objectives.

As stated by Knowles, the 'learning contract' solves the problems of (Knowles *et al.* 1998: 140):

- heterogeneity of background, training, experiences, interests, needs, and motivations that characterise groups of adults, allowing the individual to plan their specific learning objectives;
- making students feel that the objectives they will pursue belong to them;
- identifying a variety of resources so that students who must learn the same things can resort to different resources in relation to their specificity and characteristics;
- providing each student with a structure that allows them to visualise and systematise learning; and
- providing the learner with a systematic procedure that involves and allows them to evaluate the results of a specific training intervention.

3.3 *Adult Teaching Methodologies*

Communicative language teaching (CLT) is the most widely adopted approach to adult language teaching, based on the principle of teaching language as communication: the goal of learning is not to learn the language but to learn how to communicate (Widdowson 1972; Littlewood 1981). Foreign language teaching practice has shown that the use of methodologies such as communicative, playful, and cooperative learning activities can be effective for adults (Begotti 2019; Serragiotto 2010). Such humanistic-inspired approaches, which centre on subjective, emotional, and relational components,

tend to eliminate anxiety-inducing factors and reduce what Krashen (1981) defines as the 'affective filter'.

Many activities require individual work, acknowledging adults' personal or unique characteristics, which must be complementary to the social ones in which each individual uses the language in a meaningful way and collaborates with others to solve linguistic problems, from understanding or producing a text to elaboration of linguistic hypotheses or working on the lexicon. The distinction between collaborative activities, in which each student has a task and their integration leads to reaching the objective, and cooperatives, in which the objective must be achieved by working together, should be noted. In this way, the different types of intelligence, cognitive and learning styles, motivations, and personalities are integrated and each individual learns from the others, not only to solve that specific linguistic problem (understand a text, change its tense, analyse a passage syntactically, summarise it, etc.) but also learn that there are various strategies for solving a particular issue and that one's own approach is only one of several possibilities (Celentin 2020).

Equally important is the playful dimension of activities (Mollica 2010). Playfulness changes the aim of the action to play and, if possible, to win. However, games should be autotelic: they do not affect marks, inspire fear, or emphasize the contrast between teacher and students. Additionally, the learner does not have a judge (linguistics) but is an arbiter: language is used, forgetting that the ultimate goal is to perfect or acquire it (this is Krashen's 'rule of forgetting').

Under the broader umbrella of CLT, the task-based language teaching (TBLT) approach is quite popular in adult language teaching. The underlying principle of TBLT is that the primary objective of language teaching is not to make students demonstrate their knowledge of the language or to master grammar rules but to give them the opportunity to engage in meaning-oriented language use in the form of tasks:

An activity in which meaning is primary; there is some communication problem to solve; there is some sort of relationship to comparable real-world activities, task completion has some priority, and the assessment of the task is in terms of outcome. (Skehan 1998: 95)

A practical guide for conducting tasks in the classroom is offered by Willis' task-based learning framework, which consists of three phases (Willis 1996a, 1996b):

–   *Pre-task*, where the topic, task, and necessary vocabulary are introduced. Structures are not taught during this stage. Students are asked to think about how they would accomplish the task. Students may also hear a similar task being performed by native speakers, or the teacher may perform the task.

–   *The task cycle* includes three sub-stages: *task*, *planning*, and *reporting*. In the *task phase*, the students perform the task; in the *planning phase,* they prepare a presentation for the report stage, and in the r*eporting phase,* students report their findings to the class. The final part of the task cycle may involve students listening to native speakers performing the same task and comparing the strategies used in the classroom to the strategies used by native speakers.

–   *Language focus* involves students performing an *analysis* of language, *practising* the language used in class, and conducting follow-ups, such as changing partners and performing the task a second time in light of the analysis and practice.

Willis describes six main types of tasks, roughly sequenced by difficulty: listing, ordering and sorting, comparing, problem solving, sharing personal experiences, and creative tasks.

Another suitable approach to teaching languages to adults is the dialogic approach, which combines humanistic and pragmatic-communicative issues to build and promote relationships. In the 1970s, Freire developed a theory of dialogic action that pointed out the dialogic nature of humans and the importance of dialogue as a tool for raising critical consciousness. Further dialogic conceptualisations of learning have arisen rapidly, building upon Vygotsky's sociocultural

psychology emphasising that people form meaning via interactions with others and the view of language as the most powerful tool mediating learning (Vygotsky 1962). On a methodological level, these approaches make extensive use of recapitulations, elicitation, repetition, reformulation, exhortation, narrative (descriptions, relationships, letters), and self-narrative (diaries, portfolios, stories of emblematic personal events) techniques (Mercer, 2000).

7. Conclusion

The change that can be experienced in education is an encounter between two cultural experiences: that of the teacher, who offers their own culture, plans, and prepares the path, and that of those who feel that their culture is insufficient, inadequate, and out of phase with the hands of the internal or social clock (Demetrio 1997).

The relationship between adults and language learning experiences is extremely complex and multifaceted. In this context, the conceptual categories of multiplicity and diversity of motivations, needs, expectations, strategies to which the didactic principle of multiplicity and flexibility of methods and techniques are applied, are relevant.

Teaching adults requires taking on new roles and adopting novel language teaching methods. For Rogers (1969), the teacher becomes a *facilitator* through practices that take into account the characteristics of adults; for Mezirow, the teacher is *a facilitator and provocateur* (1997) or *catalyst* of transformative change and learning (1991); for Tudor (2016) a *counsellor* for Tudor; and for Knowles, a *process designer and manager* (Knowles *et al.* 1998) who plans and coordinates the learning process, builds relationships, identifies needs, and actively encourages student involvement.

At the methodological level, classroom activities must be linked to the needs, interests, and experiences of each adult, provide appropriate language models based on these needs, vary the methods, tools, and materials used, and present the right balance between what is known and what is new, to ensure ever greater awareness and autonomy.

If the need is for lifelong learning, the revolution that educational language teaching must implement consists of transforming students, depending on the teacher and the teaching materials, into autonomous students who, at each stage of their life, know how to improve their mastery of a foreign language, how to set up autonomous learning, and how to ask their teacher for help. Teachers will, in turn, indicate the most suitable materials and most productive paths for them and follow the students if and when necessary.

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