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Main Teaching Strategies Most Successfully Promoting Foreign Language Learning in Adult Groups

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ABSTRACT

With a dramatic extension of international cooperation, there has been a change in requirements applied to academic teaching staff of modern higher educational institutions, including non-language specialities. The study presents the definition, conceptual issues, principles, objectives, and models of education that reveal theory and practice relevant to the issues of adult learning peculiarities based on the principles of andragogy. The present study proves that specific educational goals of adult learners fully correspond to the basic principles of andragogy. The paper introduces some teaching strategies and methods, types of classroom interactions and course assignments, which found their practical application at Nosov Magnitogorsk State Technical University (NMSTU, Russia) where the one-year part-time course was introduced in order to motivate teaching staff for writing academic articles and to encourage specific skills development and opportunity to master English. We analysed some features and promising practices in adult learning and revealed the fact that participation of adult learners in our one-year part-time English language course was associated with a substantial increase in the skills needed to improve knowledge of the foreign language and in the level of linguistic competence. Moreover, we identified the combination of some main teaching strategies that most successfully promote learning in adult groups.

Keywords: Andragogic model; Adult Language Teaching; Motivation; Teaching Strategies and Methods

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INTRODUCTION

Recently, there has been a change in requirements applied to academic teaching staff of modern higher educational institutions including non-language specialities. In addition to a high professional level, a lecturer has to acquire a high level of linguistic competence for further professional progress. Moreover, a publication activity in systems indexed in the Web of Science or Scopus databases is nowadays among the basic criteria of the university effectiveness. Therefore, there remains a growing demand in delivering lectures in a foreign language at national and international universities, sharing experience with foreign colleagues, and participating in international conferences. All these factors motivate lecturers for mastering a foreign language. However, a busy schedule and steady employment prevent them from learning a foreign language intensively; this reduces their linguistic competence and their role in the international scientific life of the university.

Thus, new requirements applied to academic teaching staff of higher educational institutions make the teachers of foreign languages search for new techniques and teaching tools, additional teaching and visual aids, the use of which in the teaching process will result in a significant increase in the professional progress of the academic teaching staff.

Literature Review

We addressed the experience of professionals involved in research studies relating to adult language teaching, and discovered that much research in recent years has focused on adult language teaching, which is considered to be one of the challenging areas of methodology. In the course of literary survey, it was revealed that the technology of adult education is an integral part of andragogy that is aimed at solving this problem.

Organizational, philosophical, sociological, and psychological aspects of adult education were analysed in the latter half of the 20th century (in 1950-60s). The studies of a number of scholars [such as 8, 26, 27, 29, 32, 40] dealt with the issues of methodological and didactic principles of adult learning. The majority of these scientists gave a high priority to the problem of adult learning, defined it as pedagogy of adults, and dealt with the specific issues relating to adult learning:

- Creating the courses, instructional and educational materials for adult education [2, 4, 28; 33].
- Individualised learning [3, 23, 41].
- Specific teachers' activities in adult education [20, 31, 36].
- Specific adult students' activities [5, 6, 7, 17, 38].
- Didactic and methodological principles of adult education [11, 12, 25, 35, 39, 40].
- Conditions of adult education [18].
- Motivation for adult learning [21, 43].
- Train-the-trainer for adult learning [9, 14, 15, 37].

Andragogical Model of Teaching Foreign Languages to Adults.

It was M.S. Knowles who laid the foundation for andragogy as a study; considered his first "full-blown presentation" of the andragogical model; and tried to distinguish the differences between pedagogy and andragogy [22].

As for the andragogical model of learning, where the learner him/herself plays a leading role, he or she is an active participant of the learning process that provides opportunities for equal participation of each person. The use of this model in adult education process promotes learning activities that are well-organised and properly sequenced in order to create a comfort environment for an effective learning, to keep the students motivated and, consequently, to apply specific techniques.

The author of her own andragogical model of teaching foreign languages to adults N.I. Rakova considers the studying process "...not so much expertise, knowledge and skill transfer process as the arrangement and impulsion process of learning – cognitive activity adult learners with a view to mastering scientific knowledge and skills, cognitive interest cultivation, creative abilities" [34]. The researcher has suggested that internal motivation to the challenge and adult learners' activity are required conditions of the studying process.

The andragogical model of teaching involves collaborative activities of teachers and adult learners at all stages (planning, implementation and estimation) taking into account life and studying experience of adult learners and their focus on application of the studied material. Teaching strategies for adult learners differ from those for young learners. Thus, N. A. Rakova [34] describes the following stages of adult teaching strategies:

1. Psychological and androgogical diagnosis - identification of learners' individual peculiarities.
2. Planning – understanding of the educational process, its objectives, activities, and expected results by adult learners.
3. Creating conditions for realisation of the educational process.
4. Realisation of the educational process.
5. Assessment of the educational process and its results.
6. Correction of the educational process.

Language Andragogy as a Section of Methodology Dealing with Teaching Foreign Languages to Adult Learners

The model described above provides the basis for language andragogy, which is a section of methodology of teaching foreign languages to adult learners. The language andragogy reveals age peculiarities of communicative competence building and development of adult learners as well as effective methods of teaching control. Milrud R.P., a prominent Russian methodologist and linguist, who has introduced the term *language andragogy*, emphasizes the need for differentiation of teaching methods and strategies depending on age peculiarities [30]. Disregarding age peculiarities of adults, teaching influences the educational process and adult learners negatively, and can result in the early study dropout in some cases [30].

According to the *language andragogy*, there exists a number of requirements for the adult teaching course:

1. The educational course requires an appropriate level of language complexity of curriculum.
2. The choice of the syllabus should meet demands and expectations of adult learners.
3. The educational process should be practice-oriented enabling adult learners to develop their own professional activity and put the knowledge they acquire into practice.

We are convinced that professional teachers should get ready to teach adult learners from one professional field to another without spending years. An experienced teacher chooses the required principles, methods, and strategies when course designing, and applies them to new subject content successfully.

The technology of adult education implies formulation of the basic principles, elaboration of the learning model via realising the principles that govern learners' activity, and, consequently, sets definite goals, and implements teaching strategies and techniques, which are characteristic to the age category of learners in practice.

Basic Principles Suitable for Our Study

The theoretical source survey [16, 47] resulted in the specification of the basic principles of andragogy, among which are the following: recognition of the increased self-management, adult willingness for education, application of the acquired data, focusing on problem solving, educational process planning and setting educational goals in cooperation with adult learners, creating a special psychological climate for education, mutual distribution of new educational needs.

Being a fully formed personality, an adult learner sets himself/herself specific educational goals, aims at independence, self-fulfilment, and self-management, and plays a leading role in the process of education. All these correspond to the basic principles of andragogy.

We consider that andragogical principles should be applied to activities of learners and teachers requiring special educational techniques. Therefore, we formed the basic principles suitable for our study:

- the priority of self-education;
- a teamwork principle;
- a principle based on student's experience;

- an individualised learning process;
- a consistency of education;
- actualisation of learning outcomes;
- educational selectivity;
- special educational needs;
- educational awareness.

We agree with M.T. Gromkova who treats the methods of andragogy as the ways of collaborative person-oriented activities [16]. The teachers' point of view what method they should use to encourage *students* to develop their abilities will be the reason for the choice; this will influence the class efficiency. It is natural to assume that the modules consisting of lectures, workshops, seminars, tutorials, or a mixture of these, play a determinant role in the choice of a particular strategy. The researcher agrees that the relative stability of the modules gave rise to the methods known as traditional ones.

METHODS OF RESEARCH

Problem Statement

In the light of researcher's observations and the review of relevant literature, the researchers see that teaching foreign languages to academic teaching staff of higher educational institutions has not been given a particular attention. It should be noted that "adult learning strategies have not been clearly formed to date. The choice of the method is person-oriented and depends on the goals, timing, social status, and age of the group of learners" [46, p. 159].

This study endeavours to assess the validity of the andragogical model at the one-year part-time course offered by NMSTU, to study the effect of andragogical practices on learning process and student satisfaction outcomes.

Our aim was to find optimal methods and teaching strategies, types of classroom interactions, and types of course assignments for adult language teaching in order to motivate adults and to encourage specific skills development and opportunity to master foreign language and apply them at Nosov Magnitogorsk State Technical University (NMSTU) attending the one-year part-time course.

Research Questions

This study unfolds under the following research questions:

1. What are the main advantages of the andragogical model in adult language teaching?
2. What are the optimal and effective methods and techniques for adult language teaching?
3. What are the teaching techniques to improve the level of the academic teaching staff?
4. How adult learning principles can be applied to motivate adults for studying foreign languages?

Purpose of the Study

The purpose of this study is to explore the modern teaching strategies applied in adult language teaching and select an optimal strategy, which later will serve as a base for improved foreign language skills and to analyse organizational, philosophical, sociological, and psychological aspects of adult education, to study the definition, conceptual issues, principles, objectives, and models of education, which are relevant to the issues of adult language teaching.

Methodological Approaches

To achieve the goals of the study we used the following research methods:

- Literary survey (theoretical and practical reviews).
- System analysis: study and summary of Russian and international practices of andragogy.
- Method of observation.

- Theoretical analysis.

The study of the modern teaching strategies is based on the following methodological approaches:

- A system approach, which allows one to research the adult learning process as a whole entity in the system of subjective and objective activities of membership.
- A learner-centered approach, which provides the study of adult learning process as a main human activity.
- A historical approach, which allows one to analyse the emergence and development of social events in particular social and economic, cultural and historical conditions.
- A pragmatic approach, which forms knowledge and skills to understand and make foreign statements according to the certain communicative situation, task, and intention.
- A competency-based approach, which allows teachers to match the learning process with required professional competencies, to increase the motivation, and to keep the learners' task oriented and active.

To select appropriate methodology is an essential integral component of teaching a foreign language to adults. Widdowson suggested that appropriate teaching methodology should be placed "at the very heart of the operation with course design at servicing its requirements" and to address their specific needs [43, p. 130].

The Experiment on Implementing Teaching Methods Enabling to Equip Teaching Staff with Academic Science Writing Skills and Improved Knowledge of General English

The one-year part-time course «Teaching Academic Staff Methods of Writing Scientific Papers» was introduced in NMSTU. We taught 60 adult learners mainly from the engineering department staff. The classes were made up of learners between 25 and 60 years of age, who were tested for language proficiency and could be described as a mixture from low to high levels.

Unfortunately, we could not divide learners according to the results of the initial assessment test based on their level of language proficiency; we had to divide learners into five groups in accordance with their relation to a specific professional area in order to make this course more efficient and more collaborative. They underwent the experiment on implementing teaching methods enabling to equip them with academic science writing skills and knowledge of general English during a year. Class sizes were 12 learners each.

For nearly all period of learning, they were involved in various classroom activities in their working groups. The learners were aimed at a final presentation of their draft paper, which had to be created by each group. The titles they presented were related to their professional activity and to the area they have been carrying out their research in. Moreover, the learners were involved in teamwork, which we consider the essence both within and outside the classroom setting. We are strongly confirmed that it should significantly contribute towards a better understanding of why and how research studies are carried out and research papers are written. We tried to use teamwork during the periods of study to encourage the whole-class collaboration on specific skills development (e.g. strategies on scientific paper writing); the whole-class support in editing their draft papers. We are strongly convinced that learners studying English for academic writing purposes have to be busy working on problem-based learning (PBL), which includes research and development activities that result in writing scientific papers. PBL involves learners in design, problem-solving, decision making, or investigative activities; gives students the opportunity to work relatively autonomously over extended periods of time; and culminate in realistic products or presentations [20].

We think for effective adult language teaching (most of whom are PhDs), it is necessary to create environment conditions similar to their working activity. Therefore, the aforementioned groups were created on teaching lecturers how to write scientific papers according to the IMRaD (Introduction, Methodology, Results and Discussion) model. The teaching process was based on the authentic books content: *Science Research Writing for Non-Native Speakers of English* by Hilary Clasman-Deal, *English for Writing Research Papers* and *English for Academic Research: Writing Exercises* by Adrian Wallwork, *Writing and Presenting in English*. The *Rosetta Stone of Science* by Petey Young.



Stages of the Educational Process

As the introduction to the educational process, the teachers thoroughly explained and showed in practice the difference between general and academic English. Considered a tougher standard to meet, academic English relates to the language necessary for success in scientific paper writing. Therefore, the learners came to know common errors they make in academic English, e.g. the use of phrasal verbs, slang, idioms, contractions, vague language, exclamatory marks, improper general English. They remembered that academic English is more formal, more objective and has to use a lot of referencing like citing the source.

At the first stage of the educational process, the lecturers were encouraged to thoroughly study their target articles written by native speakers and absorb the lexis needed for their future papers. Each learner has studied at least 50-60 scientific articles written in his/her field of studies, thus developing and broadening their own learning styles. The learning strategies encouraged their critical thinking and discovery of personal learning styles, both of which are essential to becoming a self-aware and independent learner.

At this preparatory stage the teacher checked the material comprehension by encouraging interpretation (questions involving thinking about the meaning), encouraging discussion on meaning (learners explained the meaning of technical terms, agreed or disagreed with their peers), motivating the learners to ask for clarification (providing synonyms or opposites to the terms rather than giving verbal translation into their native language). Throughout this stage, tutors monitored their learners' development progress carefully. To track the progress, tutors turned to computer-based programs that automatically graphed the progress of the individual learner's initial level of performance on a specific skill and the end-of-work goal.

Since enriching the learners' vocabulary bank is the first and foremost important step in language acquisition, at the second stage of the educational process our aim was to motivate them for making their individual special-purpose vocabulary bank which consisted largely of notions, words, word combinations, abbreviations, terms and grammar structures planned to be used in future scientific papers.

Therefore, the learners were encouraged to prepare their individual vocabulary notebooks, based on the target articles content, where they copied vocabulary relating to their field of scientific studies. When new words were generated in the classroom from discussion or from activities, adult learners immediately recorded them in their notebooks, which later assisted them in their studies and provided a systematic approach to recording and reviewing new words. A vocabulary book can be of great benefit if written by hand rather than printed. Memory retention improves with the physical act of writing the information. Learners generally find it easier to add a quick addendum as well, when receiving correction or feedback from the tutor or peers. It should be noted that the peers' feedback was in some cases more relevant than the tutor's one as the adult learners were highly-skilled professionals with more than 15-year experience in their field of studies. They were recommended to include a word form, a definition or explanation of their own, an original sentence as an example and possible collocations. In future, the vocabulary notebook could be used as a handy reference tool outside the classroom activities. The tutors also engaged the learners in activities to deepen their knowledge of the new words (by comparing words, classifying terms, writing their own analogies).

Our experience showed that learners needed multiple and various exposures to the word content before they fully understood and could apply it. After the necessary lexis had been accumulated, it was memorised and trained in the close-to-real situations. We simulated the contexts with these words by various role-plays.

Role-play is very crucial in teaching speaking as it gives adult learners the opportunity to practise communication in different social context and social roles. It also enables students to be creative, explore their inner resources, empathise with others, and use their own experience, which reinforce their motivation.

We applied various role-plays during the classes among them are "The rolling shop" (where the foreman of the rolling shop is training workers to use the new equipment), "At the conference" (where participants of metallurgical conference exchange their views on new tendencies in metallurgy) and other plays. The favourite one was, for example, the role-play "PhD defence", which was actual among learners who are thesis advisors themselves. The participants were distributed certain roles (a doctoral candidate, a secretary, opponents, a chairman of the thesis board, members of the thesis board, invited guests). This role play simulated a real PhD

defence in English. The participants of the role play were stimulated to get into argument with the doctoral candidate who was asked an unlimited number of questions. This play built the learners' communicative capacity and equipped them with the key vocabulary tailored to their specific research needs.

It is worth noting that over 90-minute period learners moved through various activities, from working in pairs or groups to the individual work on computers. Often during the classes, learners gave presentations on an engineering-related topic, corrected the mistakes made in the draft copies of their research papers, consulted their English teacher and peers who gave tips on the use of language.

Moreover, we are strongly convinced that a grammar review was compulsory at every stage of learning. It was important for tutors to attract the learners' attention to the texts, projected onto the screen with the help of multimedia that enabled them to check the key vocabulary and grammar. From our point of view, the key vocabulary relating to the professional activity of each learner should be rehearsed before the text is projected onto the screen and learners are involved in mutual collaboration to comprehend the content and structure, and then be capable of writing their own draft papers. Only a combination of the aforementioned methods, a sense of equality, engagement atmosphere, adequate tasks, polylogic communication can bring fruitful educational results, develop the adult communicative potential, help them to overcome shyness, reduce stress and anxiety, form a positive image of themselves [24].

At the third stage of education, four sections of the IMRaD model were carefully studied from the aforementioned authentic books. This was the longest in duration and the most labourious part of our work lasting for approximately five months. During this period of time the learners were taught the detailed models of each section writing, later they tried to produce their own models using the Keys substituting the original version with vocabulary relating to their professional field. Moreover, the learners were taught the use of signalling language, i.e. ways of connecting one sentence or idea to the next and developing the ideas logically. At the final stage, the learners were to produce the final version of their draft papers, which they exchanged with their peers. Each one made a peer-review of the paper, analysed it and drew written conclusions about the correspondence of the paper to the models studied. At the end of the courses, the papers have been corrected by tutors followed by the detailed analysis of common errors.

Thorough examination of the IMRaD model and common lexis used at every stage of paper writing, study of the key vocabulary tailored to the lecturers' research field, revision of grammar structures served a significant stimulus for writing papers of the international level, kept their awareness of the responsibility for the quality of these papers, saved time and costs for translation services, created the university image at the international arena and promoted mutual cooperation with foreign scientists.

Conducting the Research

It is important to emphasise the practicability of implementation of pragmatic approach in teaching English to adults. The matter is what efforts a teacher and learners apply towards those language activities that are necessary for perceiving world achievements in the professional area. In order to follow the latest scientific research relating to any professional area and to be well-informed the adult learner has to read fluently, be able to produce professionally-oriented texts, and translate the academic papers. It is evident that pragmatic approach calls for the self-realisation in foreign language listening, text production, academic writing, and translation in the professional area. The pragmatic approach involves the selection of scientific and educational texts and topics for studying as a part of professional subject. The four skills in language learning – reading, writing, listening, and speaking do not occur in isolation from communicative texts or activities [13].

In order to build a good pragmatic competence for the adult language learner the following should be taken into consideration:

1. The objectives and the goals of a language course for adult learners should be designed to meet the needs of adult language learners and to help them develop and improve their communicative competence.
2. The teacher should create the course material to engage the learners in the pragmatic and functional application of language for communicative purposes. As Erton declares: "the functional study of language means studying how language is used. For instance, trying to find out what the specific purposes that

language serves for us, and how the members of a language community achieve and react to these purposes through speaking, reading, writing and listening.” [10, p. 7].

3. The pragmatic competence of the adult learners must be well developed and, finally, they should be ready for practical application of language.
4. There exists a number of exercises useful for the development of pragmatic competence. Additionally, they have to provide the learners’ awareness of the importance of such competence in the process of developing all kinds of language activity.

In other words, the development of skills is connected with the implementation of the competency-based approach since any competence is defined as an ability to carry out one or another activity.

The goals of pragmatic and competency-based approaches in teaching English to adults coincide as they are focused on revealing of mastering various aspects of language as abilities. The competency-based approach was widely adopted by the end of 1970s, particular as the basis for the design of work related and survival oriented language-teaching programs for adults.

Auerbach identifies the eight key features for the competency-based approach [1]:

1. A focus on successful functioning in society: the goal is to enable learners to become capable of coping with the demands of the world.
2. A focus on life skills: learners are taught those language skills required by the situations in which they will function.
3. Task- or performance-centered orientation: the emphasis is on behaviour rather than knowledge.
4. Modularised Instruction: language learning is broken down into manageable and immediately meaningful parts. Objectives are broken into narrowly focused sub-objectives so that both teachers and learners can get a clear sense of progress.
5. Specified Outcomes: learners know exactly what outcomes are expected of them. Outcomes are specified in terms of behavioural objectives.
6. Continuous and ongoing assessment: program evaluation is based on test results and is considered objectively quantifiable.
7. Demonstrated mastery of performance objectives: rather than the traditional paper-and-pencil test, assessment is based on the ability to demonstrate pre-specified behaviours.
8. Individualised, learner-centered instruction.

RESULTS AND DISCUSSION

Promising Practices of Adult Education

Considering the practical experience in foreign language teaching, we identified some promising practices of adult education:

- “Interactive learning within which the approach and strategy of interaction and organisation of collaborative activities are produced, significantly increases motivation and provides a high level of the topic acquirement” [44, p. 57].
- “Group work, including work in small groups, is considered the most typical form of adult learning and allows the learners to distribute roles in accordance with the individual capabilities thus helping develop polylogic communication of learners” [45, p. 34].
- Game activities providing language-learning activities intended for stimulating adult learners’ strategic and cognitive processes proposed as practical “vehicles” for learning English. As long as the main teacher’s task is to give many opportunities for students to fully comprehend the material and actively participate in class, the game activities may be proposed to adult learners, so that they can practice in a meaningful communicative activity – most related to work – and do not experience extreme stress or anxiety.
- A problem-based method, which includes activity-based methods, is aimed at solving problems related to the professional activity of adult learners.
- Communicative capacity building aimed at perceiving, processing, storing and transfer of information [19].

Main Results

Thus, a one-year part-time course held at NMSTU resulted in:

- the improved skills in English Scientific and Technical Style and the Grammar Construction used in professionally-oriented texts in English;
- the enhanced skills in Professional Written Communication;
- the ability to produce clear detailed texts for variety of purposes related to the professional area;
- the increased publication activity in systems indexed in the Web of Science or Scopus databases.

It should be noted that language learning is a relatively small part of adult learners' lives.

Limitations

Despite the fact that adult learners are mostly goal-oriented, their knowledge is often limited by the area of professional activity. We acknowledge the following limitations to our research:

- in spite of the fact that adult learners are teachers themselves, they often failed to distribute work equitably on their own;
- some learners had intense fear of making mistakes that led to the negative results in the process of communication;
- their attitude sometimes was not serious enough; they did superficial work and rarely revised their draft papers.

CONCLUSION

We attempted to analyse the andragogical model in order to provide learners with fundamental knowledge by means of adult learning techniques, and this study proves that the specific educational goals of the adult learners fully correspond to the basic principles of andragogy.

Nevertheless, as we discovered, it is impossible to find in practice a learning situation in which the andragogic model of adult learning and its principles could be entirely applied.

We identified the combination of four main methods of work in adult groups and revealed the fact that participation of adult learners in our one-year part-time courses was associated with a substantial increase in the skills needed to improve knowledge of the foreign language.

At the present stage of science education development, adult education undoubtedly is quite different from the education of children and adolescents, and different approaches to the effective organisation of the learning process are required for its implementation.

To conclude our observations, we would like to emphasise the growing interest to this one-year part-time course and opportunity to master English. The search for effective strategies for adult learning will provide background for our future research.

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