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**Anna ARAKELYAN**

*Russian-Armenian (Slavonic) University*

## THE ART OF ADULT TEACHING AND LEARNING

*The mediocre teacher tells. The good teacher explains. The superior teacher demonstrates. The great teacher inspires.*

*William A. Ward*

Every day one in three adults takes part in a learning process. They meet in academic settings, workshops, professional seminars, and evening classes and they do their best to learn from their instructors and peers. But very often, teachers rely on a narrow choice of techniques, silently wishing for better ways to stimulate participation and encourage learning.

Recently more and more research is carried out on adult education. Definitely there are new methods and approaches for teaching adults to make teaching and learning more smooth and worthwhile. We know that there is no single theory of teaching and learning that can be applied to all adults. Age is the characteristic often mentioned when describing an adult learner. Most educators assume that it is easy to distinguish an adult learner from a younger one just by looking at the age difference. But the difference goes beyond age and years. Youths and adults are different, however, and how and why they learn can vary, too. Safe environment should be given to adults where they will be able to share their past experiences with peers, as well as learn from one another. Adults almost always have a very pointed reason why they are learning, and that reason makes their primary motivation.

Accordingly, to reach our students' needs, wants, desires, learning styles, conducting needs analysis should be a priority in planning and designing any curriculum, syllabus and/or lesson. Conducting a needs analysis is an important first step in the development of a curriculum that is being developed from scratch for a completely new program. Brown

defines needs analysis as “the systematic collection and analysis of all subjective and objective information necessary to define and validate defensible curriculum purposes that satisfy the language learning requirements of students within the context of particular institutions that influence the learning and teaching situation” /Brown, 1995/. Needs analysis (also known as needs assessment) has a vital role in the process of designing and carrying out any language course, whether it be English for Specific Purposes (ESP) or general English course, and its centrality has been acknowledged by several scholars and authors /Munby, 1978; Richterich & Chancerel, 1987; Hutchinson & Waters, 1987; Berwick, 1989; Brindley, 1989; Tarone & Yule, 1989; Johns, 1991/. In fact, the process involves looking at the expectations and requirements of other interested parties such as teachers, administrators, financial supporters and others who may be impacted by the program. However, very often teachers fail to be flexible and adjustable to their students’ specific needs and tend to blindly follow the curriculum enforced by the Ministry of Education, the University and/or certain education institution, which most of the times do not necessarily comply with the needs or desires of students. And this is where a clash of interests occurs.

With every academic year we as teachers make sure everything is ready for the upcoming year to begin with fresh ideas and more enthusiasm: we hustle around to get the relevant text books ordered, rush to the specialized bookstore to get more books to stuff into our never-full-enough supplementary file and try to finalize the syllabus. Surprisingly enough, one thing that guides us in the preparation for the academic year is our own goals and objectives we set for whichever class we are going to teach. What we lack to consider is our students’ own goals and objectives. Very often students do not even have any idea what exactly to expect from their studies or what they should be working toward that is reasonable, do-able and applicable. However, when I get my students think about their objectives and envision them in a more tangible and concrete way, they seem to be at a loss. This is especially true when my first or second year university students are concerned. They seem to study just for the sake of passing the class and get the required credits as they are more than sure teachers and university faculty have carried out a

needs analysis and have designed and planned everything for them to munch it up. Yet, the reality is not always so colorful and smooth.

Therefore, what I find important is to get my students reflect on their own goals for them to know what they are working toward, to be able to keep track of their own progress, and revise their study strategies, and, most importantly, take some responsibility for their own learning. And as a result of it, I generally observe the tendency among students to be more serious, more motivated and, overall, more effective learners.

However, many teachers holding a degree in Applied Linguistics and/or experienced in TESOL, TEFL or CELTA are not always well prepared to dealing with students whose learning styles do not always go smoothly with their teaching styles. As a result, in classes where serious mismatches between students' learning styles and instructors' teaching styles occur, students tend to be bored and inattentive, perform poor results in tests, become highly demotivated in the subject matter, thinking they are not good enough to continue studying, and they eventually give up. Instructors, confronted by their students' poor performances and low test results, may become overly critical of their students and/or begin to question their own accountability and proficiency as a teacher.

To reduce teacher-student style conflicts, some researchers advocate that teaching and learning styles should be matched, especially in foreign language instruction. There are many indications that bridging the gap between teaching and learning styles play an important role in enabling students to maximize their classroom experience.

One response is for teachers to adapt their own teaching styles and strategies and to provide a variety of activities to meet the needs of students with different learning styles. By doing so, they will help ensure that all students will have at least some activities that appeal to them based on their learning styles and will be more likely to succeed in these activities.

My teaching goal has always been to investigate what teachers and I as an adult educators should know and implement in classrooms while teaching adults and/or older learners and to illustrate what different approaches and learning styles should a teacher and/or a learner consider and incorporate into the learning process to make the environment more safe, learner-friendly, inspiring and motivating.

To understand the needs and challenges of adult learners as well as to examine how well those needs and challenges are addressed and met in the Armenian reality, I have conducted a survey entitled “You as an Adult Learner”. The survey was conducted among a few dozens of people belonging to different age groups (ranging from 19 to 65), nationalities, races and education backgrounds who have had either learning and/or teaching experiences as far as second language acquisition is concerned. All the respondents were to choose from a list of possible answers or come up with their own answers when completing the survey.

To be more explicit, I would like to address 5 out of 13 questions in the survey and analyze them separately to be able to create a thorough understanding of the attitude and the approaches towards adult education in Armenia.

In response to the question *‘What learning style do you belong to?’* 46% of the respondents believe to be visual learners, 38% of the respondents claim to belong to reflective learning style, 10% of the respondents think they are auditory learners, and only 6% consider themselves kinesthetic learners. Now questions arise as to how many teachers usually consider this information when teaching different style learners and whether or not they are able to identify those learners and know how to deal with them. How many teachers understand the importance of incorporating variety of activities to meet all their students’ needs and requirements in a learning environment? In response to the question whether or not their needs were met in their classrooms, the majority of the Armenian audience who had taken language courses at some point in their lives or, at the time of the survey, were enrolled in a language course, could hardly recall anything like that or left the question unanswered presumably not considering it important or not giving positive answer to it. Nonetheless, the picture was completely different with my American or Persian respondents learning Armenian with Armenian teachers. They assured that most of the times their needs were met by constant constructive feedback going back and forth between their instructors, the latter being open and flexible to help learners pursue and meet their immediate needs and objectives.

Next question of the survey is aimed at identifying and helping teachers have a better understanding what is more essential for adult learners while taking any language course in terms of content, approaches and the teacher role. 50% of the respondents believe that content is extremely important, i.e. they want to know what they learn to better understand the process of learning. 38% of the participants are more interested in the methods and ways they are taught. In other words, what techniques and approaches teachers should use that will work better for them to make their learning more productive and less challenging. Interestingly enough, 12% of our respondents find teacher factor more important claiming that a teacher should be knowledgeable, demanding and a good coach. Thus, 88% of the respondents believe content and methods of teaching are more central than the teacher factor. Then it is pretty paradoxical why we still practice the out-dated teacher-centered approach, whereas for the modern world a student plays a focal role in the learning process, particularly when our society is ready for it, based on the survey results?

The other question that I find significant to be analyzed in our survey is *“Based on your experience, what is essential in adult education?”* where 58% of the respondents reply that a teacher’s role should be more directed at facilitating, leading and giving instructions in the learning process by motivating and gearing their students to self-directed learning. 26% of the respondents think that self-directed learning is productive along with teacher facilitation of what, how and why to learn. 16% of the participants look at the teacher as a figure of authority who is always there to tell them what to do. This comes to prove the idea that most adults view their teachers as facilitators who guide them through the process of independent thinking, individual decision making and critical intelligence as far as autonomous learning is concerned. Therefore, more and more adults spend considerable time acquiring information and learning new skills and much of this learning takes place at the learner’s initiative.

Question 4, *“What should a teacher do to promote and/or foster adult-education?”* comes up with the following results. 46% of the respondents state that adults are not empty vessels; consequently the teacher should consider their background and interests. 40% of the

respondents consider that the teacher should provide students with the long-term goal of the course. 14% of the respondents think that the teacher should not do anything special and if the adult has started learning a language, he/she should carry the responsibility and fulfill the goal of the course. Here we, university instructors, again fail to cognize the fact that teaching adults is not like teaching children, stuffing their heads with knowledge. What is more, children have little real world experience to base their learning on, as opposed to adults, who have a great deal of accumulated life and professional experience that can enrich their education. Instead of deciding for what and how much should be covered throughout the academic year, teachers should enroll their students in developing goals and objectives, set long-term goals to allow students to work toward them over time. This will help students to benefit more by being a part of decision-making process, being more self-motivated, thinking logically and insight fully hence holding accountable for their own learning.

Regarding the number of students in classrooms, 46% of the respondents answer that they are enrolled in a class of 2-10 students, 20% of the respondents give preference to one-on-one teaching with the same individual over a specific period of time, since the session time and frequency is set together with the student, 34% of the respondents study in a class of 11-20 students which some find very unproductive.

Most teachers would agree that teaching a small class comes with many benefits. Teachers can offer one-on-one assistance at times and are more likely to meet the individual needs of their students. Besides, teachers and students often feel more comfortable when the class size is smaller and can voice their questions and opinions. In addition, teaching is student- centered and is often more communicative than with larger classes. Finally, teachers have more time to provide detailed feedback when assessing, so students get better sense of how they are improving and where they need to work harder. Also, teachers have more time to answer questions before, during and after class. On the one hand, students like to be in a smaller class where they can interact more on a personal level with their teacher, on the other hand they prefer to face the challenges of a larger class because individuals learn better if they think about what they are learning and are actively involved with the

information. Besides, they need to be engaged in deep learning if they are to develop and become autonomous, critical thinkers and learners. Moreover, if there is no student participation and/or interaction during a lesson then there is limited opportunity for ongoing and timely feedback for further improvement and advancement.

To highlight, class size is one factor to consider when evaluating the effectiveness of the school. Nonetheless, we should not focus merely on whether or not class size plays significant role in teaching or learning, but what other aspects should be considered alongside with it. Class size alone does not ensure good education. The quality of the teaching, the leadership and/or administration, student's involvement and/or motivation and many other factors are of crucial importance, as well.

This survey once again comes to highlight the fact that every teacher needs to be aware of the challenges while teaching adults and try to adjust to their different learning styles regardless their age, gender, social and cultural background and others. Hence, teachers should always incorporate various strategies in their teaching activities thus reinforcing the idea that it is not always possible to learn through a single teaching technique.

Adults and older learners in particular bring a lot to the classroom, but teachers need to be flexible and patient with their students learning patterns and styles. Adult learners often prefer to be presented with analytical formal grammar and need to be given a lot of controlled practice before moving into more fluency-based communication activities. Seniors may need more time to adapt to spontaneous oral practice, consequently they may request a lot more explicit explanation and detailed grammar presentations. In these situations teachers are advised to bend a bit more than usual to accommodate what works best for them by giving them time to take notes and/or ask questions.

Another thing that all adult learners appreciate is when teachers guide them into the world of more laid-back learning, to create a relaxed and informal learning environment to facilitate and help them find their rhythm.

In conclusion, one thing we should always bear in mind is that adult learners are self-directed and they like to have control over their own learning, they are internally and externally motivated. Adults draw upon

past experiences to help in their learning process. In addition, adults are oriented learners; they want to apply new knowledge immediately in problem solving. In line with all the above mentioned, I have one very important recommendation to share with my fellow colleagues. “Keep eyes, ears and minds open when teaching adults and to get into the habit of giving and receiving constant feedback in any form applicable, be it a survey, Q&As and/or research paper and always reflect upon their teaching styles.”

Alongside with all the challenges that teachers and learners face while enrolled in any learning process, teaching adults is a pleasurable and highly rewarding experience. Their self-directness, life experience, and motivation are great assets to any classroom. They will be successful if we get to know them and sustain an environment where all learners in class get what they need, delivered to them in the way they need it.

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**Ա. ԱՌԱՔԵԼՅԱՆ – Հափահասների դասավանդման և ուսուցանման արվեստը.** – Սույն հոդվածը դիտարկում է չափահասների ուսման և դասավանդման առանձնահատկությունները, ինչպես նաև դասավանդման ոճերին, մեթոդիկային և նորանոր մոտեցումներին վերաբերող հարցեր: Հոդվածում նշվում է, թե որքանով է կարևորվում դասավանդման մեթոդիկան, ձևն ու բովանդակությունը, հատկապես, երբ առնչվում ես չափահաս մարդկանց հետ՝ իրենց բոլոր հնարավոր և անհնարին թվացող կարիքներով և ցանկություններով հանդերձ:

**Ա. АРАКЕЛЯН – Искусство преподавания и обучения взрослых.** – В статье рассматриваются отличительные особенности преподавания и обучения взрослых, а также обсуждаются различные стили, методы обучения и инновационные подходы. Обобщаются результаты исследования, проведенного на основе опроса взрослых и нацеленного на определение их нужд и запросов.