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The Socio-psychological Difficulties of Learning the English Language in the Context of Lifelong Education

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Abstract

The paper deals with some of the common problems that adult educators face when teaching adult language learners, in particular learners who have considerable educational and life experience but still seem to be stuck at the lower levels of elementary and pre-intermediate due to their low self-esteem, high level of anxiety, and fear of making mistakes. Adult learners face difficulties when listening to the target language. The types and extent of difficulties have been conducted, and listening comprehension research has been conducted on the problems faced by adult language learners. The results of this body of research show that a number of factors may negatively influence English language acquisition; the latter have undergone a detailed review in the paper.

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1. Introduction

The progressive development of Russian society has fostered an increasing interest in the study of the English language by adult learners in the context of continuing education (the so-called “lifelong learning”). The desire to learn English can be explained by many reasons, such as the growing demand for professional competence of adults, particularly where one of the main conditions for the competitiveness of an adult specialist has become a high level of English proficiency.

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Analysis of methodical and psychological literature (including the authors' personal experiences) has shown that the main obstacles encountered by adults in the process of English language acquisition are social and psychological obstacles combined with difficulties directly related to the acquisition of certain aspects of the English language, such as listening. Evidence shows that listening, as opposed to speaking, reading and writing, is a multidimensional and complex aspect of the English language. Listening involves a number of components that constitute direct listening process: mechanisms of short-term and long-term memory, probabilistic forecasting and understanding, inner pronunciation and speech segmentation and identification of concepts (Kovalenko, 2003).

Due to its multi-component structure, as well as an abundance of complex mechanisms, listening training is one of the most burning issues in the modern methods of teaching adults the English language. Underdeveloped listening skills not only lead to an inability to perceive the English language by ear but often lead to difficulties in communicating in English, due to the fact that without listening skills speech communication process cannot be fully realized.

In connection with the above, the objectives of our study are as follow:

- 1) to study social and psychological difficulties that adult learners may encounter in acquiring the English language, and to propose options for overcoming social and psychological obstacles;
- 2) to analyze listening process in order to identify difficulties which are typical of adult learners in their study of the English language.

2. Discussion and Research Hypothesis

The general idea that it is more difficult for an adult to acquire new knowledge has turned out to be erroneous. Psychologists have found that a high learning potential is maintained at all stages of life. Permanent mental work included in the individual educational activity maintains a high level of psycho-physiological functions, and education is one of the key conditions for the mental health of an adult.

Adult learners have a high degree of motivation; therefore, involvement in educational process is a conscious choice for them. Adults who are engaged in acquisition of the English language are sufficiently diligent and disciplined, since the decision to continue their education, as a rule, is made consciously. Adults are motivated to achieve a particular goal; they are focused on training and getting new skills.

Adult education, as a rule, is aimed at solving specific problems and achieving a particular goal in social or professional life. In this regard, adult learners have a practical attitude with respect to training; they have a strong desire to obtain such skills that could be directly and immediately implemented in their professional and social activities.

Moreover, adults have both life and professional experience, including knowledge gained in the previous stages of education. Adults tend to be actively involved in their training, using their own experience and knowledge, so they can make a significant contribution to their education, either with the help of an adult educator or independently. Adult learners are predisposed and prepared for independent activity. They are also more independent in their thinking, and they prefer independent forms of learning activities (Zmeev, 2007).

Despite the high potential of teaching English to adults, their high motivation, a clear goal to obtain certain skills, experience and readiness for independent activity, adults face a number of barriers of social and psychological type. Some of these barriers include:

A) a fear of mistakes. Many adults are prone to perfectionism, often believing that silence is golden, and that it is better to do nothing than to make mistakes that sometimes hinder the process of learning English.

B) the unpleasant experience of learning English in schools and universities. Sometimes adult learners blame their teachers, often rightly arguing that in secondary schools the English language is taught just "to check the box".

C) a wide range of responsibilities and lack of time. Adults tend to work, to have families, and to face certain public duties, which, by all means, both affect the learning process and make it difficult for adult educators to assign homework and to demand its fulfilment.

D) a lack of confidence in their own abilities, usually manifested in an increased level of anxiety. Anxiety occurs for various reasons: the financial cost of education, the lack of support in the family or by the employer, a sense of either hopelessness or the feeling that their training is irrelevant, a lack of confidence in their abilities, and a fear of demonstrating incompetence in a new learning environment (Nizkodubov & Evseeva, 2015).

An adult educator must help adult learners to overcome these social and psychological barriers. Anxiety and fear—particularly the fear of making mistakes—can be eliminated with the help of the following actions: an adult

educator must fully inform adult learners about the training (i.e. curriculum and syllabus, career opportunities, student outcomes) and the students' responsibilities regarding training. Educators must also praise adult learners for achieving goals while simultaneously running a forum for the exchange of views, ideas, useful tips etc. (Babushkin & Ryzhov, 2004).

It should be noted that the obstacles in teaching adults English are not confined to the problems of social and psychological type. As a rule, during English language training adult learners encounter various aspects of the English language, such as speaking, reading and writing, but the intricacies of these elements cannot be compared to the complexity of activities such as listening.

Listening (Latin "audire" – to listen) - to listen to voiced texts for training perception and listening comprehension (mainly in the educational process) – is a complex act that can foster problems for adult students of a foreign language. The whole range of problems in the perception of foreign speech may be classified into three main groups:

A) Difficulties associated with the specifics of the process of hearing and speech activity of the adult learner.

B) Difficulties associated with the specific pronunciation of native speakers.

C) Difficulties associated with the specifics of the English speaker's mentality and the acquisition of sociolinguistic and socio-cultural components of communicative competence.

Listening comprehension is based primarily on the auditory sensation. Human hearing organs are affected by and react to the words of the communication partner. The sound clarity is of great importance in the perception of words and sentences by ear. When a person perceives the voice of the caller, it simultaneously produces what he hears in the form of inner speech, because listening is the reason of an auditory-motor reaction.

The process of speech comprehension is easier in those situations where the interlocutor has the ability to visually observe partner's speech organs in the communication process, i.e. to monitor lips, articulation, as well as facial expressions. Visual perception is often considered to be an important criterion for understanding words and sentences by ear (Galskova & Gez, 2004).

Therefore, we can conclude that comprehension of oral communication takes place in parallel with the motor, auditory and visual perception. This dominant role for auditory perception and the nature of this kind of perception causes the perceived clarity of speech.

Foreign language listening comprehension is associated with a large number of obstacles that arise because of the specific phonological structure of the English language. The differences between sounds within words and between words within a sentence are considered to be a serious hindrance when listening to a fragment in English. Phonemes existing in a foreign language, and not in the native language, create barriers to understanding. It is also a challenge for adults to understand words from the English language that have differences between pronunciation and spelling. The presence of the initially learned graphical representation of a word in the mind of the adult educator is different from the vocalized variant resulting in misunderstanding of the words while listening to the speech, due to the strong imprint of the graphical word, rooted in the consciousness of the adult learner. In the authentic speech the recognizable words change their familiar sounding because of assimilation, desaccentuation and other phonetic phenomena.

The diverse rhythmic and melodic patterns of the English language also complicate the adult educator's learning curve. We know that the intonation used by native English speakers can be used as a grammatical marker. For example, English speakers change intonation to ask general questions. In this case, the intonation is a secondary marker, due to the fact that the word order is the main grammatical marker to ask a question, while in Russian language general questions are formed purely using the rising tone intonation.

Rate of speech plays an important role in speech perception among adult learners as well as whether the speaker is addressing the learner or not, whether the voice is recognizable or not, and whether there is visual support or not. These factors are valid for the speech perception in native language as well. It happens quite often that when adult learners complain that English speakers talk too fast, they themselves speak at the very same rate using their native language and it feels very natural for them. This phenomenon is due to the fact that the adult learners cannot say the complete message of a native English speaker inwardly to themselves. This is explained by the fact that during the perception of the transmitted message in English there is a kind of detachment between the inner speech and the audible information, which leads to comprehension problems, and because of such a disconnect, the content of the message becomes almost impossible to understand. A high rate of English speech is also a barrier, often difficult to surmount not only for the adult learner with the low level of English proficiency, but also for the student with a higher level of English. Fast speech changes the quality of phonemes, unstressed syllables are reduced, even words

sometimes are completely reduced, and phrases acquire deviated phonation compared to the learned ones.

The nature of speech perception depends also on whether it is addressed directly to the listener or the learner hears it from other people's conversation, whether the listener is thinking on how to response or if it is not required. If the speaker refers directly to the listener and sees his or her reaction, then the speaker can see that the listener has difficulty and can slow down the rate of speech, can stop for a while to give the listener an opportunity to reflect, can repeat what has not been heard or can help with nonverbal means. When the speech is turned to an audience or to a third party, then, of course, the listener has to adapt to the existing conditions of speech perception. However, in the last case, the recipient has certain advantages because all the attention can be focused on the perception of the foreign speech.

For the perception of English speakers it is important to determine whose voice sounds at a given moment: familiar or unfamiliar, male or female. Once determined, the individual characteristics of the speaker's voice—tone of speech, diction, and individual sounds enunciation—comes to the fore. When adult learners are accustomed to male speech, it is particularly difficult to understand female speech clearly and it was established that students perceive a lower female voice easier than higher pitched voice. Thus, the clarity, the intensity, as well as the gender to a large extent determine the completeness and depth of English language comprehension.

Monologue speech plays an important role in the perception of English speech. Fast-paced monologue speech is a serious barrier on the way to understanding a foreign language. Adults cannot keep up with the flow of information, as there are no “mental islands” which allow them to stop and think of the information they hear. The “mental islands” in dialogic speech are present in the form of pauses between the two interlocutors, which enable the listener to process the information received. Note that a monologue is time consuming for listeners, and it requires them to have a developed auditory memory (Zimnyaya, 2002).

The perception of speech in English and its associated difficulties accompany the development of auditory sensations. It is necessary to deliberately develop the adult auditory sensations, as these are not innate qualities. When adults either start learning English over again or continue learning, they have to re-develop the sensations associated with the perception of the English language, as this kind of skill is not required when mastering the Russian language.

3. Conclusion and Recommendations

To summarize our research, we can conclude the following:

1) Adult learners of the English language face a number of social and psychological difficulties among which the most prominent are: a fear of making mistakes, a low interest in studying English in high school and/or at the university, a broad range of responsibilities and a lack of time, and a lack of confidence in their own abilities, which usually manifests itself in an increasing level of anxiety.

In order to help remove these barriers, adult educators can resort to the following actions: giving complete information on the training program, class hours, career opportunities, and expected results; informing adults about their own responsibilities with regard to training, deserved praise for the achieved results; providing a forum for the free exchange of opinions, ideas, tips, etc.

2) The above data on the nature of listening comprehension and the accompanying difficulties allow us to suggest the skills that are to be developed in adults. One of them is to be able to “catch by ear” learned speech patterns and to divide them to smaller elements. Other important skills include the ability to recognize words that have undergone changes in the flow of speech; to pick out which words have logical stress; to understand the type of intonation with which the sentence is delivered; to differentiate similar-sounding words; to perceive words aurally, both in the presence and in the absence of visual support; to grasp different speech paces; and to understand the difference between male and female speech.

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