



The Characteristics of Adult Learners and Second Language Teaching Strategies

Mei Bai(✉)

Department of English, Chengdu College of University of Electronic Science and Technology of China, Chengdu 610037, Sichuan, China
yyx@cduestc.edu.cn

Abstract. In recent years, there has been a growing trend for adult learners to learn a second language, as adults wish to improve themselves to meet the increasingly higher social demand. However, there are greater differences between adult teaching and children teaching due to various influencing factors (e.g., age, psychology, environment). Also, it is important to consider the needs and characteristics of adult learners (e.g., the independence of personality). Although the traditional second language teaching methods are inappropriate for adult teaching, scholars at home and abroad have a little research on adult second language teaching. In addition, the factors affecting adult learners are complicated and uncontrollable. Thus, this paper will comprehensively analyze the factors influencing adult second language acquisition, outline the needs and characteristics of adult learners systematically, and provide corresponding strategies on how to conduct adult second language teaching.

Keywords: Adult Second Language Acquisition · Influencing Factors · Adult Learning Characteristics · Adult Teaching Strategies

1 Introduction

Adult second language education is an organic component of China's lifelong education system and a supplement and improvement of general education. The improvement of self-requirements and the increasingly fierce social competition environment promote adults' willingness to continue learning stronger. The demand of adults for second language acquisition has increased sharply. However, China's adult education system is not mature and perfect. Qin argues that there are still some main problems, such as the shortage of teaching resources, the single form of education, the lack of characteristics and innovation, the neglect of professional needs, and the disconnection between training objectives and actual needs [1]. Therefore, it is essential to consider how to effectively carry out adult second language teaching. This paper will analyze the factors affecting adult second language acquisition (e.g., age, psychological and environmental factors) and the characteristics of adult learners in detail, which provides some valuable adult teaching strategies to help adults overcome the influencing factors and master the second language.

© The Author(s) 2023

Z. Zhan et al. (Eds.): SEAA 2022, ASSEHR 675, pp. 980–987, 2023.

https://doi.org/10.2991/978-2-494069-05-3_117

2 Influencing Factors

There are a great many factors affecting adult second language acquisition, mainly including the following three aspects: age, psychology and environment.

2.1 The Influencing Factor of Age

From the perspective of age, Zhu compares the advantages and disadvantages of adults and children in acquiring a second language through the critical period hypothesis [2]. He finds that adults have passed the critical period of language learning from 4 to 12 years old, and the sensitivity of their brain response begins to show a distinct downward trend, with lower memory retention rate and faster-forgetting speed. In other words, it means that the elder their ages are, the more mature formation of their mother tongue (i.e., Chinese) protection system is. It induces that the internal resistance to accepting a foreign language is stronger and acquiring a language will be more time-consuming and laborious [2]. In addition, due to social reproduction, Chinese educational resources have been unevenly distributed for many years. More specifically, regional English education is unbalanced. Also, most primary and secondary school English teachers' pronunciation maybe lack accuracy, which makes it quite difficult for students to change their previous pronunciation and intonation after adulthood. Additionally, adults have deep-rooted memories of wrong grammar in their school days, which will definitely be even more formidable to correct. There is another learning difficulty for adult learners to learn a second language, which is skillfully mastering knowledge.

2.2 The Influencing Factor of Psychology

In terms of psychology, it is because adults have a more mature mind and higher cognitive ability to themselves, they have a stronger sense of self-esteem as well as a sensitive heart. They cannot help paying more attention to their face in the process of getting along with others and caring more about the evaluation from others. Consequently, in the course of learning a second language, they will be timider to communicate and express their ideas with others in the second language. Simultaneously, they are also particularly afraid of being ridiculed by others for making mistakes during the process of learning a second language. It is very common that adult learners often lack self-confidence and courage at critical moments because of too many concerns. Then, they miss a lot of precious opportunities to practice their second language and develop their comprehensive ability.

On the other hand, holding one's tongue is a big taboo in language learning, which slows down the speed of the second language acquisition to a certain extent. In the meanwhile, Qi finds that adults have strong self-awareness interference [3]. It means they have their own fixed way of thinking and sometimes have difficulty in accepting some language knowledge points that they do not understand. After that, adult learners may have to spend more time accepting and absorbing a second language. Furthermore, adults' learners usually have excessively high self-expectation without considering their insufficient information and knowledge storage, and they are more eager for quick success and immediate benefits. Hence, they are more likely to become depressed, anxious and irritated when they do not see the expected effect of their learning in a short period of time.

2.3 The Influencing Factor of Environment

From the perspective of the environment, Ren regards that as natural persons into the society, it is impossible for adult learners to have much energy in learning like students in school [4]. Their multiple roles impose much pressure on them. Also, they have to take social and family environments into account while seeking personal progress. As for social environment, in the context of lifelong education system, individuals always keeping learning is a potential hard requirement for work and their survival. Unfortunately, adults have entailed huge expense on all aspects of their daily life and family, and they are also expected to bear the cost of learning a second language [4]. Moreover, adults cannot choose to study completely out of work to make ends meet. Meanwhile, the work task will lead to learning distraction, eventually affecting the learning state and effect. In regard to family environment, married employed adults not only play a certain role on the society, but also play an important role in the family. The demands of a wife or husband, children's education, parents' medical care plus household chores all interferes with adult learning. Accordingly, adults' can only spend very limited time and energy on learning. Additionally, adults rarely use the knowledge they learned as students after they graduate from school.

3 The Characteristics of Adult Learning

Due to the physical and psychological development, roles and environment of adults are strikingly different from those of school students, adult learners have some unique characteristics that belong to them.

3.1 The Characteristics of the Independence of Personality

The psychological and physical development of adults is more mature. Lu finds that adults have transitioned from dependent and heteronomous youth to independent and self-regulated adulthood [5]. Adults have strong autonomous learning abilities. As adult learners' dependence on teachers is reduced, they have a strong sense of personal awareness and personal responsibility in most cases; Also, they have the ability to choose their own learning content and make their learning plan [5]. Therefore, most adult learners wish that teachers can make any decisions about teaching after consultation with them, such as evaluating learning needs and objectives, choosing teaching activities, and deciding how to evaluate their learning. When they encounter problems in learning, they also hope that teachers can organize, guide and help their learning in an equal, respectful and friendly way, rather than appear as an authority.

3.2 The Characteristics of the Richness of Experience

With the growth of age, the mechanical memory of adults is inferior than that of teenagers, but they have accumulated a considerable degree of experience in social and professional life. Adults have generally understood and master more knowledge through their experience, which is not only the basis of adult learning but also a very valuable resource

in learning activities. The organic combination of adults' existing experience with new knowledge tends to make adults' learning more effective and meaningful. However, Lu argues that the experience of adults sometimes forms a certain learning set and has an adverse impact on learning [5]. Maturity and rich and profound life experiences usually make people more stubborn and more resistant to change, which is the enemy of second language learning. Thus, when proposing changes and new concepts, teachers had better clarify the "why" and connect them with existing concepts to promote adult learners' further exploration. In addition, the thinking of adults is closely related to social practice. Hu argues that adults' comprehensive abilities concerning meaning recognition ability, understanding ability, analysis, comparison, judgment, and reasoning are strengthened with the increase of age [6]. They are easier to have a comprehensive and profound understanding of objective things than teenagers and can quickly connect the internal relationship of objective things [6].

3.3 The Characteristics of the Clarity of Purpose and the Intensity of Motivation

As Adults are more rational and responsible for their own lives, they have clearer goals and stronger motivation to do everything than minors. He shows that adults' learning intention and motivation are generated and changed according to the actual needs of work and life [7]. Keeping oneself in balance with the "developing society" is an intrinsic motivation for adult learning [7]. Cao regards that material rewards are often extrinsic motivations for most people to continue learning [8]. To be more specifically, adult learners are practical and hate theory. They need information that instantly satisfies the needs of the job. They ordinarily prefer practical knowledge that improves their skills, helps their job, and facilitate their confidence. Also, intrinsic motivation or extrinsic motivation will help adult learners to learn better.

3.4 The Characteristics of the Urgency of Time and the Limits of Energy

Lu argues that unlike children, who have a future-oriented view of time, adults have a present-oriented view of time [5]. Adults hold the view that time is as valuable as money and effort. They attach great importance to learning efficiency and always hope that they can quickly apply what they have learned to practical work and life to address the difficulties they face. Additionally, on account of the diversity of adult roles, they are not allowed to devote more energy to study. Therefore, adults have a sense of urgency to apply what they have learned in second language acquisition and pursue instant results. In general, adult learners are objectively lifelong, professional and practical, and subjectively have specific and practical goals, autonomy and selectivity in learning, and flexibility and diversity of methods [9].

4 Adult Teaching Strategies

Sun discusses the effective teaching of adult community education and finds that in adult teaching, teachers should be adult-oriented and deeply understand the regulations

of students' physical and mental development and cognitive characteristics [10]. Moreover, teachers should also consider the environment and needs of adult learners and the difficulties they are facing, and then teach them in accordance with their aptitude and formulate corresponding educational plans and strategies, so as to enhance their learning enthusiasm, promote the smooth completion of educational objectives and finally achieve a win-win situation. Here are some suggested teaching strategies.

4.1 Elaborating Teaching Content

On the basis of carefully studying the syllabus and teaching materials, teachers should carefully select teaching content and explain them in a concise and general way, so that adult students could learn the significance and essence of content in a limited time and get the most information [9]. Teachers should be clearly aware that adult teaching should not mechanically import knowledge but needs to highlight the key points, break through the difficulties and explain the doubts. In adult teaching, teachers should focus on revealing the rules of structural knowledge, take training thinking as the core, and guide students to actively participate in the whole process of class to let them take the initiative to acquire and construct knowledge and promote the internalization of knowledge [11].

4.2 Teaching in Accordance with Needs and Emphasizing the Practicability of Teaching Content

The ultimate goal of adult learning is to encounter problems that are difficult to solve in life, constantly enrich the knowledge system and apply what we have learned to improve their ability to handle problems. Adult education requires teachers should combine the teaching content with adults' work and life practice according to the actual needs of adult students, so as to cultivate their ability to use knowledge and deal with practical problems [9]. At the same time, Ren argues that teachers should also pay attention to the individual needs and emotional experiences of adults, and put adults in the central position of teaching [4].

4.3 Utilizing Situational Teaching Method

Li argues that situational learning signifies that teacher should create a situation conducive to the communication and practice of adult learners according to the existing experience of adults or with the help of multimedia technology so that adult knowledge and skills can be developed in a practical situation [12]. This implies that teachers should create more situations that often happen in the real-life and work of adults in the class, so as to better teach adult students how to use the knowledge they learn. Overall, based on situational learning, Li studies adult teaching strategies and finds that the essence of situational learning is in line with the cognitive characteristics of adults, such as experience, practicality, problem, and self-orientation [12]. It pays attention to the improvement of adults' practical ability, which can meet the needs of adults' lifelong development [12].

4.4 Combining Dialogue Teaching with Various Teaching Modes

Each adult is an independent individual with his own learning style, so teachers cannot use a single teaching mode for teaching. Furthermore, the function of language is to promote better communication between people. Wang argues that teachers should combine the dialogue teaching mode with a variety of teaching modes, and carry out adult teaching innovation through question and answer, inspiration, communication, debate, and other ways, so as to strengthen the interaction between teachers and students and students [13]. Therefore, it can promote adult students to obtain practical knowledge and cultivate inquiry ability, cooperation ability and problem-solving ability [13].

4.5 Teaching Fragmentarily and Imparting Knowledge Systematically

The multiple roles of adults do not allow them to have a lot of concentrated time, full passion, and energy to devote themselves to learning. Long-term learning will make people become tired and reduce their learning efficiency. Therefore, teachers should divide logical and coherent knowledge into many small parts and teach them to students. In this way, it is not only convenient for adult students to study anytime and anywhere in their spare time effectively, but also enables them to systematically grasp and apply knowledge.

4.6 Advancing Step by Step and Giving Feedback Timely

Teachers should make full use of the existing knowledge of adults and arrange the learning contents in the order from easy to difficult, from simple to complex [9]. Teaching content must be closely related to the life and work of adult learners for helping adult students to have a period of adaptation. Aimed at consolidating the teaching effect and promoting students' absorption of knowledge, it is necessary to arrange some typical, representative and enlightening questions appropriately. Students should also know the way and deadline to hand in assignments. Teachers should give feedback on problems in homework timely and adopt a variety of online ways to communicate with students to help students improve their abilities. Meantime, Li regards that the most crucial point is to adopt scientific adult teaching evaluation in terms of the measurement and evaluation of academic achievement [12]. The common problems should be avoided as much as possible, for example, the separation of evaluation mechanism from reality, single evaluation subject, rigid evaluation method, and inflexible evaluation process [12].

In a word, during the process of adult teaching, the teaching content should not be separated from the practice of adult life. Jia regards that from the perspective of the speech act, the cultivation of communicative competence should be the primary goal of language teaching [15]. In teaching practice, teachers should strengthen the training of adult students' acquired language, so that rational knowledge and perceptual consciousness can be more appropriately integrated and gradually internalized into natural and appropriate language communication ability [14].

5 Conclusion

Second language education for adult learners is an implicit requirement of the modern international environment, which represents the improvement of the quality of the whole group and the progress of society. In addition, adult second language education is a way to enrich adults' knowledge, improve their language skills, and increase their oral expression and communicative competence. Nowadays, China is paying amounts of attention to adult second language education. How to reform and innovate adult second language teaching has always been a heated topic in China's higher education. This paper summarizes the influence of age, psychology, and environment on adult second language acquisition. Also, it expounds on the characteristics of adult learners from four aspects: personality, experience, motivation, and time. Finally, it proposes six adult second language teaching strategies and skills in terms of teaching content, method, mode, and feedback. This paper provides some useful and effective suggestions for teachers on how to teach an adult second language, and this paper also has implications for scholars who are interested in adult education and make up their minds to explore the factors affecting adult second language acquisition and the characteristics of adult learners.

References

1. Qin, M. M. (2020). Research on the application of "problem-solving" teaching model in adult higher education teaching.
2. Zhu, Q. (2017). Age factors and second language acquisition. *Contemporary Education Research and Teaching Practice*, 245.
3. Qi, W. J. (2010). Research on adult foreign language teaching under the framework of lifelong education.
4. Ren, Y. (2015). A study on experiential oral English teaching mode for working adults.
5. Lu, Y. J. (2004). Adult psychological characteristics. and teaching strategies. *Journal of the Northwest Adult Education*, 13–14.
6. Hu, H. Y. (2004). Research on cooperative learning in adult teaching.
7. He, G. Q. (2013). Debate and significance of andragogy. *Open Education Research*, 63–70.
8. Cao, K. M. (2006). On learning motivation of adult learners. *Adult Education*, 20.
9. Pu, Q. M., Wang, S. F., & Wen, Z. B. (2007). Adult learning characteristics and teaching principles in the new century. *Adult Education*, 29–30.
10. Sun, G. S. (2019). Based on the cognitive development characteristics of adult learners, this paper discusses the effective teaching of adult community education. *Emotional Reader*, 61.
11. Bie, T. Y., & Xu, J. S. (2010). On teaching strategies for adult education. *Adult Education*, 37–38.
12. Li, F. (2010). Research on adult teaching strategies based on situational learning.
13. Wang, H. H. (2017). Teaching innovation of adult education based on dialogue teaching theory. *Journal of Beijing Xuanwu Hongqi Spare-Time University*, 10–14.
14. Jia, Y. H. (2003). Age differences and second language acquisition. *Journal of Minjiang University*, 121–122.

Open Access This chapter is licensed under the terms of the Creative Commons Attribution-NonCommercial 4.0 International License (<http://creativecommons.org/licenses/by-nc/4.0/>), which permits any noncommercial use, sharing, adaptation, distribution and reproduction in any medium or format, as long as you give appropriate credit to the original author(s) and the source, provide a link to the Creative Commons license and indicate if changes were made.

The images or other third party material in this chapter are included in the chapter's Creative Commons license, unless indicated otherwise in a credit line to the material. If material is not included in the chapter's Creative Commons license and your intended use is not permitted by statutory regulation or exceeds the permitted use, you will need to obtain permission directly from the copyright holder.

