18 Adult education: Meeting learners' language needs

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In this chapter, we ask the following questions:

What employment opportunities are there for EFL teachers in Austria beyond the secondary level?

What are some of the distinguishing characteristics of adult learners as opposed to younger learners? What specific challenges do these create for the teacher, and how can teachers handle these challenges?

How do power relationships differ in an adult education setting, and what can teachers do to manage these relationships effectively?

Theoretical perspectives and the Austrian context

In the 21st century, there has been a steadily growing emphasis on the importance of language skills in the EU marketplace. For example, the 2008 Council Resolution on a European strategy for multilingualism labelled multilingualism "a factor in the European economy's competitiveness and people's mobility and employability" and highlighted the need to "promote language skills in career development" and to "provide job-specific language courses in vocational education and training (VET)" (2008/C 320/01). Similarly, a 2012 European Commission staff working document titled *Language competences for employability, mobility and growth* stated that

> [l]anguage competences should be useful in real life and match, in particular, labour market needs. This applies for national and European labour markets, and the work of EU enterprises operating on an international scale. Poor language skills are a serious obstacle to seizing professional opportunities abroad and in enterprises or organisations active at international level (European Commission, 2012a, p. 1).

In 2020, the EU's *Languages for Jobs* report stated that "English is clearly an extremely important language for international exchange. [...] In large parts of Europe and beyond, English is already considered more as a basic skill than a foreign language" (p. 15).

Indeed, a growing body of research has shown that proficiency in a foreign language is viewed as an asset, which is linked to increased employability and higher income (e.g., Araújo, et al., 2015; Gazzola, 2016). While 2016 Eurostat statistics showed that 99.9% of Austrian learners at the upper secondary level have received training in English (EUROSTAT, 2016), there remains a need for continued EFL training outside of school. A wide variety of EFL training opportunities for adults are available across Austria. This chapter focuses on three primary settings.

Teaching opportunities in the Austrian adult EFL market

The first EFL learning setting is the Austrian tertiary education system, which features a variety of different training programmes for EFL learners. For example, most Austrian *Fachhochschulen* (FH) feature English courses integrated into the curricula of the individual study programmes, with emphases ranging widely from field-specific English (i.e., English for specific purposes (ESP)) to more general business or professional English (see chapter 16 in this volume). In contrast, the university sector generally features affiliated language centres or institutes (e.g., Treffpunktsprachen at the University of Graz), which offer classes across the university population (i.e., students and staff) and even to the general public. Here again, a wide variety of topics can be seen, ranging from general language courses (sometimes in connection with certificates such as TOEFL/ IELTS, which are often pre-requisites for studying or teaching abroad) to English for Academic Purposes (EAP) and courses in key competencies (e.g., presentation skills, job applications, scientific writing).

The second broad category of EFL adult learning consists of courses and other EFL training and support activities offered under the auspices of a language teaching organization. This includes organisations such as *Wirtschaftsförderungsinstitut (WIFI)*, which is a further education institution with a focus on current and future qualification requirements of companies and their employees, *Berufsförderungsinstitut (BFI)*, which provides vocational qualification and personal development for employed and unemployed people, and the *Volkshochschule (VHS)*, which is an independent adult education system open to all age groups, on the public side and companies such as Berlitz or the Cambridge Institute in the private sector. The latter generally feature a blend of in-house courses offered to the general public while

the former provide more customised training programmes or individualized language coaching services offered to companies and other organisations.

The final category consists of adult EFL teaching opportunities available to individual teachers acting as freelance private contractors. While such individuals often offer similar services to those available from language schools (e.g., company courses, personal English 'coaching'), this form of employment presents several special challenges and demands different skills from practitioners.

In fact, as in many other fields, the various EFL teaching settings correspond to essentially different job profiles. Just as a corporate lawyer and a divorce lawyer perform fundamentally different tasks that draw on different skill sets, teaching a General English (GE) course at a language institute differs significantly from teaching an ESP course at a technical research firm as a private contractor. The variety of teaching opportunities is one of the essential challenges facing Austrian adult EFL teachers. While some people may find a niche in one of these areas and then spend their careers in it, many EFL teachers end up moving between these different contexts as their careers progress, or even find themselves working in different ones simultaneously.

Due to this extreme diversity, adult EFL teachers must be able to perform a variety of tasks that go well beyond classroom teaching. Unlike many primary or secondary teaching positions, an adult EFL teacher rarely encounters a structured environment with set curricula and clearly established learning goals and procedures. For example, while some *FH Studiengänge* (degree programmes) may feature English courses with detailed syllabi and existing learning materials, many have far less clearly defined goals and content areas and may offer no teaching materials at all. Similarly, while some private language institutions feature their own proprietary teaching methods and materials, the majority of such institutions give instructors wide latitude to devise their own approaches. Thus, even within a single job position, adult EFL teachers must often play a wide variety of roles beyond instructing, such as needs assessors, course designers and materials developers (Belcher, 2006).

This wide variety of demands is particularly daunting when considering the level of training adult EFL practitioners often possess when they begin working. Whereas Austrian regulations require teachers at the primary and secondary levels to complete rigorous teacher training degree programmes, no such requirement exists for teachers at the tertiary level or in the private adult EFL sector. Although recent times have seen an increase in efforts to address this didactic gap by introducing higher education didactics training programmes (particularly at FHs and universities), not all aspiring EFL adult educators have access to these programmes.

The challenges of adult education

Before addressing the specific characteristics and needs of adult learners, it is important to dispel the common assumption that there is a negative correlation between age and language learning ability. Certainly, the physiological advantage quite young learners have in terms of developing proper pronunciation has been well established, and of course it is nearly impossible for adult learning scenarios to match the learning performance characteristic of young children growing up in an immersive linguistic environment. However, in more formal classroom learning situations, adult learners actually have an edge due to their greater general cognitive capabilities and enhanced ability to engage with conceptual complexity and abstract thought (Harmer, 2007). This means the potential for rich and effective language learning experiences is every bit as present in adult learners as in their younger counterparts.

In order to realize this potential, it is important to understand the distinctive characteristics of adult learners. To this end, we will draw on the work of Malcolm Knowles, perhaps the most well-known and influential andragogy theorist. Knowles et al. (2005) formulated six assumptions about adult learners, which are useful for understanding both learners themselves and the potential learning process. Four of the assumptions focus on adult learners' motivation and contain the unifying theme of 'real-world applicability'. That is, for learning to take place, adult learners must feel a "need to know" the skills or information offered, a desire which most often arises when they perceive the content as "things they need to know and be able to do in order to cope effectively with real-life situations" (Knowles et al., 2005, p. 67). It follows that their "orientation to learning" is "life-centered (or task-centered or problem-centered)" (Knowles et al., 2005, p. 67). Furthermore, since the main goal is to acquire practical knowledge and skills, intrinsic motivational factors, such as "the desire for increased job satisfaction, self-esteem, quality of life, and the like", are of primary importance (Knowles et al., 2005, p. 68). Adult EFL teachers should bear these attitudes and goals in mind when trying to achieve learner buy-in to their courses.

Knowles' remaining two assumptions highlight some important challenges for adult EFL teachers. First, in describing the "learners' self-concept", Knowles et al. (2005) emphasize that most adults "develop a deep psychological need to be seen by others and treated by others as being capable of self-direction" (p. 65). Adults possess a strong desire for autonomy, as well as the corresponding resistance to being compelled by others, which can complicate learner-teacher relationships. Finally, perhaps the broadest assumption deals with the "role of the learners' experiences" (Knowles et al., 2005, p. 65). Adults, by definition, have more experience than

younger people, which can influence the learning process in various ways. On the positive side, this richer experience can serve as a valuable resource for certain forms of learning that are designed to mobilize and incorporate this experience.

However, Knowles et al. (2005) emphasize that this previous experience also brings some potential pitfalls. For example, accumulated experience can lead to "mental habits, biases, and presuppositions that tend to cause us to close our minds to new ideas, fresh perceptions, and alternative ways of thinking" (Knowles et al., 2005, p.66). In the context of EFL learning, many learners may have had negative experiences in previous courses or other EFL environments (e.g., with instructional methods, assessment). This can give rise to negative feelings towards the language and even feelings of learned helplessness, which conflict directly with the aforementioned desire for autonomy and can generate tension in an EFL learning setting. Beyond the fact that adult learners have *more* experience than their younger counterparts, their experiences are generally far more *diverse* as well. For this reason, a group of adult learners "will be more heterogeneous in terms of background, learning style, motivation, needs, interests, and goals" (Knowles et al., 2005, p. 66). In the EFL context, the heterogeneity of learners' educational experiences often leads to a corresponding diversity of English language ability levels beyond that faced by EFL teachers of younger students. In fact, this diversity in ability levels is one of the most difficult challenges faced by adult EFL teachers.

Recommended approaches

Managing heterogeneity

There are several ways to manage heterogeneity in adult education contexts. In some cases, EFL teachers of adults can mitigate this problem by forming multiple classes for people at different ability levels. For example, language institutes offering GE courses to a wider audience often create multiple classes for different levels (e.g., beginner, intermediate, advanced). However, based on our experience, this is rarely possible. For example, due to educational and resource purposes, FH study programme directors generally want all students to receive the same training, and companies investing in language training often lack the number of employees or the financial resources to support multiple classes. Thus, adult EFL teachers must be able to manage the disparity in English abilities they are likely to encounter within a course.

To this end, the first important step is to conduct some type of assessment at the beginning of the class, in order to gain a sense of learners' different levels. We will

cover assessment in more detail below, but here we will just emphasise that this is less about formal placement tests and more about deploying an activity that gives the teacher a chance to hear learners speak or yields a sample of their writing (depending on the goals of the class). For example, simple ice-breaker activities in which learners introduce themselves are normally enough to get an initial impression of learners' existing language abilities.

This knowledge will aid teachers in individualizing the teaching and learning strategies deployed for a course, with the goal of keeping the more advanced English users challenged without overwhelming the less advanced ones. While the less advanced English users normally require more attention in the classroom, in the course planning phase we recommend a particular focus on creating roles for the stronger English performers. Our experience has shown that the attitudes and behaviours of the stronger performers can have a significant influence on the overall tone of the class. Whereas a detached or even condescending stronger performer will tend to decrease the willingness of the weaker performers to participate, stronger performers who are engaged or supportive can help support the learning of those less advanced. To motivate stronger English users, it is important to remember Knowles' et al. (2005) "need-to-know" principle. In EFL teaching situations, it is common to have some learners who believe (sometimes rightly) that they already possess the English skills they need to survive in their daily lives. In our experience, providing such learners opportunities to develop additional skills (e.g., organization, leadership) in the context of learning activities normally makes them more likely to contribute positively to the overall learning experience, thereby serving as positive role models for the less developed English users.

Since many EFL learning activities involve dividing a class into smaller groups, in some cases it may make sense to form groups based on ability levels and then adjust the difficulty levels of the tasks assigned to each group. However, we usually find it more effective to form groups of people with varying levels of existing English ability and then assign some extra task or responsibility to the more advanced English users in each group. For example, if the class is divided into small groups to conduct a meeting simulation, one of the stronger learners could be placed in each group and then assigned the task of running the meeting or monitoring the group dynamics and providing feedback at the end of the activity. Through such approaches, teachers can promote maximum engagement among learners across all different levels of English ability within a group.

Designing courses for success

This leads us to the EFL teacher's role as course designer. While the situation will dictate how much course design is required, experience has shown that a high degree of flexibility in terms of course design is the norm. As mentioned above, the first step to designing a course is to perform some type of a needs assessment, which then serves as the basis for other decisions (Belcher, 2006). The literature on conducting a needs assessment features a wide variety of methods, most of which involve several stages and include extensive data collection and analysis, all performed well in advance of the time when the course actually takes place.

However, in reality, the Austrian adult EFL teaching market rarely presents the opportunity for such a thorough and deliberate approach. Thus, teachers need to be more creative in their efforts to gather information about current language ability (as mentioned above), learning objectives, and learning/teaching preferences. While this information can sometimes be gathered beforehand via discussions with human resources managers or programme directors who hire teachers, often it is more useful to get this information from the learners themselves in the initial session via questionnaires or, ideally, in-class activities designed to elicit this information. Using this information to tailor the course to learners' needs and preferences plays into Knowles's et al. (2005) second assumption about learner autonomy. That is, involving the learners in the course design gives them a sense of ownership of the learning process and helps democratise the classroom, which promotes engagement.

On the subject of how to incorporate learners' needs and preferences, we can refer again to the theme of real-world usefulness. As Knowles et al. (2005) suggest, adults "learn new knowledge, understandings, skills, values, and attitudes most effectively when they are presented in the context of application to real-life situations" (p. 67). This means expanding our conception of our mission as EFL teachers beyond teaching the nuts and bolts of the English language into helping learners obtain a powerful customised communication tool. Once an assessment has revealed the real-world situations in which learners need to use English, activities should be designed or adjusted to simulate these situations and prepare learners to handle them more effectively. For example, GE learners might want to do role plays about travel situations (e.g., complaining about an unsatisfactory hotel room); sample job interviews or simulated meetings might suit business English (BE) learners; and learners of English for Engineering Purposes may need to work on technical presentations they plan to give at international conferences or at a client site.

This last example points to another challenge of ESP teaching, where learners' knowledge of field-specific terminology and concepts often exceeds that of the teacher. This can be particularly daunting for younger teachers, who may have learners in class who are older than they are. In such cases, authenticity plays a key role. While teachers need to invest time in familiarising themselves with field-specific information, it is not recommended to pretend to be an expert in the field. Rather, this can be viewed as an opportunity to make use of learners' knowledge and experiences. For example, on the content level, teachers can collaborate with learners in selecting topics to be covered. In addition, teachers can use peer feedback in the classroom and other activities as a way of using learners' knowledge to monitor the topic-specific aspects of learner-produced content (see Example 1 in Practical Applications below).

Beyond the learner benefits, expanding our perceived mission to embrace diverse communication tasks benefits adult EFL teachers as well. While terminology and register vary greatly across fields, fundamental communication functions remain broadly similar in many cases. Developing our own knowledge of essential skills (e.g., critically evaluating information, working effectively in a team, presenting information to an audience, communicating across cultural barriers) allows us as adult EFL teachers to devise learning activities for these valuable real-world skills, which can then be adapted for a variety of settings. Thus, lessons designed to train general skills can then be augmented with field-specific case studies or simulations, which can provide learners an opportunity to practice important skills while simultaneously building their knowledge of the relevant field-specific language and concepts. This approach helps situate language learning in the wider context of acquiring practical skills that learners can deploy in their real lives, regardless of what language they may be speaking. It also creates a win-win situation: the teacher's burden of preparing courses for different settings is somewhat lightened, and learner engagement increases due to the opportunity to gain additional practical skills.

Power dynamics in adult education

This vision of empowered learners and engaged teachers collaborating eagerly in the pursuit of knowledge and skills is a worthwhile goal for adult EFL teachers. And indeed, particularly in situations where adult learners have voluntarily registered for a class, one encounters many motivated learners. However, even in classes where adults voluntarily take part, we cannot forget that most of them must often balance an array of family and occupational demands, which may leave even the best-intentioned learners with little energy to focus on learning a foreign language.

Furthermore, the reality is that many adult education activities in Austria exist because someone from 'upstairs' (e.g., an FH curriculum developer, a member of corporate upper management) decided they were necessary, a decision with which the actual learners may not be in complete agreement. Therefore, adult education practitioners may also confront the same issues evident at earlier educational levels, such as learner apathy, resistance, non-compliance and disruptive behaviour.

Thus, as with every learning experience, adult education involves some level of power dynamics. Brookfield (2013), who has written extensively about the issues of power in teaching, argues that teachers must sometimes "insist and coerce, [...] stand our ground, and not give in to students' demands" (p. 10). He goes on to point out that "being adult-centred does not absolve me of making value-based choices. Sometimes it means trying to find out as much as I can about how my students are experiencing their learning and then using what I have discovered to help them engage with material I feel is worth the effort" (Brookfield, 2013, p. 11). Thus, it is important to recognise that teaching adults is emphatically not about ceding all power to the learners.

At the content level, this means that teachers must sometimes dictate what topics are to be covered. In the case of EFL teaching, one common example is grammar. While perfect grammar is not a requirement for most EFL professional situations, communicating effectively and maintaining credibility (an important aspect of communication in the professional world) require a solid grasp of grammar, and in many situations, the learners need to have grammar concepts explained or refreshed. In addition, there may be other topics that must be covered, regardless of learners' and/or teachers' wishes.

In order to ensure a responsible and effective use of the power inherent in a teacher's role, Brookfield (2013) offers some fundamental guidelines. The first, already mentioned in the quote above, is to remain aware of how adult learners "are experiencing their learning" (Brookfield, 2013, p. 11). In essence, needs assessment is an ongoing process. Teachers must constantly seek information about learners' evolving needs and be willing to adjust as much as possible to these needs. Another principle Brookfield (2013) advocates is maintaining transparency when exercising power. He points out that research has consistently identified two behaviours learners look for in teachers: "(1) regular and full disclosure of the expectations, criteria, and agendas that teachers hold, and (2) teachers laying out the rationale behind their actions and decisions" (Brookfield, 2013, p. 26). Thus, honest, open communication can help mitigate the negative impact of a teacher's actions being at odds

with learners' needs for autonomy. This can be done by making the rules and expectations clear and granting learners the right to exercise the maximum amount of autonomy possible within the conditions of the activity or class at hand. One final practice Brookfield (2013) emphasises concerning how to deal with power issues is modelling, whereby teachers serve as role models for the attitudes and behaviours they are asking learners to practise. As an example, he mentions that teachers can help teach learners how to challenge their own assumptions and see issues from different angles by "model[ing] a self-critical analysis of one's own ideas in front of students" (Brookfield, 2013, p. 24).

The mention of critical thinking brings us to one final related point we would like to make about adult EFL education in Austria. While the diversity of the field can be challenging at times, it also represents an outstanding opportunity for teachers, if approached with the proper mindset. This means embracing the challenge of teaching on a topic on which a teacher is not an expert and cultivating the same open and curious mind towards these unfamiliar topics that we hope to see our learners demonstrate towards English. In fact, when granted the opportunity to teach in a particular ESP setting for an extended time, many EFL teachers find that they can soon achieve a level of fluency on the topic that allows them to function even more effectively, leading to more job enjoyment and satisfaction.

Practical applications

Example 1

Goal: learners will devise arguments to convince others of their position; learners will listen to other viewpoints and try to find ways to refute them

Activity: critical debate

Rationale: to train critical thinking and perspective taking; to train effective communication styles and techniques for disagreeing constructively in difficult situations

Pre-knowledge: knowledge of diplomatic English and appropriate register in heated debates

Level: CEFR B2 and above

Procedure

1. The teacher chooses an issue on which opinion is divided among learners (e.g., inheritance tax, plastic surgery, smoking in public places)

2. Learners are asked for a show of hands either in support or opposition to the issue, and two teams are formed.

3. The teacher announces that each team must now devise arguments for the side that they do NOT support. [Note: The teacher points out that no one has to change their personal viewpoint, but that learners have to pretend to have the opposite viewpoint for the duration of the activity.]

4. The two teams spend 15 to 20 minutes developing their respective arguments.

5. The teams form one large circle with two chairs in the centre. Each team chooses one person to make their case in the debate, with the other team members observing the debate. In larger groups, the debate may be held with four people (i.e., two per team). The debate goes on for about 3 to 5 minutes or until one of the two (or four) chooses a replacement from the outer circle.

6. The debate goes on for several more rounds until everyone has had a chance to participate in the debate or until no new ideas and arguments are brought forth.

7. In the debriefing, the teacher asks the learners what it was like to argue against their personal positions. Have they discovered any new avenues for thinking about the issue? Were any blind spots uncovered? Were any assumptions confirmed or challenged?

Example 2

Goal: learners will read for meaning; learners will summarise findings in an oral presentation using topic-specific language; learners will practise listening comprehension and asking questions; learners will practise providing feedback in a sensitive manner

Activity: holding presentations

Rationale: to prepare learners for real-life professional presentations, both as presenters and audience members; to sensitise learners to the importance of diplomatic language when providing feedback

Pre-knowledge: topic-specific knowledge; effective presentation language and skills; language and techniques for effective feedback

Level: CEFR B2+ and above

Procedure

1. The teacher assigns related texts on a selected topic, or learners can be instructed to select a topic/reading from their own fields.

2. Learners prepare a presentation of the core information from their assigned text or their selected topic (optionally with PowerPoint). [Note: The number of presenters per topic and presentation length can be adjusted based on class size and available time.]

3. Learners prepare three True/False or multiple-choice comprehension questions, which they submit in advance to the teacher. The teacher compiles these questions into a comprehension test for all presentations.

4. Learners also prepare three open-ended discussion questions on the content of their presentation.

5. Before in-class presentations, the teacher designates three (or more) learners to ask difficult, topic-related questions after the presentation, as well as individual students to provide oral and/or written feedback on specific aspects of the presentation (e.g., body language, voice control, signposting, structure).

6. Learners deliver their presentations, followed by questions from the designated questioners and a discussion of the presenters' prepared discussion questions.

7. One round of oral presentation feedback is conducted, with the assigned learners taking the lead for each presentation aspect.

8. Learners take the comprehension test compiled by the teacher. This can be done in class on paper or using an appropriate digital tool (e.g., Quizlet), or it can be done digitally after class via a learning platform (e.g., Moodle).

9.The results of this test can be used to give presenters feedback on the effectiveness of their presentations. That is, the number of people who get the questions from a certain presentation correct can serve as a rough indicator of the effectiveness of the presentation or help identify areas for improvement. In a subsequent class session, learners can discuss why they got questions wrong and help devise strategies that would have made the presentation more effective.

Activities and questions for reflection

1. Design an ice-breaker activity for day 1 of an adult education class that would help the learners get to know each other but also allow you to begin to assess their level of proficiency.

2. Based on your own experience, what is your personal philosophy of adult learning and the teacher's role? How might this role differ in different settings where you hope to teach?

3. What strategies could you use to prevent learner resistance (e.g., apathy, hostility towards teacher or fellow learners) in an adult EFL setting? How would you deal with these situations if they arise in class?

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Suggestions for further reading

Brookfield, S. (2013). *Powerful Techniques for Teaching Adults*. John Wiley & Sons Inc.

In this book, Brookfield draws on both theory and his own extensive teaching experience to provide insights into the dynamics of power in adult teaching, as well as practical tips for teachers for engaging and empowering learners.

Rocco, T. S., Smith, M. C., Mizzi, R. C., Merriweather, L. R., & Hawley, J. D. (2020). *The handbook of adult and continuing education*. Stylus Publishing.

This book features a collection of concise, comprehensible chapters that provides valuable information on current issues and trends in adult and continuing education.

Merriam, S. B., & Bierema, L. L. (2014). *Adult Learning: Linking Theory and Practice*. Josey Bass.

This book offers an overview of the most important theories and research in adult learning, including recent studies from the field of neuroscience and insights into the pervasive influence of technology on adult learning.

Commentary on reflection questions

1. Your answer to this reflection question will depend on your personal teaching experience. The point of this question is to encourage reflection on teaching English in adult education.

2. Obviously, answers will vary widely, but the important thing is that teachers and prospective teachers should take time to consider their own beliefs about this issue and how those beliefs will inform their teaching practice in the future. They also need to be prepared to articulate these ideas in potential job application situations (e.g., interviews, teaching portfolios). Specific areas to consider include the teacher's self-concept, teacher-learner relationships, communication styles, personal motivations and career goals.

3. There are many possible answers to this question. With regard to prevention, we mentioned earlier the importance of effectively handling the stronger learners in a class, but there are many other possible techniques (e.g., collectively establishing communication and behavioural norms at the outset of class). With regard to handling these issues when they arise in class, this is largely dependent on the individual's personality and style, including such issues as desired level of formality in the classroom and comfort level with confrontation. The point of this question is to en-

courage prospective teachers to reflect on their own personalities and begin to devise appropriate strategies for preventing and managing problem situations that may arise.