TEACHING ENGLISH FOR SPECIFIC PURPOSES TO ADULT LEARNERS AT UNIVERSITY: METHODS THAT WORK

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As more and more adults in Ukraine and other countries continue to study throughout their lives and may acquire more than one qualification, the average age of students of higher education institutions is increasing, and therefore the foreign language learning at university should be organised in the same way as with working adults. In this regard, it is important to understand that a modern student is an adult learner who has a number of characteristic features that distinguish him/her from a child as a learner and thus should be considered in the learning process. In our article, based on the practical experience of English language teachers of the National Technical University of Ukraine "Igor Sikorsky Kyiv Polytechnic Institute", we aim to show how specific features of adults as learners can be considered in teaching ESP and what learning methods can be most appropriate for that purpose. We conducted a mini-research among 12 English teachers of Department of English for Engineering, who had the opportunity to work with both children and adult learners. As a data collection tool, we used an open-ended questionnaire which included three questions concerning their perception of university students as adult learners, importance of creating favourable learning climate, methods, and technologies they find most effective and motivating for adult students. As shown by the results of our survey, teachers find interactive ESP learning methods and techniques the most effective, since they most fully involve adult students in self-directed learning, permit taking into account characteristic features of adults as learners, make learning a collaborative process involving cooperation between all the participants as the main driving force of the learning process.

Keywords: English for specific purposes; adult learner; university; learning methods; learning process.

Introduction

The processes of globalisation, integration, and internationalisation of economy, business and education, the formation of the knowledge society are becoming the most important challenges for Ukraine, as well as for other countries. They urge to search for new approaches to professional training as a necessary condition for competitiveness and sustainable economic growth of the society. Active international cooperation in all spheres of life requires from a modern specialist not only professional competences but also proficiency in foreign languages, especially English as the language of international business. In this context, exploration of ways of optimisation of foreign language learning is gaining primary importance.

As more and more adults in Ukraine continue to study throughout their lives and may acquire more than one qualification, the average age of students of higher education institutions is increasing, and therefore foreign language learning at university should be organised in the same way as with working adults. In this regard, it is important to understand that a modern student is an adult learner who has a number of characteristic features that distinguish him from a child as a learner and thus should be considered in the learning process. Unfortunately, higher education institutions in Ukraine lack sufficient understanding of the importance of using adult education methods, techniques and approaches, which significantly hampers the learning process, makes it less effective, and reduces students' motivation.

In our article, based on the practical experience of English language teachers of the National Technical University of Ukraine "Igor Sikorsky Kyiv Polytechnic Institute", **we aim** to show how specific features of

adults as learners can be considered in teaching English for specific purposes and what learning methods can be appropriate for that purpose.

Theoretical background

As mentioned before, the professional education of specialists at university level is determined by the specific features of adults as learners. In this context, the definition of the terms "adult" and "adulthood" are crucial for the understanding of characteristics of an adult student, his / her needs and aims of learning. According to Merriam and Caffarella, "it is … the nature of *adults* as learners and the distinguishing characteristics of the adult learning process that differentiate adult education from other kinds of education. To facilitate the process of learning, it is especially important to know who the adult learner is…" (Merriam, & Caffarella, 1999, p. xi).

However, given the multiaspectual nature of these terms, in science, there is no single vision of who should be considered an adult. Zmeyov (2007) notes that: "... in the theory and practice of learning, there is an ongoing debate about the definition of an adult from the sociological, psychological, and pedagogical perspectives. This is explained by the fact that, depending on the understanding of the agent of the learning process, the theory and organisation of learning are constructed" (p. 78).

One of the first scientists who presented his comprehensive understanding of adulthood was Knowles (1980), who considered four possible definitions of adulthood. He wrote that "... there is a physiological definition: achievement of the ability to reproduce – which varies from era to era, culture to culture, an individual to an individual (and probably from sex to sex)" (Knowles, 1980, p. 24). Then he drew attention to the fact that there are various legal definitions which determine the age that gives the right to vote, drive a vehicle, drink alcohol beverages. They also set an age that defines the legal status of a juvenile and adolescent offender, marriage age, etc. But, as he pointed out, "there is a wide variation among governments and eras in these definitions" (p. 24). Therefore, in the field of education, Knowles (1980) finds it expedient to use the social definition, according to which "... a person is adult to the extent that that individual is performing social roles typically assigned by our culture to those it considers to be adults – the role of worker, spouse, parent, responsible citizen, soldier, and the like", and a psychological definition – "... a person is adult to the extent that that individual perceives herself or himself to be essentially responsible for her or his own life" (Knowles, 1980, p. 24). So he singles out two critical aspects of adulthood – performance of adult roles and self-concept of an individual.

In line with Knowles' (1980) definition, Merriam and Brocket (2007) consider adulthood to be "a sociocultural construction" and explain that "the answer to the question of who is an adult is constructed by a particular society and culture at a particular time" (p. 4).

Our analysis of the criterial features of an adult learner shows the close relationship between the education of an adult person and his / her practical life needs, which urges an adult learner to be an active participant of the learning process. An adult learner needs to understand the value of learning. He / she is a self-directed personality, has a large and varied (domestic, social, professional) life experience, urgent need for study, is practically oriented and guided by internal stimuli for learning. As a result of these objective factors, an adult student plays an active, leading role in the organisation of all stages of his educational process.

In view of the characteristic features of an adult student, the professional training of a specialist in classical university is a purposeful, systemic and consistent process that has its own characteristics and follows a certain system of principles or "basic requirements and rules" which ensure its effectiveness (Ogienko, 2008, p. 316). As a methodological category, principles form a unity that derives from the values of a particular educational paradigm and serves as the ground of learning methods and techniques, influencing the selection of content and forms of organisation of the learning process (Kukuev, 2010, p. 219).

In pedagogical science, numerous researches are aimed at studying the specifics of adult learning, identifying the conditions for successful adult learning process. Scientists have developed models, principles, and theories that explain the features of adult learning and substantiate the need to apply innovative educational technologies in teaching adults. They are based on six assumptions formulated by Knowles (1990) as andragogical principles of learning which follow from the characteristics of an adult learner (pp. 57–63) and, according to Merriam (1993), are "inarguably the best known set of principles explaining learning in adulthood" (p. 1):

– adults need to know why the learning is valuable for them and what benefits it can bring (Knowles, 1990). Here Knowles relied on the results of Tough's (1979) research which showed that before starting to study something adults carefully weigh all the advantages of the knowledge they are going to acquire, as well as all the negative effects that will follow if they do not do it;

– an adult has self-consciousness of an independent individual capable of self-directed learning. Knowles (1990) believed that a person becomes psychologically mature when he or she begins to be aware of his / her self-direction. And as soon as this happens, adults develop a deep psychological need for others to perceive and treat them as people capable of self-direction (p. 58);

– an adult has certain life experience that must become a rich source and foundation of learning (Knowles, 1970, p. 39);

– adults' readiness to learn is directly related to the social tasks facing them in the course of their development. Adults also become ready to learn what they need to know and are able to deal effectively with real professional problems (Knowles, 1990);

– adults have a practical approach to learning and are interested in the immediate application of the acquired knowledge. This means that adults are interested in learning something to the extent that it, in their opinion, will help them accomplish their tasks or solve the problems that face them in real life (Knowles, 1990, p. 61);

– motivation of adults for learning is mainly caused by internal factors. While children are motivated by external factors such as grades, diplomas, honors, fear of failure, the main incentives in the learning of adults are internal stimuli such as the desire to increase the satisfaction from work, raise the personal self-esteem, quality of life, etc. (Knowles, 1980).

Based on these principles Knowles (1980) defines the features of organisation of adult learning process at the stages of planning, implementation and evaluation as also substantiates the necessity of using interactive teaching methods and group work which motivate learners to be active participants of educational activities (Lytovchenko, 2016b).

Principles of adult learning, formulated by Knowles (1980), underlie the principles of teaching ESP:

1) "Instruction should be made as meaningful as possible to the adult learner by making use of the learner's prior content, workplace or professional knowledge;

2) Direct use in the classroom is made of materials, tools, equipment and "things" ("realia") that the learner will actually use after training;

3) English language skills are improved at the same time that the learner's content knowledge, information knowledge, processing skills, discourse skills, turn-taking skills, cross-cultural skills, and sociolinguistic skills are improved;

4) Valid assessment of learning requires context / content specific measurement" (Global Talent Bridge, 2018, p. 3-3).

From this definition of ESP teaching principles, it follows that the most effective are interactive learning methods and techniques since they most fully involve adult students in self-directed learning. In this context, teaching becomes not so much creative as collaborative art (Knowles, 1950, p. 29), and the cooperation between the teacher and the student becomes the main driving force of the learning process. The basis of such cooperation is the active involvement of learners to the organisation of the learning process, the use of innovative educational technologies in the learning process.

There is a wide variety of methods and techniques in teaching ESP which are especially attractive to adult learners because they are based on the above-mentioned principles. For example, group discussion is preferred for fostering collaboration, real-life interaction, active engagement of students in learning (Harmer, 2016; Prichard, Bizo & Stratford, 2006; Alfares, 2017). Task-Based Learning (TBL) and Project-Based Learning (PBL) are particularly valued for their learner-centeredness, authenticity of communicative situations, focus on students' needs (Willis & Willis, 2007; Herrin, 2009; Bilsborough, 2018). Information and communication technologies are found to be powerful tools for provision of high degree of students' self-directedness and autonomy in learning (Monteiro, 2018; Butler-Pascoe, 2009; McClanahan, 2014). Methods for teaching ESP to adult learners are quite varied and their diversity and popularity are growing, which helps to attain the most important goal – increasing student achievement.

Methods

We conducted a mini-research among 12 English teachers of Department of English for Engineering of the National Technical University of Ukraine "Igor Sikorsky Kyiv Polytechnic Institute" who had the opportunity to work both with children (of secondary school age) and adult university students. Since our intention was not to collect statistics, but simply to share experience of use of methods and technologies that make it possible to take into account specific features of adults as learners in teaching ESP at university level, as a data collection tool we used a methodology that is typical of qualitative type of research – an open-ended questionnaire which included three questions:

1. Do you think that university students have to be treated as adults and taught with the use of adult learning methods and techniques? Why / Why not?

2. What kind of learning climate do you find most effective for adult students and what do you usually do to set it?

3. What learning methods and technologies do you find most effective and motivating for adult students?

Results

The analysis of answers collected in this way shows that all the teachers (100 %) taking part in the research are aware of importance of using adult learning technologies in ESP. They support their position by the fact that adults as learners are different from children in that they: are more independent and autonomous than children; are more responsible and motivated to obtain maximum results from learning than children; are able to perform more complex learning tasks than children; have content knowledge that helps to acquire necessary knowledge and skills in ESP more easily; have certain life experience and are more able of critical thinking than children; are more critical of content, resources, forms and methods of learning and, accordingly, have higher expectations; prefer more structured material presentation than children; can keep their attention focused for a much longer time than children; must be respected and treated as partners; are motivated to learn only if the content is professionally relevant.

When answering the second question the respondents showed that they find the learning climate very important. In describing the atmosphere which, in their opinion, can produce effective learning they used the following attributes: friendly, non-authoritarian, supportive, informal, non-threatening, collaborative, involving, non-stressful, accepting, trust-based.

The respondents also emphasised the fact that in order to set such kind of climate they as teachers first of all treat their students as equals, show respect for their opinions, do not criticise them, encourage students, especially those who are shy, try to make them feel more comfortable and relaxed. One of the teachers said, "I engage and support shy students giving them an opportunity to express their "expert" opinion in topics they are most confident in because they have certain professional knowledge of them". This, to our mind, illustrates how students' professional experience and their readiness to share it can be used in building favourable learning climate. Another teacher said she sometimes asks her students about their preferences in learning. For example, at the end of the class, she asks students what activities they liked / disliked most and why. This helps to create trustful relations between the teacher and students.

Another important means of setting a positive atmosphere mentioned by the teachers was group work. When students work in groups they are less constrained, more open, enthusiastic, engaged, cooperative, united around a common task, responsible for results. Friendly atmosphere in a group is spread to the wider context of the classroom.

The results of the study show that the way of error correction is important for setting a favourable learning atmosphere. First of all, errors must be accepted as inevitable and natural in any learning. Their correction should not be insulting for students; on the contrary, they must feel that the teacher corrects mistakes to help them improve their language skills. Most of the respondents (7 teachers (58%)) also think that over-correction creates a demotivating atmosphere and if every single mistake is corrected by the teacher, the students may lose self-confidence. 8 respondents (67%) also find peer correction very effective for creating favourable atmosphere, because, as one of them mentioned, "if students are authorised to correct each other's mistakes, they feel that they can help their peers".

When answering the third question related to learning methods and techniques the respondents find most effective and motivating for adult students, they mentioned different interactive methods and technologies which imply active communication and collaboration between students. In our research, we singled out only 5 of them – those which were chosen by at least 3 teachers (N ≥ 3). Most frequently mentioned were: group discussion (4 respondents), task-based learning (3 respondents), project-based learning (10 respondents), use of technologies (12 respondents), blended learning (12 respondents).

Group discussions are among the most favourable activities for adult learners because they are very close to adults' real life. Our respondents mention that discussions take place almost every day – at home with family members (for example, about family matters and problems), among friends (for example, about films, books, politics), at work (for example, in business meetings, job interviews), so they are very motivating for adults and useful as they prepare them for different situations that may arise in the real world.

Project-based learning is considered by our respondents as very appropriate for adults because it is to a high degree learner-centred and "a great tool to engage students in collaboration with each other". Like in task-based approach the learning is focused on a task but the difference is in that completing it may take

quite a long time, even a semester or a year. Our respondents find this technology especially valuable for adult learners as it provides much autonomy to them in choosing means of research, resources, time, place and organisation of the study, ways of cooperation and sharing ideas with peers, form of presenting the results of the investigation. The teachers also state that they prefer this technology for adult learners because it connects classroom to real world.
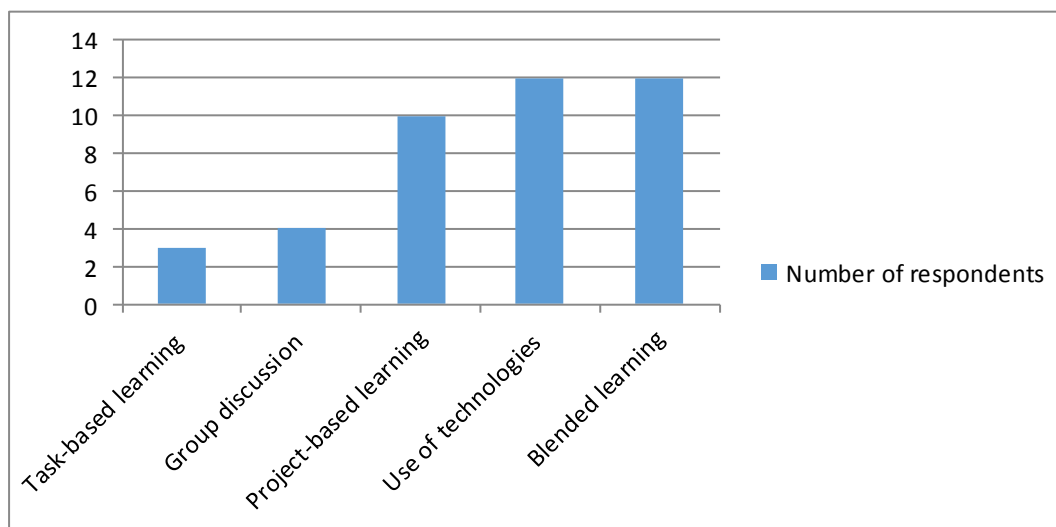

Fig. 1. Learning methods and techniques which are found by our respondents especially appropriate for teaching adult learners at university

Technologies in learning are especially preferred by our respondents because they permit a high degree of self-direction, interaction, language use inside and outside the classroom and thus are very motivating for adult learners. The respondents widely use distance learning (distance courses are developed for university students of different specialties), Skype, mobile learning (for accessing internet resources, listening to podcasts, going through learning materials etc. in any place and at any convenient for students time), podcasting (both authentic podcasts that are not designed for ELT but are appropriate for listening activities and those which are specifically produced for learning purposes), online video lectures, Massive Open Online Courses (for individual learning).

Blended learning, according to our respondents, can best meet the needs of adult learners as it is a combination of face-to-face learning with independent technology-based learning in a convenient for learners mode, and therefore has maximum adjustability and comfort. Respondents also mention using flipped learning, when they ask students to watch or listen to a small lecture at home and then discuss it in class and perform tasks based on its content. Blended learning, as stated by the respondents, is especially preferable for adult learners because, on the one hand, the use of technologies permits them to take full control of their study, on the other hand, students have the opportunity to communicate in person, discuss things face-to-face, exchange opinions etc.

It is notable that all 12 teachers mentioned using group work as they considered it the basis for successful implementation of all adult learning methods and techniques. One respondent said, "it gives adult learners the possibility to be fully engaged in learning, practice the language, feel more confident, independent from the teacher". Other respondents also mentioned that group work is particularly effective for adults because those of them who are more confident as language users have a great chance to share their knowledge, skills and experience, help and support others in the group. On the other hand, those who do not speak the language confidently can practice it in a non-threatening environment (unlike in whole-class activities, when they feel that the teacher's and all the students' attention is focused entirely on them) and thus are not embarrassed about making mistakes.

Discussion

The results of our research contribute to the understanding of how features of adults as learners can be considered in teaching ESP at university level and what learning methods teachers may find suitable for that purpose. Our findings are in line with those obtained by a number of authors who studied the specifics of English language learning by adults (Kukulska-Hulme & Viberg, 2018; Ainoutdinova & Ainoutdinova, 2017; Vikulina & Obdalova, 2017; Cheng, 2017; Wang, 2017; Klimova, 2018; Beseghi, 2017; Avci &

Adiguzel, 2017; Lavrysh, 2016; Chugai, Terenko & Ogienko, 2017; Lytovchenko, 2016a) and, in view of characteristic features of adults as learners, emphasised that language learning for adults must be flexible, interactive, meet students' personal and professional needs, provide peer- and self-evaluation, active engagement and cooperation, cultural authenticity, motivation and possibilities of immediate implementation of its results into practice.

The choice of interactive methods and technologies which were mentioned by our respondents as appropriate for teaching English to adult students at university finds strong theoretical and empirical support from the field of adult education and language acquisition research.

Thus, previous researches show that group work in general and group discussion, in particular, are especially effective in adult language learning. They provide opportunities to engage adult students in discussion of issues and collaborative learning in a less threatening environment (Harmer, 2016). In groups, students may feel more independent as they are encouraged both to teach other students and learn from them (Alfares, 2017). As a result, both parties benefit from the learning, as those who help may improve the target language skills while teaching and explaining to others (Lier, 2014). Students are also more motivated to help their peers in groups because they have to support each other to achieve the desirable result as a group (Prichard, Bizo & Stratford, 2006). Alfares (2017) investigates learners' perceptions of the benefits and difficulties of group work in English classes and argues that learners find group work beneficial for their motivation to learn and the development of knowledge. It creates a friendly, supportive learning environment, natural, real-life interaction, helps students feel more confident when speaking outside the classroom and thus prepares for communication in a larger social environment.

The positive aspects of Task-Based Learning and Project-Based Learning which were singled out by our respondents as specifically relevant for teaching ESP to adult students, are quite similar to those presented in other studies (Willis & Willis, 2007; Herrin, 2009; Bilsborough, 2018; Lytovchenko, Ogienko, & Terenko, 2017; Lytovchenko, 2009). These two learner-centred approaches have a number of advantages over traditional methods: they allow students to focus on real communication before doing any serious language analysis; they focus on students' needs by putting them into authentic communicative situations and allowing them to use all their language resources to deal with them; they encourage students to take responsibility for their own learning; learners are exposed to a wide variety of language and not just grammar. A particular advantage of Project-Based Learning – the ability to motivate students – is singled out, because "projects bring real life into the classroom… Project work … involves real life communicative situations" (Bilsborough, 2018).

The results of our study related to the use of technologies and blended learning in ESP classes for adults at university level are in full agreement with numerous researches in this area. "Self-directed learning on the internet is becoming increasingly popular and it is one other way to encourage our students to practise their language outside the classroom, or it is a vital resource for the student who cannot get to a classroom" (Monteiro, 2018). Butler-Pascoe (2009) lists a number of advantages of technology use in ESP, including providing communicative activities characteristic of specific professional environment; promoting understanding of socio-cultural perspectives of the language as practiced in different professions; providing field-specific input and facilitating student production; providing strategies for language development and content-specific understanding; using authentic materials from specific disciplines and occupations; supplying authentic audiences, including outside experts in specific fields; using collaborative learning; being student-centred and addressing specific needs of students; meeting affective needs of students: motivation, self-esteem, and autonomy, etc. (pp. 2–3). McClanahan (2014) focuses on the use of technologies for the practical orientation of learning, which is of primary significance in adult education. She points out that "technology can bring the real world into the ESL classroom via multimedia supports, and in this way, it strengthens the connections between the English language and the experiences and needs of the learners", makes language learning more related to their lives (pp. 23, 26).

Conclusion

As shown by the results of our survey, teachers find interactive ESP learning methods and techniques the most effective for teaching adult students at university level. Among those which are most commonly preferred are: group discussion, task-based learning, project-based learning, use of technologies, blended learning, since they most fully involve adult students in self-directed learning, permit taking into account the characteristic features of adults as learners, make learning a collaborative process involving cooperation between the teacher and the student as the main driving force of the learning process. Group work is considered the basis for successful implementation of all adult learning methods and techniques as it creates a friendly, supportive learning environment, natural, real-life interaction, helps students feel more confident, prepares for communication in a larger social environment.

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