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## Teaching Foreign Languages to Adult Learners: Issues, Options, and Opportunities

**Abstract.** As is the case with any other age group, teaching a foreign language to adults has its own specificity, with some attributes of older learners being facilitative of this task and others constituting a source of major difficulties. The paper aims to provide an overview of key issues relevant to language learning and teaching in the case of adults, highlighting options that teachers have at their disposal and illustrating ways in which the characteristics of this age group can be capitalized upon to enhance instruction. In the first place, common myths about language learning are tackled, which is followed by a consideration of issues concerning the identification of the aims of instruction, the choice of the syllabus as well as instructional techniques, the role of grammar teaching and error correction, the influence of individual learner differences, and the contribution of autonomy and language learning strategies.

**Keywords:** adult foreign language education; instructional goals; syllabus type; instructional techniques; grammar teaching; individual differences; learner autonomy.

### 1. Introduction

Before embarking on the discussion of issues, options and opportunities in teaching foreign languages to adults, as signaled in the title of the present paper, it is necessary at the very outset to define this age group and come up with a list of its distinctive characteristics, a task that may in itself pose

a formidable challenge. If we apply the criteria proposed by Komorowska (2003) in her division of learners into age groups, namely the ability to read and write unobtrusively, the capacity to engage in abstract thought, intellectual maturity and social maturity, adults can be regarded as individuals 19 years of age or above. With respect to teaching this age group, she observes that it is typically less problematic than in the case of children and teenagers since, on most occasions at least, adults are not forced to sign up for a language course but choose to do so of their own accord. Brown, in turn, discusses the features of adults as language learners by contrasting them with children, pointing out that they “have superior cognitive abilities that can render them more successful in certain classroom endeavors” (2001: 90). As a result, as he argues, adults are better able to deal with the abstractness of rules and some language-related concepts, their longer attention spans allow them to endure even quite tedious activities, their need for multisensory input is considerably reduced, they are much less susceptible to emotional pressures and they are prepared to focus on isolated linguistic features, as required when grammar structures are introduced. Obviously, such characteristics come with a number of caveats as it is obvious, for instance, that excessive reliance on abstractness, uninteresting tasks or constant decontextualization are bound to do more harm than good (Brown 2001: 90–91).

While, on the one hand, such descriptions are without doubt necessary in textbooks for prospective teachers, not least because they allow imposing order on the undeniable complexity of foreign language teaching and providing manageable guidelines for effective instructional practices, on the other, they unavoidably involve overgeneralizations and oversimplifications. This is because there is a wide array of contextual and individual variables which dictate that different adults may manifest rather different characteristics and confront the task of language learning in quite disparate ways, thereby requiring sometimes radically different instructional approaches. It is clear, for example, that individuals in their twenties cannot be taught in exactly the same way as those in their fifties, or that students majoring in English will have different agendas and expectations from those pursuing other majors and attending foreign language classes as part of their BA or MA programs, not to mention those who enroll in language courses later in their lives in response to personal or professional needs. For this reason, it has to be clarified at the very beginning that the considerations in the present paper are intended to refer in particular to *younger adults*, those between, say 20 and 40 years of age, attending *non-major general foreign language courses*, both as an inherent part of their higher education or outside of such education (e.g. in a private school), which does not exclude the possibility

of occasional references to and comparisons with other groups or contexts. In addition, given the immense complexity and diversity of issues that are involved in foreign language instruction, irrespective of a particular age group, the discussion is necessarily selective, with the themes touched upon often reflecting the research interests of the present author, as well as subjective, with the views expressed sometimes being indicative of his convictions or personal experiences rather than theoretical claims or hard-and-fast empirical evidence. These crucial caveats having been made, common myths concerning language learning will first be tackled, which will be followed by the consideration of the aims of language pedagogy in the case of adults, the choice of syllabus type and instructional techniques, the place of grammar teaching and error correction, the need to attend to individual learner differences, and the role of autonomy and learning strategies. In conclusion, an attempt will be made to bring all of these themes together and offer some basic guidelines on effective foreign language learning and teaching in the age group in question.

## 2. Common Myths Concerning Language Learning

The learning and teaching of foreign languages is beset with a number of false assumptions, referred to here as *myths*, that can be highly detrimental to these endeavors, and it is warranted to dispel them before moving on to discussing issues in adult foreign language education. One of those is related to *the age factor* and can be found in the widespread opinion that the earlier language instruction begins, the better, a logical consequence of this being the belief that, by a certain age, successful language learning becomes exceedingly difficult, if not impossible. This is the reason why, for example, some parents enroll their two- or three-year-old children in language classes and why it is so common to hear from a thirty-year-old that he or she is simply too old to learn languages. Beliefs of this kind are reflective of the *critical period hypothesis*, according to which there exists “a biologically determined period of life when language can be acquired more easily and beyond which time language is increasingly difficult to acquire” (Brown 2001: 52). As many specialists argue, however, and as abundant empirical evidence shows, while children might indeed have an advantage in naturalistic environments and an early starting age might be important for achieving more native-like pronunciation, its significance diminishes in cases of limited in- and out-of-class access to the target language (TL). In fact, in such situations, age-related effects are likely to be superseded by a host of other variables,

such as intensity of exposure, opportunities for language use, affective factors (e.g. motivation) or language aptitude (cf. Birdsong 2014; Cook and Singleton 2014; Muñoz 2012; Muñoz and Singleton 2011; Skehan 2014). Thus, one can only agree with Cohen when he aptly comments:

‘the younger the better principle’ is only valid in environments where there is a constant and natural exposure to the L2 [...]; in typical classroom environments where the amount of exposure is relatively small, older learners seem to have the advantage over their younger peers, that is, here, older is better. (2010: 162)

Somewhat similar in its degree of determinism is the assumption that successful learning is only possible if one is endowed with a *special gift for languages*. This belief is responsible for lame excuses, such as “Language learning is not for me” or “I am good at the sciences but I just do not have the ability to learn English”, frequently coming from evidently intelligent individuals, in their twenties or thirties, quite successful in other walks of life. While there is no denying that the possession of this gift, knack or flair, referred to in the literature as *foreign language aptitude*, however it is conceptualized (see e.g. Dörnyei 2005; Dörnyei and Ryan 2015; Skehan 2010), immensely aids the process of learning and makes it more effortless, this attribute may be present in different individuals to a different extent. Apart from this, its various components (e.g. working memory capacity, analytical ability) may be manifested to varying degrees and not having much of an innate talent for languages does not in the last mean that this undertaking is doomed to failure if sufficient effort is invested. To quote from Cohen once again,

language aptitude does *not* determine whether or not someone can learn a language. If a learner is not a natural language learner, this can be compensated for by various other factors, such as high motivation or the use of effective language learner strategies. Indeed, the majority of people *are* able to achieve at least a working knowledge of an L2 regardless of their aptitude – so where there is a will, there is most likely a way. (2010: 162)

Other common misconceptions that also deserve to be briefly addressed at this juncture are that visiting the country in which the target language is spoken guarantees success, that it would be most beneficial to recreate in the language classroom the conditions of naturalistic, real-life communication, that teaching grammar is unnecessary, and that there exists one miraculous recipe

for successful language learning, usually associated with a particular teaching method. As regards the first of these beliefs, while it can hardly be denied that prolonged stays abroad can have a beneficial effect on attainment (see e.g. Cai, Li and Liu 2013; Llanes and Muñoz 2012), it cannot be assumed that such gains will automatically accrue, as much depends on the nature of the stay (e.g. academic or leisure), opportunities for target language use (e.g., reduced when living with individuals speaking the mother tongue) or the nature of this use (e.g. for interaction with native speakers in a variety of settings vs. for basic work-related purposes). On the face of it, it would also seem that conducting language lessons in such a way that classroom interaction exhibits the features of out-of-class communication is a sound proposition. The problem is, though, that, first, this might be an unachievable goal on account of, among others, imperfect nature of exposure, availability of learners' first language and limited opportunities for output (Ellis 1997); second, such efforts fail to take into account scant access to the TL outside the classroom, and, third, they are incongruent with the purposes of instructed language acquisition and may sometimes backfire. As Pawlak (2004: 103) concluded on the basis of the findings of his study of interactive processes in lessons conducted by Polish and American teachers, "replicating the characteristics of general conversation in the foreign language classroom does not necessarily promote language development and, in some cases, can even hinder rather than foster that process". Closely tied to this is the issue of grammar instruction because, although there exists empirical evidence that some TL features can be learned incidentally in classroom settings, this should not be interpreted as meaning that such an approach is the most effective and that it cannot be improved on and accelerated through appropriate form-focused instruction (FFI) (cf. Pawlak 2006, 2013). Such reservations are echoed in the words of Larsen-Freeman, who writes:

I believe it is a myth that grammar can be learned on its own, that it need not be taught. [...]. The point of education is to accelerate the acquisition process, not be satisfied with or try to emulate what learners can do on their own. Therefore, what works in untutored language acquisition should not automatically translate into prescriptions and proscriptions for pedagogical practice for all learners. (2003: 78)

Finally, despite the promises of those advertising various teaching methods, some of which are claimed to ensure fluent language use within months, if not weeks, there is no one specific approach to learning or teaching that can be expected to be capable of doing such wonders. The reason for this

is that the effects of second language acquisition, whether it is instructed or not, hinge upon a wide array of learner-internal and learner-external variables, ranging from individual learner characteristics and experiences, through the specificity of the instructional setting and the nature of instruction, to the skill and involvement of the teacher, to name but a few (e.g. Lightbown and Spada 2013). Therefore, an instructional technique that might work superbly for one learner or a group of learners in a specific context, might fail dismally in other circumstances, which testifies to the significance of tailoring learning and teaching approaches to the parameters of a particular situation (cf. Kumaravadivelu 2006).

### 3. Aims of Foreign Language Learning and Teaching

When addressing the aims of foreign language learning and teaching, be it in the case of adults or, in fact, any other age group, it is perhaps fitting to begin with a brief consideration of what the mastery of the target language involves. A convenient point of reference for this purpose is the model of communicative competence first put forward by Canale and Swain (1980), and subsequently amended by Canale (1983), where four components are distinguished, namely: (1) *grammatical* or *systemic competence*, which is related to the knowledge of the subsystems of the TL (i.e. grammar, lexis, pronunciation and spelling), *discourse competence*, which is concerned with constructing spoken and written texts (e.g. issues of coherence and cohesion), *sociolinguistic competence*, which pertains to pragmatic considerations (e.g. sociopragmatic and pragmalinguistic issues), and *strategic competence*, which is reflective of the ability to deal with communication breakdowns and to make communication more effective<sup>1</sup>. In addition, a key distinction has to be made between *explicit knowledge*, which is declarative, conscious and can only be drawn upon when learners have sufficient time to plan their utterances, and *implicit knowledge*, which is procedural, subconscious and can be accessed in real processing time (cf. Ellis 2007). It is the latter or a highly automatized version of the former that is indispensable for spontaneous communication, since, for example, a learner may be able

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<sup>1</sup> The author is fully aware of subsequent modifications and extensions of the concept of communicative competence, as evident, for example, in the models proposed by Bachman (1990) or Byram (1997), the latter of whom introduced the construct of *intercultural communicative competence*. Although these are significant developments, it is the belief of the present author that Canale and Swain's (1980) model is the most pertinent to the current discussion.

to use advanced grammar structures or vocabulary in traditional exercises or be aware of a variety of pragmatic features, but be incapable of employing them interacting with others due to lacking attentional resources. Finally, such knowledge has to be used across different language skills which, in most cases, have to be integrated for successful communication, which places even greater demands on learners' working memory capacity, with the effect that becoming adept in fluent language use in different situations poses a formidable challenge.

Obviously, attaining such superior command of a foreign language can only be regarded as a viable goal in the case of students majoring in that language, with the caveat that even for most of them such accomplishment often turns out to be unrealistic, either because of constantly falling levels of proficiency, scant exposure to the TL and limited contacts with native speakers, insufficient aptitude or simply lack of motivation or need to become native-like. In fact, even if such students gain superior control of target language subsystems, that is achieve high levels of grammatical competence, the other competences are bound to lag behind, a deficiency that can hardly be rectified without intensive, high-quality exposure in a TL environment. For the vast majority of adults, however, the goals of foreign language education will be much more modest. For those, who take language courses as a requirement in their BA and MA programs and do not see any immediate value of foreign languages in their lives, such a goal, sadly, might simply be getting a credit which is necessary to complete the course of study. As a result, such individuals may be fully content with being able to satisfy rudimentary communicative needs when they go on holidays abroad, assuming that such an opportunity ever arises. As regards adult learners who need a foreign language for their future jobs, whatever these may be, the aim of learning and teaching will be determined by specific professional needs. For instance, for a physicist, one that is perhaps contemplating seeking a doctoral degree, the priority might be in the main reading academic texts and, perhaps, at some point, writing papers or being able to understand and deliver speeches at international conferences. For a business person, much more important is likely to be the ability to engage in negotiations with partners in different contexts, although gaining ample skill in reading and writing may also constitute a desirable goal as he or she climbs the successive steps of the corporate ladder. What should be borne in mind, however, is that different grammatical constructions and different lexis will be useful for such individuals, and their need for strategic competence is also likely to vary, with such issue as good pronunciation or pragmatics taking a back seat as long as messages can be effectively conveyed. Yet another set

of goals of language learning may be envisioned by a secretary who uses a foreign language one or twice a month, a retired individual who decides to start language English for sheer entertainment, or an adult who chooses to go abroad for good to join a family residing in a country where the TL is spoken. In the last of these cases, learners are likely to place highest premium on basic communicative skills that will allow them to get by at airports, in shops or in everyday encounters with native speakers. What may come as a surprise, it is them that may be most in need of awareness of pragmatic conventions even if they are not able to adhere to them in their own target language production. Such diverse goals are bound to impact the ways in which a foreign language is taught and the targets for instruction, issues to which we now turn our attention.

#### **4. Syllabus Type and Instructional Techniques**

A question that has to be addressed when planning any foreign language course is what kind of syllabus should be employed and what instructional techniques should be used when focusing on the items included in this syllabus, with such choices applying in equal measure to all age groups, including adults. When it comes to the syllabus, which specifies teaching content, the sequencing of this content, and, sometimes, also specific objectives as well as the ways in which they can be pursued or evaluated, it can be organized around grammar (i.e. structural syllabus), vocabulary (i.e. lexical syllabus), notions and functions (i.e. notional-functional syllabus), situations in which the TL can be used (i.e. situational syllabus), themes covered in class (i.e. a topic-based syllabus), or it can be task-based in which case instruction is planned with respect to pedagogical tasks, which gradually become more difficult in terms of cognitive and linguistic demands (cf. Breen 2001; Ellis 2003; Johnson 2001; Nunan 2001). With the exception of foreign languages department students who might benefit to varying degrees from all of these (e.g. a structural syllabus in a grammar or pronunciation class but a lexical or topic-based one in a conversation class), the decision concerning the choice of a syllabus is closely tied to the aims of instruction. For instance, in general English classes, taught to students seeking different majors or individuals signing up for language courses in a private school, a structural syllabus is likely to be the norm, complemented with or even gradually replaced by a task-based syllabus with increasing proficiency levels. By contrast, although students specializing in specific areas might be taught in a similar way, language courses are likely to also include a lexical or



topic-based component catering to their professional needs (e.g. medical vocabulary in the case of doctors). Yet another choice might have to be made in the case of adults who wish to brush up on a foreign language they once learned but for which they lack communicative abilities, or individuals who expect to gain working knowledge of the TL within weeks or months, in which case a notional-functional or situational syllabus might be applied and needs analysis might provide guidance as to the targets of instruction.

For reasons of space, it is not possible in the present paper to discuss all the instructional techniques that could be the most useful in teaching different TL skills and subsystems. Suffice it to say then, that with adults, whatever their specific goals might be, the teaching techniques used can capitalize on their language awareness, capacity for abstract thought, long attention spans and superior analytical abilities, which means that learners can be openly informed about the instructional targets and requested to deliberately practice the TL features selected. In the case of grammar, for example, it might mean spending hours on changing active sentences into passive ones, in the case of pronunciation, it could entail tedious practicing of minimal pair contrasts and in the case of vocabulary it might mean memorizing lists of words or collocations. Adults are also better able to focus on TL skills in isolation, working on, for instance, specific types of reading and listening (e.g. skimming or scanning), particular genres that they need to conform to in their writing, or phrases that will allow them to express given language functions in a myriad of concrete situations. This should not be interpreted, however, as meaning that adults do not have to be supplied with opportunities to use the TL features in communication or to integrate different skills in pursuit of communicative goals, as only in this way can they be expected to develop necessary implicit knowledge or automatized explicit knowledge in order to successfully participate in real-time interactions. On a more general note, Komorowska (2003) emphasizes the need to plan classes independently of each other in view of the fact that adult learners might not be able to attend all of them due to personal or professional obligations, and to ensure that frequent revisions take place. Brown (2001), in turn, stresses that adults are capable of complex cognition, even if they are not always able to express their ideas in a foreign language, and cautions against treating them like children or disciplining them likewise. Both scholars also stress the need to take into account individual differences, manifest sensitivity to affective considerations and attempt to foster autonomy, issues that will be addressed later on in the present paper.

## 5. Grammar Teaching and Error Correction

Although the issue of grammar instruction has been touched upon when dispelling some of the myths concerning foreign language learning and teaching, the place of what is often referred to as *form-focused instruction*, an inherent part of which is the *provision of corrective feedback* undoubtedly deserves somewhat more extensive treatment. In the first place, it should be made plain that, irrespective of the aims of a language course, some reference to grammar structures is likely to occur in teaching adults, simply because failure to do so would be tantamount to not taking full advantage of the attributes that such learners possess, mentioned in the introduction to the present paper. For this reason, it is in this age group that it seems the most warranted to fall back on what Loewen describes as “systematic manipulation of the mechanisms of learning and/or the conditions under which they occur [in order to] enable or facilitate the development and acquisition of a language other than one first” (2015: 2). It is also here that it is the most reasonable to apply the first of the principles of instructed foreign language learning listed by Pawlak, according to which “deliberate and systematic FFI is indispensable if students are expected to go beyond basic communicative ability and become capable of conveying their messages in a way that is not only comprehensible, but also accurate, precise and appropriate” (2013: 215). In other words, in teaching adults, teachers can exploit the full potential of what has been called *grammaring*, approaching this subsystem not only as a *product* but also as a *process*, use grammar terminology, make informed choices between reliance on deduction and induction in introducing grammatical structures, strike the right balance between production-oriented and reception-based grammar teaching, use consciousness-raising activities or apply focused-communication (i.e., requiring application of specific TL features in communication) (cf. Larsen-Freeman 2003, 2010; Loewen 2015; Nassaji and Fotos 2011; Pawlak 2006, 2013), obviously on condition that they are cognizant of the existence of such instructional options.

This said, it is necessary to make a crucial qualification that *how much* grammar should be taught to adults as well as *how exactly grammar instruction should be implemented* must be guided by the aims of the course, learner characteristics and the exigencies of a specific context. Thus, for example, all points of grammar, even those minor ones, are likely to be covered in a grammar course constituting part of intensive instruction in a foreign language in a BA or MA program in English, even though pertinent questions can be raised about the need for such in-depth coverage and the focus on the

development of primarily explicit knowledge often evident in such cases. On the other hand, within the same context, grammar is likely to receive only scant emphasis in a conversation class, where only problematic areas may mainly be addressed in accordance with the principles of task-based instruction (cf. Ellis 2003; Nunan 2004), thus representing *incidental focus on form*, which entails brief and spontaneous instances of attention to TL features in the course of message conveyance (cf. Loewen 2011). Very selective grammar teaching, with a focus perhaps on awareness-raising, is also likely to be expected in the case of adult learners, especially in their senior years, who wish to develop basic communicative skills (e.g. for family-related purposes) or familiarize themselves with specialized vocabulary and, therefore, follow a functional-notional, situational or lexical syllabus. Finally, teachers have to strive to find a golden means in the case of students enrolled in language courses as part of their higher education, or adults who sign up for such courses for professional reasons and wish to develop both the ability to effectively get messages across and to gain ample command of literacy skills. In such situations, it is of paramount importance that teachers tread cautiously and manage to strike a balance between a focus on introducing and practicing grammar structures, which, it is worth adding, should be carefully selected and adjusted to students' needs, and other activities aimed at the development of the remaining TL subsystems and skills as well as their integration. Such a cautionary note is in order as teachers often fall into the trap of focusing excessively on grammar, a tendency that Swan ascribes to the fact that it seems tidy and teachable, thus providing a security blanket. As he comments, "in the convoluted landscape of a foreign language, grammar rules shine out like beacons" (2002: 150).

Caveats of this kind apply in equal measure to the provision of corrective feedback, no matter whether it is focused on inaccuracies in grammar, erroneous use of elements of other TL subsystems, pragmatic issues or discourse considerations. On the one hand, as Larsen-Freeman insightfully comments, "feedback on learners' performance in an instructional environment presents an opportunity for learning to take place. An error potentially represents a teachable moment" (2003: 126), with the beneficial effects of correction being attested to in the results of numerous studies undertaken in recent years (see e.g. Nassaji 2015; Pawlak 2014; Sheen and Ellis 2011). Without doubt, this considerable potential of corrective feedback can, yet again, be most effectively taken advantage of in teaching adults, who, thanks to their attributes, are best suited to benefit from such negative evidence and use it in restructuring their interlanguage systems. On the other hand, however, even in this age group abusing corrective feedback may

be detrimental, since there is a limit to the number of interruptions that learners can tolerate, lengthy explanations of errors may fail to be processed, and affective concerns are likely to be acute as adults may wish to avoid what they perceive as public humiliation and shy away from speaking. For this reason, moderation is recommended in error treatment, feedback should be provided in as pleasant a manner as possible and general principles of responding to inaccurate TL language production should be complied with. This involves, among other things, offering feedback differently depending on whether it occurs within accuracy-oriented activities (e.g. paraphrasing sentences to practice the rules of passive voice) or communication tasks (e.g. a spoken description of a landmark with the use of the passive), limiting the intervention to one or a limited number of targets when students are expected to practice a specific TL feature (i.e. focused correction), opting for more explicit, output-oriented feedback with the requirement for self-correction or more implicit, input-oriented correction, with no such expectation, depending on learners' awareness that a specific item is being targeted (i.e. presence of prior instruction) or their familiarity with the relevant rule (cf. Pawlak 2014).

## **6. Individual Learner Differences**

Since the topic of individual learner differences is so vast that entire books or edited collections have been devoted to it (e.g. Dörnyei 2005; Dörnyei and Ryan 2015; Gregersen and MacIntyre 2014; Pawlak 2012; Williams, Mercer and Ryan 2015), it is only possible here to touch on some of the issues that should be taken heed of in adult foreign language education. As Cohen writes,

The importance of learner characteristics cannot be overestimated. When students embark on the study of an L2, they are not merely 'empty vessels' that will need to be filled by the wise words of the teacher; instead they carry a considerable personal baggage to the language course that will have a significant bearing on how learning proceeds. (2010: 161)

Perhaps the most important idea to constantly keep in mind is that, as Gregersen and MacIntyre (2014) so superbly demonstrate in their recent book, individual learner variation does not have to be seen as a necessary evil that should be grudgingly tolerated, ignored or to some extent tamed, but, rather, viewed as an asset that can be capitalized on and successfully

harnessed with an eye to making instruction more effective. As they wisely point out,

By looking into the kaleidoscope of people in the classroom, taking note of the patterns that are forming and the forces that cause those patterns to change, teachers and learners can use the information emerging from emotion, cognition and behavior to understand and influence the ongoing stream of activity in the classroom. (2014: 244)

Clearly, there are individual difference variables that are entirely beyond the control of the teacher, such as age or gender. In this case, all practitioners could do is trying to differentiate the way they conduct classes with people in their twenties or in their sixties, for example in recognition of the declining cognitive abilities of the latter, or organizing group work in such a way that, when class composition allows, males are sometimes paired with females to optimize interaction. Other variables can only be manipulated to a minimal or very limited extent, good examples being language aptitude, working memory, intelligence or learning styles. Still, there are surely things that teachers can do to ameliorate their effect in order to enhance the process of learning. Gregersen and MacIntyre, for example, maintain that “although they may be somewhat stable features, (perhaps in specific domains), [...] cognitive abilities and attentional variables can be changed and manipulated through instruction and experience” (2014: 79), as well as presenting a number of activities that could be used for this purpose. Cohen (2010), in turn, talks about *style-stretching*, where students are encouraged to experiment with learning approaches that deviate from their preferred ones. Clearly, attempts to take such steps can and should be made with adults, although teachers must be aware that older learners, particularly those who have been successful in learning another language or are experts in other domains, may prove to be overly confident in the efficacy of their approach and reluctant to change their ways.

There are also individual difference variables that are to a large extent malleable and thus more susceptible to the impact of teachers’ interventions, such as anxiety, beliefs, willingness to communicate, motivation or language learning strategies. Since the last of these will be dealt with at some length in the following section, let us briefly comment on the first three and then devote a little more space to motivation which seems to play a pivotal role in teaching a foreign language to adults. Since anxiety may have a particularly debilitating effect on older learners, especially more mature ones who are

professionals in other walks of life, it is clearly necessary to take steps to diminish it by, for example, ensuring a non-threatening atmosphere or resorting to anxiety-reducing activities of the kind described by Gregersen and MacIntyre (2014), such as those which help learners identify triggers of their anxieties or equip them with appropriate strategies for managing apprehension (e.g. relaxation techniques). It may also be imperative to address the beliefs held by adults since some of those assumptions, manifested, for instance, in the myths illustrated earlier in the present paper, may be especially harmful and render the task faced by teachers even more challenging than it is on account of the personal and professional obligations of adult learners. This could be done, for example, by getting learners to reflect on their beliefs, share them with peers or take part in debates on the nature of language learning, and then making them aware of a lack of sufficient grounds for some of those or demonstrating how erroneous assumptions of this kind can interfere with the learning process (cf. Gregersen and MacIntyre 2014; Pawlak *et al.* 2006). Intervention of some kind may also be required with respect to willingness to communicate (WTC), defined as “the probability of initiating communication, given choice and opportunity” (MacIntyre 2007: 567). This is because adult learners, especially older ones, may display reluctance to speak as a result of affective concerns, related to the belief that they cannot be successful, that their utterances may be unintelligible, or that they cannot express their true personality or expertise in a foreign language. In order to remedy detrimental sentiments of this kind, teachers could try out a number of solutions, such as ensuring the presence of factors facilitating WTC, limiting factors hampering it, encouraging learners to plan for hesitations, raising students’ awareness as to potential future uses of the TL, generating a sense of security or fostering a propitious intergroup climate in the classroom (cf. Gregersen and MacIntyre 2014).

As regards motivation, Dörnyei states that “[i]t provides the primary impetus to initiate L2 learning and later the driving force to sustain the long and often tedious process; indeed all the other factors involved in SLA presuppose motivation to some extent” (2005: 65). Williams, Mercer and Ryan, in turn, adopt a more pedagogically-oriented stance and assert that “[u]nderstanding the motivation of students and playing a part in enhancing that motivation is surely one of the most rewarding aspects of being a teacher” (2015: 120). While motivation plays a crucial role in teaching foreign languages to any age group, it appears to be of particular significance in the case of adults for at least two reasons. First, somewhat contrary to what Komorowska (2003) claims, many younger adults, such as university students, are required to obtain a credit in a foreign language rather than

enrolling in a course of their own accord, and, not seeing the immediate benefits, they must often be encouraged to invest time and effort in the study of that language. Second, to refer to the process model of motivation put forward by Dörnyei and Ottó (1998), although adults may initially be highly motivated to start learning a foreign language, frequently driven by a vision of pragmatic gains (e.g. getting a better job), and have genuine hopes for success at the stage of *choice motivation* (i.e. when motivation is generated), serious problems may begin to surface at the stage of *executive motivation*, when the initial resolve has to be sustained as tangible progress is not easily perceived, as well as *retrospective motivation*, when an objective judgment has to be made about the reasons for learning outcomes. After all, situations are common when adult learners are enthusiastic about a language course only to drop out after a month or so when progress falls short of their expectations and disappointment sets in, a phenomenon that is further aggravated if they choose to attribute their failure to factors seemingly beyond their control. Thus, it is of pivotal importance to use appropriate motivational strategies which should first and foremost involve *creating basic motivational conditions* (e.g. a supportive classroom environment), and be compatible with the three stages of the motivational process mentioned above, that is *generating initial motivation* (e.g. creating realistic learner beliefs), *maintaining and protecting motivation* (e.g. setting specific goals for learners), and *encouraging positive retrospective self-evaluation* (e.g. promoting motivational attributions) (cf. Dörnyei 2001). Yet again, a number of activities that can be drawn upon to enhance adult learners' motivation at all of these stages are suggested by Gregersen and MacIntyre (2014). They are aimed to enhance learners' social identity, make them aware of the goals sought in the performance of specific tasks, teach them how to monitor task performance, convince them that lacking aptitude can be compensated for by motivation, increase their international posture and get them to envision their ideal selves with respect to foreign language learning.

## 7. Autonomy and Language Learning Strategies

In his seminal publication, Holec defined autonomy as the “ability to take charge of one’s own learning”, which means assuming “the responsibility for all the decisions concerning all aspects of this learning” (1981: 3). This may be manifested in independent identification of one’s goals in language learning, the choice of one’s own materials and preferred ways of learning, effective management of the time allotted to language study, adept self-evaluation,

the development of a useful repertoire of language learning strategies, or awareness of one's objectives, needs and preferences (cf. Hedge 2000; Pawlak *et al.* 2006). Moreover, the capacity for self-direction has to be accompanied by the willingness to exhibit it in specific circumstances as it is obvious that although a learner may be able to exhibit self-direction, he or she may decline to do so, either with respect to a foreign language that may be disliked or some instructional activities in the case of a language that is otherwise adored (cf. Littlewood 1996). Even though autonomy is an attribute that is sought when teaching any age group as it is bound to greatly contribute to the efficacy of the learning process, similarly to motivation, it should be particularly valued in the case of adults. This is because they are the most capable of engaging in autonomous behaviors and receptive to a multitude of ways in which autonomy can be fostered, and they might have the greatest need for self-direction due to their inability to regularly attend classes or complete homework assignments. In light of these considerations, it is obvious that one of the priorities for teachers dealing with adult learners is to determine the level of their independence and take actions to extend it. This could involve, for example, honing the ability to set learning goals, which should be concrete, short- and long-term, adjusted to individual needs and abilities, and constantly verified in response to internal and external demands. Other options include raising awareness about different aspects of the language learning process, using pair and group work, assigning projects, making students aware of the opportunities for out-of-class TL use, familiarizing them with the potential contributions of information and computer technology, promoting effective use of dictionaries, getting learners engaged in choosing topics or preparing lessons, or equipping them with skills needed to benefit from self-access centers (Benson 2001; Hedge 2000; Komorowska 2003; Pawlak *et al.* 2006).

A facet of the development of autonomy that deserves special attention is skillful use of language learning strategies which can be defined as "the conscious or semi-conscious thoughts and behaviors used by learners with the explicit goal of the knowledge and understanding of a target language" (Cohen 2010: 164). Such strategies can be classified in different ways, with Oxford (1990) making a well-known division into *direct strategies*, subdivided into cognitive, memory and compensation, and *indirect strategies*, grouped into metacognitive, affective and social, O'Malley and Chamot (1990) opting for a distinction between *metacognitive*, *cognitive* and *socioaffective strategies*, and Cohen (2010) seeking to reconcile these two taxonomies by categorizing strategies into metacognitive, cognitive, affective and social. Irrespective of how learning strategies are defined and



grouped, there is evidence that strategies-based instruction is beneficial, both with respect to the frequency of use of strategic devices and gains in language learning (cf. Rubin *et al.* 2007). In the case of adults, training of this kind is clearly necessary because it may substantially aid their efforts to gain greater control of the TL, but it can also often turn out to be most problematic as they may have their favorite, well tried ways of learning, particularly if they have attained a reasonable level of proficiency in another foreign language. Whatever the circumstances, if we want to help adult language learners to be more successful, there is an urgent need to train them in the employment of language learning strategies, focusing first on metacognitive strategies which supervise the use of other strategic devices, providing ample opportunities for the application of the strategies taught in the performance of language learning tasks, making the training as comprehensive as possible, and recognizing the facilitative role of the mother tongue in the process (cf. Chamot 2004; Rubin *et al.* 2007). The rationale behind instruction of this kind is elucidated by Hedge, who notes that “[a]s students develop effective ways to learn they will be better able to organize their attempt to continue their learning outside the classroom” (2000: 94), an argument that is particularly valid in the case of adults.

## **8. Conclusion**

As demonstrated throughout the present paper, teaching a foreign language to adults is likely to pose a major challenge which brings with it numerous opportunities but at the same time involves the necessity of confronting daunting difficulties. This stems from the fact that, on the one hand, adults possess attributes which may enhance their chances for success in learning a language, such as superior cognitive skills, capacity for self-direction, persistence, and, at least in some cases, considerable motivation, but, on the other hand, they are more prone to affective concerns, quicker to get discouraged, and more set in their ways of learning. Consequently, in order to ensure effective instruction, teachers have to try to capitalize on the strengths of this age group and take actions to minimize the deleterious effect of its weaknesses. Crucial in this respect is careful consideration of the aims of instruction and making sure that they are the most reasonable and feasible in a specific situation, the selection of the most appropriate syllabus as well as the most beneficial techniques and procedures and deciding on the place of grammar teaching and corrective feedback. Equally important is adept management of individual learner differences, the development of autonomy

to the degree that a given instructional setting allows, and the implementation of strategy training that would be responsive to the needs of a specific class. Even though ensuring that all learners in this age group attain the level of mastery of the target language that they envisage as an unachievable task, it is certainly possible to ensure that some individuals will be successful, whether this success is equated with basic communicative ability, comprehension of specialized texts, or advanced productive and receptive command of a particular foreign language in a range of situations.

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