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## TEACHING METHODS OF FOREIGN LANGUAGE ADULT LEARNERS DISLIKE

UDC 37.02:80

Received: 17.11.2001

Technical papers

Adults are demanding foreign language learners. My sample in the questionnaire consisted of 20 adult learners of German language in the hotel and tourism industry – false beginners and intermediate level learners. The questionnaire they were asked to fill in consisted of twelve questions asking the learners to admit to the teaching methods they dislike in learning German or would like to eliminate from the process in general. First of all they expect their learning to be an almost stress-free activity. In order to achieve that, as much as possible should be learnt in the classroom because they have difficulties reconciling home study with other duties. In the textbooks they need some instruction and equivalents in their native language to feel secure. Roleplays and listening to native speakers talking rapidly stresses them most. On the contrary, videotapes make them relaxed. Certainly there are some other things adult learners might dislike and it is very useful for the teacher to ask them about these things. The more you know about learners' likes and dislikes, the more fulfilling and successful the process of acquiring foreign language skills will be.

Key words: foreign language, teaching methods, stress-free learning, adult learners' likes and dislikes, successful process of acquiring foreign language skills.

### INTRODUCTION

Current situation in the tourist region of the Riviera of Opatija shows that we still lack the skilled staff in the hotel and tourism industry who are able to communicate in appropriate and decent German. The situation must be improved due to the fact that the majority of guests visiting the Riviera of Opatija are strongly German language oriented<sup>1</sup>.

### 1. ADULT LANGUAGE LEARNERS

The group suffering most from the unfavourable situation is of course the group of adult potential learners with some of them middle-aged. This group does not want to "give up." They are aware of the fact that they have to tune in to the times of change and learn German, which they now need for their career.

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<sup>1</sup> Blažević, N., Mehrsprachigkeit im Tourismus, 4. Zagreber Konferenz, KDV, Zagreb, 2001.

Their younger colleagues, people who graduated from schools and universities just several years ago also have a lot to catch up with. They did learn some German, but one could hardly call them fluent speakers of the language. So they too take up German courses.

When teaching such a group of students, a teacher of German must be aware of the specifics of this group. Adult learners differ from other age groups in respect to their learning experience, memory type, motivation, and, most of all, in respect to their needs and expectations. As they are a little bit "behind schedule," they want to learn fast and see the results almost immediately. Generally, they are a likeable age group to teach, although there are things which simply do not work with them. Having some experience of teaching German to adults, I decided to write out a questionnaire which would confirm some of my observations as to what irritates, frustrates and demotivates learners in this age group. Knowing about the don'ts of teaching adults seemed as important as knowing about the do's. I decided that knowing about the dislikes of adults should help to make the teaching-learning process more effective and enjoyable for the learners.

## 2. SAMPLE AND QUESTIONNAIRE PROFILE

My sample consisted of 20 adult learners mostly from Opatija and Rijeka. These learners come from the professional backgrounds of the hotel and tourism industry. The questionnaire they were asked to fill in consisted of twelve questions, four of them open-ended (e.g., "Are you satisfied with your textbook? Why? Why not?") and eight of the multiple-choice type.

The questionnaire asked the learners to admit to the things they dislike about learning German or would like to eliminate from the process in general, as well as to give reasons for both. Then it attempted to sound out more particular dislikes concerning such things as the textbook, type of classroom activities, exercises, materials, topics, and finally the teacher. On the basis of the answers received, I discovered the following seven things that adult learners of German dislike most:

### 2.1. Textbooks in German only

Although adult learners appreciate the textbooks available on the Croatian book market and used in most language courses for their clarity, logical structuring of the material, and pleasant visual form, one of the critical remarks about them is their lack of any language notes or explanations in Croatian. Without seeing a word in their native language, the learners feel totally teacher dependent and unable to use the textbook for self-study or revision at home. Learning words and grammar points which the learner did not memorise in the classroom or note down in class is difficult. The adult learner finds browsing through dictionaries and grammar compendiums in Croatian too time-consuming and becomes discouraged from studying on his or her own.

Most textbooks in use are of course based on the communicative method which stresses the efficiency of teaching German through German; that is, to make the students learn how to listen, to pick out key words, and begin to think for themselves. The learners, however, seem to find the idea of abandoning the native language a bit too challenging, at least when it comes to the textbooks they use.

If we think of Suggestopedic textbooks, which in an effort to minimize the learner's stress provide him with parallel columns of texts in the foreign and native language, respectively, we may come to a conclusion that some explanatory notes in Croatian and bilingual glossaries may not do much harm. These notes would not only save the learners' time, but also give them the sense of security they miss in the often new experience of learning a foreign language.

## 2.2. Role-plays

Many adult learners admit to their inhibitions when it comes to playing roles (i.e., pretending to be someone else). The problem with this kind of classroom activity boils down to the necessity of acting and improvising, which according to some learners requires special talent. Here adult learners prove more self-conscious than representatives of other age groups. We must, however, account for individual differences which, irrespective of their age, allow some people to be more or less suited to dramatic activities. When asked to play a role of a tourist abroad or a customer in a shop, some learners will behave almost naturally, while, others, for whom the situation seems artificial, may lack ideas to enliven the activity.

A solution to the problem may simply be giving the more inhibited learners more detailed briefing about their role, thus limiting the freedom of choice which seems to be troublesome for some adult learners. Foreign language learning without using language in situations would not be the same. As Byrne (1976) says: "We do not need to be over concerned if there are one or two students who find themselves unable to participate fully. Dramatic activities... involve more than just performance: the situation has to be discussed, the characters developed, the scene elaborated and the language to be used worked out. In these and other matters all students can participate fully." We must use the less inhibited or "more gifted" learners' potential and help those less likely to "improvise."

## 2.3. Drilling

When learning grammar, adult learners like to be given nice and clear explanations without too much specialist terminology so that they understand the problem fully before they start practising. With this cognitive approach to learning, when we move from the presentation stage to practice, adult learners are, not very fond of typical drilling exercises like substitution, repetition, or transformation.

Doing these kinds of mechanical exercises, learners do not see how this rather passive activity could possibly improve their overall performance in the foreign language and they easily get disinterested. Their way of thinking seems to be, "I must

first understand what it is all about and then try to use it myself in a sentence which is not so easy to predict." Intelligent learners, a term that includes most adults, soon realise that such exercises can be done without even trying to understand the sentence fully, which is rather pointless.

Consequently, adult learners must have something instead of habit-forming drills. They obviously prefer more involved activities like answering open-ended questions, describing pictures or cartoon stories, or solving crossword puzzles. Another activity is a translation exercise in which each sentence, even though based on the same structure, is different and the adult learners have to build the sentence from scratch, paying attention to the meaning of what they are saying. Attention-capturing activities in which some thinking is required seem more suitable for adult learners of a foreign language.

#### **2.4. Textbooks with no reading material or with artificial texts.**

Perhaps as a remnant of the grammar-translation method with which they were once taught foreign languages, adult learners do not appreciate textbooks that feature dialogues, pictures, and charts, but have only a few rather short passages for reading. New vocabulary items seem to be better remembered if they are introduced in a context or a longer text, a structured entity devoted usually to one subject with which the learner later associates a group of new words.

Adult learners are not satisfied with just any reading material. The text must be of interest to the learners. It seems that authentic texts, even at the elementary level, serve their purpose better than do artificially composed texts. They give the learners a challenge and a taste of real German. As many adult learners stress, they need to be equally acquainted with the spoken and written form of the foreign language they are learning. Written form involves primarily the business correspondence in the hotel and tourism industry.

#### **2.5. Homework**

What characterises an adult learner is his or her permanent lack of time and if they decide to take up a foreign language, this becomes quite a burden. Adult learners do want to learn but have very little or no time for it at home. They expect to learn as much as possible in the classroom. Being assigned homework and not finding time to do it can be very frustrating and may eventually lead to giving up the course. Whether or not to give homework is for the individual teacher to decide, once the teacher knows the "homework capacity" of the learners in a course. When assigning homework is pointless because the learners never do it, classroom activities must be enough. Much revision and remedial work, effective use of time, and some individual work (normally given as homework) in the classroom should solve the problem.

There may be alternative homework which does not require extra time, like listening to the radio or TV news in German and reading the press in German. A piece

of advice for an adult learner can be, "just keep your eyes and ears open to the language you are learning and we can do without homework as such."

## **2.6. Inflexible teachers**

Adult learners respond negatively to the teacher's using the textbook as the only teaching aid. They do not like the situation where the teacher uses the book in an indiscriminating way, prepares no other materials, or follows the teacher's book blindly. One of the reasons why adults are not very fond of conscientious, uninterrupted covering of the material in the textbook may be that they associate this kind of learning with their school years, which they obviously would not like to go back to as grown-up, professional people.

Sticking to the textbook material all the time sounds boring. It is necessary for the teacher to be innovative and prepare some extra materials and organise classroom activities in a different way from what the textbook instructions suggest. Adult learners expect their teacher to easily change the plans for the lesson, if such were the need of the group. The learners may ask for more situational language practice, or extra help in dealing with specialist language in their work. The teacher must be ready to adapt to the learners' temporary needs. Interesting ideas and a readiness to accommodate to the changing needs of the participants of the course is what adult learners appreciate about their teacher.

## **2.7. Audio- and videotapes**

This is one thing we cannot do without, even though some learners might not like it. The problem with listening-based activities is that they are, for some adult learners, the most frustrating ones. Adult learners seem to feel under more pressure when they are supposed to understand a recorded text than when they are asked to speak. They complain about the quality of the recording and frown at any background noises. What irritates them most is "the impossible speed" at which the people in the recording speak. The speed of authentic speech, much higher than that of a nonnative teacher to whom the students are accustomed, the background noises some recordings include and the fact that the speakers do not always use standard language (on many cassettes there are voices of children, elderly people, people with different social and regional accents, or a combination of these) can make the learner's life rather difficult. There is, however, no other solution than introducing listening and video comprehension as often as possible so that the learners overcome the problem by getting used to it.

The situation seems to be much more relaxed with videotapes. The recording can be seen and heard at the same time which makes the whole situation much more stressless and even attractive as the learners have the relaxing feeling of "watching TV". The videotapes give the students very useful information about the civilisation of the country and people whose language they are trying to adapt.

## CONCLUSION

Adults employed in the hotel and tourism industry make demanding German language learners. Adult learners both of intermediate and elementary level want their learning to be an almost stress-free activity which they can help plan. In order to achieve this aim they should learn as much as possible in the classroom because they all suffer from time shortage. Some instruction and equivalents in their native language are needed to give them the feeling of security. Roleplays and listening to native speakers talking rapidly are very demanding for adult learners. Videotapes, on the contrary, relax them in a way. Most certainly there are other things adult learners might feel discouraged about, and it is very useful for the teacher not only to observe but to ask the learners openly about those things. If we are informed about our learners' likes and dislikes, our classes and courses will fulfill their purpose completely.

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## Sažetak

### NASTAVNE METODE U STRANOM JEZIKU KOJE ODRASLI POLAZNICI NE VOLE

*Odrasli su zahtjevna skupina za učenje stranog jezika. Moj uzorak u upitniku je sačinjavalo 20 odraslih učenika njemačkog jezika u hotelijerstvu i turizmu – lažni početnici i učenici na srednjem stupnju. Upitnik koji su morali ispuniti sastojao se od dvanaest pitanja obzirom na metode podučavanja njemačkog jezika koje im se ne sviđaju ili koje bi najradije eliminirali iz procesa poučavanja. Oni prvenstveno očekuju da učenje bude aktivnost oslobođena stresa. Da bi se to postiglo, najveći dio materijala se mora savladati u razredu, jer im je teško uskladiti obaveze kod kuće s onima na poslu i s učenjem. U udžbenicima neke informacije ipak trebaju biti na materinjem jeziku što studentu daje izvjesni osjećaj sigurnosti. Igre po ulogama i ponavljanje materijala s audio kazeta su za ovu skupinu učenika veoma stresni. Gledanje video kazeta ih, naprotiv, relaksira. Sigurno još ima i drugih stvari koje odrasli učenici ne vole i vrlo ih je korisno o tome pitati. Što više znamo o sklonostima i nesklonostima učenika, tim uspješniji će biti proces poučavanja i usvajanja vještina na stranom jeziku.*

*Ključne riječi: strani jezik, metode poučavanja, učenje bez stresa, što odrasli učenici vole i ne vole, uspješan proces usvajanja vještina stranog jezika.*