TEFL to adult learners with a focus on communicative language teaching (CLT)

Poučavanje engleskoga kao stranoga jezika (TEFL) kod odraslih polaznika s naglaskom na komunikacijski pristup (CLT)

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Abstract

Acquiring a foreign language, such as English, as an adult learner is a challenging task requiring effective customised educational strategies. In this paper, we reflect on the effectiveness of Communicative Language Teaching (CLT) as an approach to adult language education. CLT prioritises communicative competence and utilises learners' life experiences and individual learning preferences to develop a learner-focused environment. A key feature of CLT is its emphasis on authenticity and interaction, motivating learners to actively participate in language learning through task-based activities and real-world communication. The approach is grounded on Interactionist and Sociocultural theories, promoting integrated language skills in culturally rich contexts to improve fluency and linguistic proficiency.

Through analysing the principles Brown (2007) and other scholars outlined, this paper highlights the importance of student-centred learning. Educators facilitate rather than dictate, enabling adults to take responsibility for their learning. Adult learners pursue English as a foreign language for multifaceted reasons, including professional, educational, social, cultural, and personal development goals. With its emphasis on meaningful interaction and practical language application, CLT provides a robust framework for addressing adult EFL learners' diverse motivations and needs. This ultimately leads to more effective language acquisition and a greater sense of accomplishment.

Keywords: Communicative Language Teaching (CLT), Communicative Competence, Adult learners, English language acquisition (ELA), Learner-centered approach

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Sažetak

Poučavanje engleskoga kao stranoga jezika (TEFL) kod odraslih polaznika izazovno je i zahtijeva prilagodbu načina poučavanja. Ovaj rad razmatra učinkovitost komunikacijskoga pristupa poučavanju jezika (CLT) u obrazovanju odraslih. CLT daje prioritet komunikacijskoj kompetenciji, koristeći životna iskustva polaznika i njihove individualne preferencije učenja za razvoj poučavanja usmjerenog na polaznika. Ključna značajka CLT-a je naglasak na autentičnosti i interakciji, motivirajući polaznike da aktivno sudjeluju u učenju jezika kroz aktivnosti temeljene na zadatcima i komunikaciju u stvarnom svijetu. Pristup se temelji na interakcionističkim i sociokulturološkim teorijama, promičući integraciju jezičnih vještina u kulturalno-bogatom kontekstu s ciljem postizanja boljih rezultata u usvajanju jezika.

Analizirajući načela koja su opisali Brown (2007.) i drugi, rad naglašava važnost učenja usmjerenoga na polaznika, gdje nastavnici imaju ulogu facilitatora, omogućujući polaznicima preuzimanje odgovornosti za svoje učenje. Razlozi zbog kojih odrasli uče engleski višestruki su, odnosno služe profesionalnim, obrazovnim, društvenim, kulturnim i osobnim ciljevima razvoja. Ovaj rad sugerira da CLT, s naglaskom na smislenoj interakciji i praktičnoj primjeni jezika, pruža snažan okvir za rješavanje različitih motivacija i potreba odraslih polaznika TEFL-a, što u konačnici dovodi do učinkovitijega usvajanja jezika i većega osjećaja postignuća.

Ključne riječi: komunikacijski pristup poučavanju jezika (CLT), komunikacijska kompetencija, odrasli polaznici, usvajanje engleskoga jezika (ELA), poučavanje usmjereno na polaznika

1. Introduction

Teaching adult learners English as a Foreign Language (EFL) can be challenging. Each student has unique learning styles, interests, and requests, and teachers must put in much effort to ensure that each student gets the most out of their classes. Adults have diverse needs and expectations; unlike children, their brains have a reduced capacity to absorb and retain new vocabulary. Therefore, they find it more challenging to learn and incorporate new words or phrases into their everyday speech after hearing them just once. Adult brains require more repetition and practice to form new neural connections and retain information.

Adults can be shy and need more confidence in speaking, which makes it hard for teachers to get them to participate in interactive speaking activities. They are generally nervous in the classroom and may feel anxious because of their age. Therefore, they need more positive

encouragement to use English in the classroom and communicate with others. The more they speak, the easier it becomes to learn the language.

As stated by Brown in his book Principles of Language Learning and Teaching, "Language learning is not a set of easy steps that can be programmed in a quick do-it-yourself kit" (2007, p. 1). Brown highlights the complexity of the language learning process, which is dynamic and influenced by various factors such as individual differences, sociocultural context, and learning environment. It underscores the need for active engagement, persistence, and immersion in meaningful language experiences.

Language learning cannot be rushed or condensed into a short timeframe; it requires time, effort, dedication, patience, and active participation from a learner trying to develop proficiency and communicative competence. Brown focuses on understanding learner characteristics, age and acquisition, instructional variables, and purpose to meet learners' needs better and facilitate successful language acquisition. Teachers should consider cultural background, linguistic heritage, educational experiences, life experiences, cognitive abilities, and personality traits.

Brown offers insights into how age may impact language learning processes and outcomes by emphasising the relationship between age and second language acquisition, challenging simplistic notions of age-related differences in language learning abilities, and exploring the cognitive and emotional developmental changes associated with childhood and young adulthood. He also addresses questions about methodological approaches, materials, teacher styles, institutional factors, instructional time, and learner engagement, highlighting the multifaceted nature of language learning motivations. Teachers can tailor instruction to meet learners' needs, foster engagement and motivation, and facilitate meaningful language learning experiences by understanding learners' motivations and aspirations.

2. Reasons for Learning English

Adult learners opt to attend English language classes because they need to learn the language, and their motivation levels are usually high. Various reasons prompt them to start learning EFL. Proficiency in English can enhance job prospects and lead to career advancement in international business, technology, tourism, and related fields. It is often a requirement for admission to universities and colleges in English-speaking countries.

Moreover, proficiency in English can foster social interactions and connections with people from diverse linguistic and cultural backgrounds. It can promote personal growth, self-

confidence, and achievement as learners acquire new skills. Additionally, it can facilitate cross-cultural understanding and appreciation, enrich travel experiences, and enable participation in guided tours, cultural exchanges, and international events. For example, adult learners who intend to relocate or immigrate to English-speaking countries may learn English to adjust to their new environment, integrate into the local community, and navigate daily activities such as shopping, banking, healthcare, and transportation.

Communicative Language Teaching (CLT) is a teaching approach that caters to these diverse needs and objectives, making it an ideal method for adult EFL learners. It is based on the question of why learners are attempting to acquire a second language, what their purposes are, and whether they are motivated by achieving a successful career, passing a foreign language requirement, or wishing to identify closely with the culture and people of the target language (Brown, H.D., 2007, p. 3).

3. Communicative Language Teaching (CLT)

Teaching strategies that consider previous knowledge, life experiences, and individual learning preferences can benefit adult learners of English as a foreign language. One such approach is CLT, which can be a powerful tool for facilitating English language acquisition among adult learners. This approach draws on principles such as Communicative Competence, Interactionist Theory, Sociocultural Theory, Task-Based Learning, Learner-Centered Approach, Authenticity and Relevance, and Integrative Skills Approach.

According to Brown (2007, p. 378), CLT is a language teaching methodology emphasising authenticity, interaction, student-centred learning, task-based activities, and communication for real-world, meaningful purposes. This approach places learners at the centre of the learning process, encouraging them to take responsibility for their learning and actively participate in classroom activities.

One of the key principles of CLT is student-centred learning, where learners play an active role in the learning process and are encouraged to take responsibility for their learning. As educators, you are not just instructors but also facilitators of learning. The focus is on the needs and interests of the learners, and you act as guides, helping them navigate their language learning journey.

In CLT classrooms, learners actively use language to express their thoughts, ideas, and opinions. This approach places a high premium on developing fluency in speaking and listening

skills. Learners are encouraged to communicate spontaneously and creatively, with less emphasis on error correction. The focus is on using language to convey meaning and achieve communicative goals rather than striving for perfect accuracy.

To facilitate this practical application of language skills, CLT incorporates various activities that simulate authentic situations. In CLT, learners are taught grammar and vocabulary and provided with opportunities to practice using language in authentic situations, such as role-plays, discussions, and problem-solving tasks.

For example, learners might engage in role-plays where they practice ordering food in a restaurant, asking for directions, or negotiating a business deal. These role-plays provide a safe and supportive environment for learners to experiment with language and develop their conversational abilities.

Discussions are another common activity in CLT. They can be centered around topics relevant to the learners' interests or professional needs, allowing them to practice expressing their opinions, asking questions, and responding to others in a natural and spontaneous manner. Through these interactive exercises, learners gain confidence and fluency in using the target language.

Problem-solving tasks are also frequently used in CLT to promote language use in a collaborative and dynamic context. These tasks require learners to work together to find solutions to given problems, thereby encouraging them to communicate, negotiate, and collaborate using the target language. This not only helps learners improve their language skills but also fosters critical thinking and teamwork.

In addition to these activities, CLT often incorporates the use of authentic materials, such as newspapers, videos, and real-life documents, to expose learners to the language as it is used in everyday situations. By interacting with these materials, learners can develop a better understanding of the cultural and contextual nuances of the language.

Overall, the CLT approach is designed to create a holistic and immersive language learning experience. By focusing on the practical use of language and providing ample opportunities for practice in authentic situations, CLT helps learners develop the skills they need to communicate effectively and confidently in the target language.

3.1. Role-play activities

Adult EFL learners take on roles in different scenarios, through which they can develop practical communication skills, confidence in using the language, and language proficiency in realistic contexts. According to Doff (1988, p. 232), "role-play is a way of bringing situations from real life into classroom."

Role-play activities create scenarios that mirror real-life communication, enabling learners to engage in authentic language use. By immersing themselves in these simulated situations, learners have the opportunity to interact with others in a contextually relevant manner, thereby enhancing their language skills and communicative competence.

Role-play activities offer opportunities to adult EFL learners for authentic communication, language practice, cultural awareness, and skills development. Educators can create dynamic and interactive language learning experiences by integrating role-play activities into CLT that empower adult learners to communicate effectively and confidently in English.

"Role-plays are very important in CLT because they give students an opportunity to practice communicating in different social contexts and in different social roles. Role-plays can be set up so that they are very structured (for example, the teacher tells the students who they are and what they should say) or in a less structured way (for example, the teacher tells the students who they are, what the situation is, and what they are talking about, but the students determine what they will say). The latter is more in keeping with CLT, of course, because it gives the students more of a choice." (Larsen-Freeman, D., 2000, p. 134).

Such activities offer valuable practice opportunities for various aspects of speaking skills, including fluency, pronunciation, intonation, and expression and serve as a platform for promoting cultural awareness and understanding among learners. By engaging in role-plays that incorporate diverse cultural contexts, perspectives, and communication styles, learners are exposed to different cultural norms and practices. This exposure helps foster intercultural competence, enabling learners to navigate cross-cultural interactions with sensitivity and respect.

3.2. Discussions

Discussions allow adult EFL learners to communicate authentically, express opinions, share ideas, and negotiate meaning, empowering them to develop language proficiency, critical thinking skills, and cultural competence. Discussions are essential in CLT, as they promote meaningful interaction and authentic language use among adult learners.

One of the key objectives of CLT is to foster fluency in language use. Fluency, in this context, refers to the natural use of language when a speaker engages in meaningful interaction and maintains ongoing communication, even with limitations in their communicative competence. This fluency is honed through classroom activities that require students to negotiate meaning, employ communication strategies, rectify misunderstandings, and strive to prevent communication breakdowns (Richards, J.C., 2006, p. 14).

Discussions are meticulously designed to mirror authentic real-life communication scenarios that learners are likely to encounter. By actively participating in these discussions, learners are exposed to language usage that closely resembles everyday contexts, thereby enhancing their language skills.

Since the language classroom is intended as a preparation for survival in the real world and "since real communication is a defining characteristic of CLT, an issue which soon emerged was the relationship between classroom activities and real life." (Richards, J.C., 2006, p.20)

Some argued that "classroom activities should, as far as possible, mirror the real world and use real-world or 'authentic' sources as the basis for classroom learning." (Ibidem)

Through participation in discussions, learners can improve their proficiency in various language skills, including speaking, listening, reading, and writing. They receive feedback and refine their language abilities through meaningful communication.

Discussions involve learners actively participating, sharing ideas, and interacting with their peers. They practice language skills and collaborate with others to construct meaning, negotiate understanding, and co-construct knowledge.

3.3. Task-based assignments

Task-Based Learning (TBL) is vital to CLT. It focuses on using authentic language tasks to promote language learning. TBL involves engaging learners in real-life tasks that require language use to achieve communicative goals.

In the context of adult EFL learners, task-based assignments offer opportunities for language practice in real-world situations, empowering learners to take charge of their language acquisition journey and promoting communicative competence. Students work together on tasks that require collaboration and communication to achieve a specific goal. Task-based assignments are integral to CLT as they provide adult EFL learners with authentic opportunities to engage in meaningful language use through incorporating task-based assignments. Educators

can create dynamic and engaging learning experiences that promote language proficiency and real-world communication skills by incorporating task-based assignments into language teaching.

According to Larsen-Freeman, D. (2000, p. 144),

"As with content-based instruction, a task-based approach aims to provide learners with a natural context for language use. As learners work to complete a task, they have abundant opportunities to interact. Such interaction is thought to facilitate language acquisition as learners must work to understand each other and express their own meaning. By so doing, they have to check to see if they have comprehended correctly, and, at times, they have to seek clarification. By interacting with others, they listen to language which may be beyond their present ability, but which may be assimilated into their knowledge of the target language for use later."

By engaging in such tasks, learners are immersed in situations that mirror real-life interactions, allowing them to use language genuinely and meaningfully. Thus, learners practice language skills extensively and engage in active language use across all skill areas.

The main objective of these assignments is for learners to effectively convey meaning and achieve a real-world outcome through language use rather than solely focusing on linguistic accuracy or form. This corresponds to the main aim of CLT, which is developing communicative competence and learners' ability to communicate effectively in real-life situations. That includes linguistic accuracy, language proficiency, and fluency in context.

In connection with that, Vygotsky's theory of sociocultural development emphasizes the pivotal role of social interaction in language acquisition. It suggests that language learning is not only an individual process but also a collaborative one, wherein instructors play a crucial role in facilitating meaningful conversations and collaborative activities among learners. Through these interactions, learners can develop their language skills by engaging in dialogue, negotiating meaning, and achieving shared understanding.

Vygotsky (1978, p. 86) argues that learning occurs primarily through interaction with others, particularly those with more knowledge and skills. Thus, by engaging in conversations and collaborative activities with more knowledgeable peers or instructors, learners can expand their linguistic abilities and ultimately achieve fluency in the language. Vygotsky's theory highlights the significance of social interaction in language acquisition. Learners can benefit from

meaningful conversations and collaborative interactions with instructors and peers, which can facilitate the development and acquisition of language through dialogue, negotiation, and shared understanding. Vygotsky (1978, p. 86) explains "the zone of proximal development as the distance between the actual developmental level as determined by independent problem solving and the level of potential development as determined through problem-solving unclear adult guidance or in collaboration with more capable peers."

According to Brown (2007, p. 188-215), cultural context plays a vital role in the language classroom. It can be integrated into language instruction through the use of authentic materials, tasks, and activities that reflect real-life situations. This approach enhances learners' cultural awareness and intercultural communicative competence, underscoring the importance of educators' efforts in promoting a global understanding through language teaching. CLT recognizes the interdependence of language skills (speaking, listening, reading, and writing) and language systems (grammar, vocabulary, and pronunciation). Consequently, an integrated skills approach is used that emphasizes the simultaneous development of all language skills. This enables learners to effectively use language to communicate and create meaning.

In summary, incorporating cultural context into CLT classrooms is essential for improving learners' intercultural communicative competence, and the integrated skills approach supports the development of language skills. Therefore, it is crucial to focus on both aspects for effective language instruction.

4. Conclusive remarks

In conclusion, the challenges of teaching EFL to adult learners are multifaceted and require a nuanced understanding of the complex dynamics at play. Adult learners bring a wealth of experiences, motivations, and expectations to the classroom, necessitating an approach that is adaptable, empathetic, and responsive to their diverse needs. As H.D. Brown elucidates in his seminal work, language learning is a deeply individualistic process, influenced by a multitude of factors including learner characteristics, the sociocultural context, and the learning environment. It is a journey that requires time, effort, and a willingness to engage actively and persistently with the language.

The reasons adult learners pursue English language proficiency are as varied as the individuals themselves, ranging from career advancement to personal growth, social interaction to cultural immersion. These motivations underscore the importance of a teaching approach that

aligns with their goals and purposes, such as the CLT methodology. CLT's emphasis on student-centered learning, real-world communication, and meaningful interaction provides adult learners with a framework through which they can gain fluency and communicative competence, enabling them to navigate diverse and authentic situations with confidence.

In the context of adult EFL learning, the role of the educator transcends that of a mere transmitter of knowledge; they become facilitators and co-navigators in the learners' quest for language mastery. Through the integration of CLT principles, teachers can create an environment where learners feel empowered to express themselves, make mistakes, and ultimately, achieve a level of proficiency that allows them to fulfill their unique language aspirations. In doing so, educators not only contribute to their students' linguistic abilities but also to their broader personal and professional development.

Ultimately, the success of adult EFL learners is predicated on a collaborative effort between teachers and learners, grounded in mutual respect, understanding, and a shared commitment to the transformative power of language learning. By embracing the complexities and embracing the opportunities for growth, both educators and learners can make the journey of acquiring a second language a rewarding and life-enriching experience.

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