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The Socio-psychological Difficulties of Learning the English Language in the Context of Lifelong Education

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Abstract

The paper deals with some of the common problems that adult educators face when teaching adult language learners, in particular learners who have considerable educational and life experience but still seem to be stuck at the lower levels of elementary and pre-intermediate due to their low self-esteem, high level of anxiety, and fear of making mistakes. Adult learners face difficulties when listening to the target language. The types and extent of difficulties have been conducted, and listening comprehension research has been conducted on the problems faced by adult language learners. The results of this body of research show that a number of factors may negatively influence English language acquisition; the latter have undergone a detailed review in the paper.

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1. Introduction

The progressive development of Russian society has fostered an increasing interest in the study of the English language by adult learners in the context of continuing education (the so-called "lifelong learning"). The desire to learn English can be explained by many reasons, such as the growing demand for professional competence of adults, particularly where one of the main conditions for the competitiveness of an adult specialist has become a high level of English proficiency.

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Analysis of methodical and psychological literature (including the authors' personal experiences) has shown that the main obstacles encountered by adults in the process of English language acquisition are social and psychological obstacles combined with difficulties directly related to the acquisition of certain aspects of the English language, such as listening. Evidence shows that listening, as opposed to speaking, reading and writing, is a multidimensional and complex aspect of the English language. Listening involves a number of components that constitute direct listening process: mechanisms of short-term and long-term memory, probabilistic forecasting and understanding, inner pronunciation and speech segmentation and identification of concepts (Kovalenko, 2003).

Due to its multi-component structure, as well as an abundance of complex mechanisms, listening training is one of the most burning issues in the modern methods of teaching adults the English language. Underdeveloped listening skills not only lead to an inability to perceive the English language by ear but often lead to difficulties in communicating in English, due to the fact that without listening skills speech communication process cannot be fully realized.

In connection with the above, the objectives of our study are as follow:

- 1) to study social and psychological difficulties that adult learners may encounter in acquiring the English language, and to propose options for overcoming social and psychological obstacles;
- 2) to analyze listening process in order to identify difficulties which are typical of adult learners in their study of the English language.

2. Discussion and Research Hypothesis

The general idea that it is more difficult for an adult to acquire new knowledge has turned out to be erroneous. Psychologists have found that a high learning potential is maintained at all stages of life. Permanent mental work included in the individual educational activity maintains a high level of psycho-physiological functions, and education is one of the key conditions for the mental health of an adult.

Adult learners have a high degree of motivation; therefore, involvement in educational process is a conscious choice for them. Adults who are engaged in acquisition of the English language are sufficiently diligent and disciplined, since the decision to continue their education, as a rule, is made consciously. Adults are motivated to achieve a particular goal; they are focused on training and getting new skills.

Adult education, as a rule, is aimed at solving specific problems and achieving a particular goal in social or professional life. In this regard, adult learners have a practical attitude with respect to training; they have a strong desire to obtain such skills that could be directly and immediately implemented in their professional and social activities.

Moreover, adults have both life and professional experience, including knowledge gained in the previous stages of education. Adults tend to be actively involved in their training, using their own experience and knowledge, so they can make a significant contribution to their education, either with the help of an adult educator or independently. Adult learners are predisposed and prepared for independent activity. They are also more independent in their thinking, and they prefer independent forms of learning activities (Zmeev, 2007).

Despite the high potential of teaching English to adults, their high motivation, a clear goal to obtain certain skills, experience and readiness for independent activity, adults face a number of barriers of social and psychological type. Some of these barriers include:

A) a fear of mistakes. Many adults are prone to perfectionism, often believing that silence is golden, and that it is better to do nothing than to make mistakes that sometimes hinder the process of learning English.

B) the unpleasant experience of learning English in schools and universities. Sometimes adult learners blame their teachers, often rightly arguing that in secondary schools the English language is taught just "to check the box".

C) a wide range of responsibilities and lack of time. Adults tend to work, to have families, and to face certain public duties, which, by all means, both affect the learning process and make it difficult for adult educators to assign homework and to demand its fulfilment.

D) a lack of confidence in their own abilities, usually manifested in an increased level of anxiety. Anxiety occurs for various reasons: the financial cost of education, the lack of support in the family or by the employer, a sense of either hopelessness or the feeling that their training is irrelevant, a lack of confidence in their abilities, and a fear of demonstrating incompetence in a new learning environment (Nizkodubov & Evseeva, 2015).

An adult educator must help adult learners to overcome these social and psychological barriers. Anxiety and fear—particularly the fear of making mistakes—can be eliminated with the help of the following actions: an adult

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