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Educational needs of adult Polish and Romanian high school students

Abstract

The purpose of the article is to show the educational needs and expectations of adult students towards their foreign language teacher. The paper presents the main aspects associated with the process of teaching English to Polish and Romanian adults who are being prepared for their final exams (in Poland – matura, in Romania – Examen de bacalaureat). In considerations related to adult education, it is necessary to pay attention to recent changes in the job market in both Poland and Romania. Nowadays it is important to speak at least one foreign language, with employers requiring an understanding of both general and specific job-related language. This is the main reason for increasing numbers of adults starting to learn foreign languages. It might also be noted that foreign language acquisition is one part of the process of lifelong learning.

For a teacher planning classes for adults, the considerations must also involve the differences between teaching children and adults, and the primary aspects that should be included in the planning process.

The methodological part of the article includes data analyses of a survey involving a group of young adults preparing for the English final exam at a high school for adults in Warsaw and at a high school in Bucharest.

The conclusions present considerations related to the educational needs of the young adult students who participated in the study.

Keywords: andragogist, adult education, adult students, lifelong learning, teacher, Matura Exam

Introduction

Taking into consideration the teaching of foreign languages to adults, it is necessary to pay attention to the main advantages of this activity. In the face of an aging population, an increasing number of adults in Poland and Romania decide to begin learning a foreign language (especially English). This phenomenon is mainly caused by significant changes in the job market and the growing requirements of employers as far as foreign languages are concerned.

It is undeniable that there is a significant need to learn English among all age groups; however, adult students have the capacity to learn a foreign language more effectively than children as they are more aware of the fact that they can make appropriate use of their knowledge.

Teaching English to children and adults – the main differences in language acquisition

Although children are a very capable group of students, as they are always ready to undertake new challenges, such as studying English at school or acquiring a language by learning it from their parents when they come from a mixed family (Arabski, 1985, p. 30), there are disadvantages that might limit their ability to gain new knowledge, for example: weak concentration, unstable memory, unawareness of learning strategies and undeveloped logic memory (making learning new grammar rules impossible). Children can be good “speakers and listeners” while their reading and writing skills are still undeveloped, which is a source of problems with self-study (Komorowska, 2005, p. 91).

The process of adult education has some noticeable difficulties, as adults are also a very specific group of students. The main obstacles in learning a foreign language by adults are limited free time, fear of speaking and fear of making mistakes, associated with the fear of criticism (Komorowska, p. 37) from the teacher or other students. However, their retentive memory and competence in writing and reading are skills that let adult learners use different forms of study. What is more, adults can learn more easily, as they are able to organize their own work, monitor their educational results and utilize their far better cognitive capabilities and conceptual complexity than those possessed by younger students (Harmer, 2007, p. 81). Very significant is the fact that adults have some experience in learning and, contrary to children, they have already worked out their own learning strategies. These are helpful in their further education, allowing them to reach high levels of proficiency in learning English (Lightbown & Spada, 2006, p. 81).

It is possible to learn a foreign language at any age, despite the fact that at the beginning children may learn faster than adults. This is because their organs of speech are more flexible and “they are strongly motivated to become part of the first language community and require a native-like accent” (Ellis, 2015, p. 110); however, they can have problems with concentration and a lack of motivation. Therefore, one can conclude that adult students have the capacities to learn a foreign language more efficiently than children.

Planning an English course for adult learners

Nowadays, adult students in Poland have ever more opportunities to acquire new knowledge, such as by participating in English courses, vocational training (e.g., business English courses), individual learning, learning on the internet (e-learning) etc. (Frąckowiak, 2006, p. 82).

The situation is similar in Romania, as the educational needs of adults result from the requirements of the current labor market (Popovici, 2012).

Lifelong learning develops individual and social features in students (Gerlach, 2007, p. 55), and therefore it is important to remember that foreign language acquisition in the aspect of adult education is a complex process that requires systematic work and commitment from all participants. Adult students form a demanding group as they attend the classes because they want to, not because they have to. Their expectations and educational needs are diverse, and hence the teacher should develop an individual approach to each student, concentrating on the whole process of language acquisition rather than just the product of the classroom activities, e.g. not on the results of the listening activities, but on the listening itself (Field, 1998, p. 111).

If adult students have a positive attitude to the process of language acquisition, it is much easier for the teacher to motivate them and encourage them to further learning (Komorowska, 2005, p. 36). In adult education the main role of the teacher is to pay attention to the needs of communication, which is the result of the individual situations of the students. The motivation to study a foreign language is closely related to vocational plans for the near future, e.g. career change, business travel, challenging tasks or some new opportunities. Adult learners have some expectations: sometimes they only want to focus on vocabulary and speaking because they plan to go abroad, and do not see the necessity to develop any other skills.

It is undeniable that there is a great need to learn English among all age groups. In considering the teaching of foreign language to adults, we may conclude that a group of adults is not as problematic as a group of children. Older students are more disciplined and willing to gain new knowledge (Harmer, 2007, p. 84), as they are more aware of their obligations and necessities. Therefore, the decision to take an English course is mostly the result of their willingness and inner motivation. According to the theory of Knowles, an American pioneer of andragogy, “As a person matures the motivation to learn becomes internal” (Knowles, 1984, p. 12). Adults decide to participate in the process of education as they seek a wide variety of educational goals, to develop some new skills and to achieve qualifications (Adult education, n.d.).

The teacher should not forget that there are some restrictions and difficulties connected with the process of language acquisition. Adults do not have enough time to spend on learning English due to work and family obligations. This is the main obstacle to studying a foreign language systematically. In a situation where a group of adults includes some students that do not attend the classes regularly, the teacher should (Komorowska, 2005, p. 36):

- plan each lesson separately so that all students can take part in the classes actively, regardless of whether they attended the previous lesson or not;
- start all classes by revising and consolidating the previous material;
- provide additional materials.

Students might insist on applying traditional teaching methods that they remember from the past, e.g. reading combined with translating, or explaining the meaning of each word from the text. Sometimes adults have some problems in establishing their language preferences and are unable to inform the teacher about their general expectations and the main aims of learning English. In this situation the teacher should:

- inform the learners during the first class about the general purpose and the main principles of the course;

- explain what new skills they will acquire during the course;
- present the learners with the most significant techniques for learning English along with their good and bad points;
- ask the students about their expectations concerning the methods of learning a foreign language;
- define the method of work during the course;
- be able to adapt to the individual needs of the students (especially when any difficulties arise).

Adults who have different occupations may feel uncomfortable to be managed by a teacher. Mature students form a specific group, one which may not like being criticized by the teacher or other students.

In this situation the teacher should:

- be tactful while correcting students' mistakes;
- not interrupt the learner's presentation;
- try to encourage shy students to participate in group or pair work;
- treat all students with respect and understanding.

The teacher should always remember that the student is the most important element of the process of teaching and learning a foreign language. On the other hand, the student may need to be convinced that it is never too late to start learning English, and that their age is not an obstacle. What is more, the student's maturity is closely related to their life experience, which might be very helpful in further education (Komorowska, 2005, p. 37)

Research into adult students on their expectations related to teaching methods

The process of learning a foreign language requires contributions both from the students and the teacher. As mentioned before, adult learners are aware of their educational needs and expectations, as they already have career development plans where a knowledge of a foreign language is essential.

The educator's role is to understand the individual needs of each student. The teacher should encourage the learners to participate actively in the process of language acquisition by asking questions, motivating them to develop solutions for problematic situations, giving useful information as well as clarifying some language difficulties. The teacher should also take into account that these activities must be adapted to the needs, age and vocational plans of adults (Herr et al., 1979, p. 259).

It should not be forgotten that the teacher has to motivate the students to undertake further education, related to the basis of their individual career development. A number of adults who develop their skills by taking part in some educational programs need an instructor, a trainer or, in general, an educator, one who can show them the most suitable methods of self-development (Keierleber & Sundal-Hansen, 1985).

Purpose of the research

The survey, one of the most common research methods, is also the most convenient way to reach a large group of students, whether in Poland or abroad. Thanks to it, the researcher is able to obtain results in a relatively short time. It was considered that for this study, involving a larger group of students, this research method would be the most appropriate.

The study was based on a group of Polish and a group of Romanian students preparing for the final English exam at a high school for adults in Warsaw and a high school in Bucharest. Both groups were taught by professional English teachers, and the students attended classes four times a week. The Polish students were 18–27 years old, while the Romanian students were 18–19 years old.

The study took place in September 2019 in Warsaw and in November in Bucharest. It involved an English lesson in which the teacher presented the main objectives of the study, distributed questionnaires to the students and asked them to complete them anonymously. Before filling out the survey, they were asked to carefully read the questions and options for answers. Students were also informed that if they had any problems then they should ask their teacher for clarification.

Data comparison

A total of 100 completed questionnaires were selected randomly for the comparison and data analysis (50 from Poland and 50 from Romania), from a total of 134 participants in the study.

The survey contained 16 questions, all of which were closed to allow only one answer to be selected. The first nine questions asked the students about their English education, related to their attitude to learning a foreign language and their plans connected with English. The students were also asked what they value most about their English lessons and which activities and educational methods were the most suitable for them. Moreover, they had to evaluate the level of their English skills.

Table 1. Students' responses to questions 1–9

1. Do you like learning English?	Polish vs. Romanian students	
Yes	76% (38 students)	58% (29 students)
No	4% (2 students)	8% (4 students)
Not sure	20% (10 students)	34% (17 students)

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2. Why would you like to speak English (the main reason)?	Polish vs. Romanian students	
I need it for work	64% (32 students)	32% (16 students)
I would like to communicate	16% (8 students)	8% (4 students)
I need it for the final exam	20% (10 students)	60% (30 students)
3. Are English lessons interesting? Why?	Polish vs. Romanian students	
Yes, because of the interesting topics	50% (25 students)	62% (31 students)
Yes, because the teacher gives lots of interesting materials	22% (11 students)	34% (17 students)
No, they are not interesting	28% (14 students)	4% (2 students)
4. Does the atmosphere during the lesson influence the quality of learning?	Polish vs. Romanian students	
Yes	84% (42 students)	96% (48 students)
No	4% (2 students)	0% (0 students)
Not sure	12% (6 students)	4% (2 students)
5. What activity do you like most in English lessons?	Polish vs. Romanian students	
Conversation	60% (30 students)	54% (27 students)
Reading	4% (2 students)	8% (4 students)
Listening	6% (3 students)	16% (8 students)
Grammar practice	2% (1 student)	10% (5 students)
Work in pairs	28% (14 students)	12% (6 students)
6. Which of the following is the most useful to you?	Polish vs. Romanian students	
Conversation	58% (29 students)	42% (21 students)
Reading	12% (6 students)	10% (5 students)
Listening	8% (4 students)	10% (5 students)
Grammar practice	10% (5 students)	24% (12 students)
Work in pairs	12% (6 students)	14% (7 students)
7. How good are your English skills?	Polish vs. Romanian students	
Very good	14% (7 students)	6% (3 students)
Good	44% (22 students)	50% (25 students)
Quite good	22% (11 students)	30% (15 students)
Unsatisfactory	20% (10 students)	14% (7 students)
8. Which of the following methods is the most effective in your case?	Polish vs. Romanian students	
Lecture	6% (3 students)	18% (9 students)
Translations	4% (2 students)	10% (5 students)
Work in pairs/groups	10% (5 students)	12% (6 students)
Tests	18% (9 students)	12% (6 students)
Grammar practice	6% (3 students)	28% (14 students)
Conversation	56% (28 students)	20% (10 students)
9. Does the pace of the lesson matter to you?	Polish vs. Romanian students	
Yes	82% (41 students)	96% (48 students)
No	4% (2 students)	0% (0 students)
Not sure	14% (7 students)	4% (2 students)

Source: author's own work.

The next four questions were to determine the role of the foreign language teacher, if their presence and activity during the classes is important for the students, and the expectations concerning the adult students in terms of the teacher's attitude.

Table 2. Students' responses to questions 10–13

10. Do you think that the teacher should demand hard work from the students?	Polish vs. Romanian students	
Yes	72% (36 students)	88% (44 students)
No	6% (3 students)	6% (3 students)
Not sure	22% (11 students)	6% (3 students)
11. Which do you value more:	Polish vs. Romanian students	
Individual work	16% (8 students)	28% (14 students)
Teacher-led work	84% (42 students)	72% (36 students)
12. What personal feature of the teacher do you value most?	Polish vs. Romanian students	
Tolerance	34% (17 students)	10% (5 students)
Fairness	16% (8 students)	56% (28 students)
Honesty	38% (19 students)	14% (7 students)
Kindness	12% (6 students)	20% (10 students)
13. Do you think that grades are motivating?	Polish vs. Romanian students	
Yes	88% (44 students)	90% (45 students)
No	8% (4 students)	2% (1 student)
Not sure	4% (2 students)	8% (4 students)

Source: author's own work.

The last three questions were to show how the students are involved in the process of language acquisition. What should be typical for a group of adult learners is the practical skill of combining teacher-led education and self-education. Thanks to this combination the adult learners have the possibility of developing their language skills and becoming more independent.

Table 3. Students' responses to questions 14–16

14. Do you think that systematic work improves your language skills?	Polish vs. Romanian students	
Yes	92% (46 students)	98% (49 students)
No	2% (1 student)	0% (0 students)
Not sure	6% (3 students)	2% (1 student)
15. How much time do you spend outside school on learning English?	Polish vs. Romanian students	
1 hour a day	20% (10 students)	44% (22 students)
1 hour a week	50% (25 students)	42% (21 students)
1 hour a month	22% (11 students)	10% (5 students)
Less than 1 hour a month	8% (4 students)	4% (2 students)
16. Do you think that you spend enough time on learning English?	Polish vs. Romanian students	
Yes	28% (14 students)	24% (12 students)
No	28% (14 students)	20% (10 students)
Not sure	44% (22 students)	56% (28 students)

Source: author's own work.

Data analysis

Both Polish (76%) and Romanian (58%) adult students had a positive attitude towards learning English. However, it should be noted that for many years in Romania the first foreign language taught in schools was French, which along with Italian is very common there and the probable cause of the significant number of Romanian respondents (34%) who were undecided when asked about their language preferences.

When asked about the reasons for learning English, the majority of students from Poland (64%) answered that they were guided by professional reasons. In contrast, Romanian students primarily learn English to pass the final exams (60%). Differences in the choice of answers between the groups of students from Poland and Romania may be related to the types of schools they attended. The group of students from Poland studied in a high school for adults, where learning is often combined with the work they do every day, and therefore their need for language skills may be for professional purposes. The high school students from Romania spent most of the week at school, and therefore a well-passed final exam is currently their main objective. This raises the question of how much time the students spent learning English outside of school – where most Romanian students (44%) declared that they study a foreign language one hour a day, while most Polish students (50%) devoted one hour a week to studying English. It is also worth noting that the majority of the surveyed students from both groups were not sure if they spent enough time on learning English (44% of Poles, 56% of Romanians).

For most students from Poland (72%) and Romania (96%), English is an interesting subject, underlying the importance of a positive atmosphere during lessons and an appropriate pace by the teacher. As for the preferences regarding the educational methods used during the classes, both Polish (60%) and Romanian (54%) students considered that conversation was the most preferred form of activity in classes (vs. reading, listening, grammar practice, work in pairs).

The students from each country had a positive attitude towards learning English at school. Most of them appreciated the teacher's contribution and claimed that teacher-led work brought greater results than individual study (84% of Polish and 72% of Romanian young students preferred to work under the guidance of a teacher). Moreover, they believed that the teacher should be demanding of their students (72% of Polish students, 88% of Romanian students thought that the teacher ought to demand hard work from them). In response to the question about the most significant qualities that the teacher should have, most Romanian students chose fairness (56%), while the most important qualities for Polish students were tolerance (34%) and honesty (38%).

Both groups of young adults (44% of Polish students, 50% of Romanian students) believed that their English skills were at a good level, which undoubtedly

encouraged them to continue learning the foreign language. An important aspect in the process of education for the respondents were the grades, which were viewed as feedback from the teacher about their progress (88% of Poles and 90% of Romanians said that the grades motivated them).

Conclusions

The main aim of the research was to check the students' attitude towards learning a foreign language, their individual language needs, internal motivation, the necessity for self-development and their expectations about a foreign language teacher.

It should be noted that both study groups attended different types of schools, and although they studied at the same level, learning might be prioritized differently due to the varied professional and family situations (the students from Poland were slightly older, some of them already had their own families and, as a result, spent less time studying). Due to the type of school the respondents attended, it may be concluded that the Polish students attended a school for adults to study English mainly for professional reasons, as this may be required by their employer for the work they do outside school hours, while the Romanian high school students studied English to achieve the best results in the final exam (educational reasons), which is also related to the fact that they attached more importance to the systematic study of a foreign language.

The students from Poland and Romania valued the help from the teacher, the positive attitude towards them as participants of the learning process and the atmosphere during the classes, which certainly affects the efficiency of their work.

Appropriate selection of the educational methods during classes is also an important factor influencing the effectiveness of learning a foreign language. The respondents preferred conversation, which is the proof that they want to learn the language through active participation in classes, they are not withdrawn and certainly prefer to spend time talking with the teacher or other participants than in solving grammar tests and exercises. Adults often think that conversation during courses or classes at school form a fully sufficient form of learning a foreign language. This approach is often caused by a negative experience related to learning a foreign language at school. If, as children, the students first had to listen to the teacher, learn grammar rules and then do the tests themselves, they now want the teacher to take a slightly different role and motivate them in their process of learning by the use of guidance and activating techniques.

Most of the answers given by students from Poland and Romania were comparable. The students had similar expectations towards the teacher and the way English lessons were conducted. The results of the study clearly indicate that the teacher occupied a very important place in the adult learning process.

Active and lively teaching, appropriate selection of educational means and methods, and appropriate adjustment of the pace during lessons are all a response to the needs of the students that still exist despite the fact that they are no longer children but young adults, consciously participating in language learning.

Students from both countries eagerly participated in their English classes, while the discrepancies in the responses in the study were primarily due to the type of school they attended, rather than the country in which they lived.

There is no doubt that learning foreign languages (especially English) is a thing of the future. Education has become a requirement for functioning in the modern world, and brings with it new challenges (Pólturzycki, 2008). However, it should be considered that the effectiveness of language acquisition depends on the involvement of both sides: student and teacher. The student is always at the center of the process of learning a foreign language, while the teacher should seek to create favorable conditions that allow the student to learn English more willingly and effectively.

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