

TEACHER-2-TEACHER

Techniques for teaching adults

Teachers must get to know their students to learn what assets each brings to the classroom environment

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I believe adult students learn best when they know what is required to complete an exercise and, more importantly, when they know why they are doing it. Unlike younger pupils, adult students need to see the benefit in undertaking a task. They must have the confidence that they can complete what has been asked and that, when it is finished, there will be some intrinsic or extrinsic benefit from what they have completed.



Teacher trainees reflect on their performance after practice teaching during the School for International Training's Teaching English to Speakers of Other Languages (SIT Tesol) certificate course at the American University Alumni Language Center recently. Veteran professional trainer Steve Tait, far right, listens carefully and gives constructive pointers. PURICH TRIVITAYAKHUN

Know the students

When teaching adults, especially young adults, teachers need to know the students and what they have learned or experienced before they come to class. This is difficult with any group, as learners will have varying skills and experiences.

However, it is our responsibility to determine what learners share with each other, what knowledge or experience might be limited to one or two individuals, and finally, what experience, knowledge or skills are needed to do the task.

Shared experience

With an understanding of what most students share in the way of experience or knowledge, it is possible to determine where a learning event should start. For example, in teaching negotiation skills, if students understand the concept of compromise, and have the vocabulary required, the class can move to other aspects of negotiation.

With an understanding of the participants' varying backgrounds, a teacher will know who might be able to provide support in different areas. For example, if one student is strong in idiomatic English, he or she can be called on to provide short, useful explanations.

New material

With an awareness of what might be new for all participants, it becomes easier to create an overview of what a teacher will need to present and the areas where difficulties can be expected.

For example, if students studying negotiation skills do not have experience in accepting or rejecting offers in English, they will need to be presented with the basic structures employed in day-to-day conversation before they can be expected to adapt these conventions to a negotiation task.

Lesson structure

Adult learners also need to understand how the learning is to be structured so that they can gain confidence in what they will be asked to do and so that they can work more effectively.

Once they understand how to learn or how to complete a particular activity, they will become more confident and learn more readily.

For example, adult learners who have been asked to read need to know what is expected. If they do not know what types of questions they will be asked or what types of exercises will follow, they will not know what reading skills to employ.

However, if they have been asked to read for pleasure, and know that questions will relate to their enjoyment of the text, they can then read accordingly.

Students should also understand why they are being asked to do something so that they can understand the benefits of a particular activity in terms of immediate acquisition of skills or knowledge and how, if successful, these skills and knowledge will benefit them in the future.

My approach to learning builds increasingly on experience through interaction and mutual respect. I believe adult students do their best to learn when they know they can use the subject matter and skills acquired and when they can see for themselves how new skills and knowledge will fit into an existing set of experiences and expectations.

I also believe adult students learn best when they have accepted that everything expected of them, or undertaken in class, is intended to be of benefit to them both personally and professionally.

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