The Importance of Age in Foreign Language Learning

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Abstract
Identifying the language learning preferences and needs of adult ESP learners is highly effective in terms of successful language learning and teaching. A research previously undertaken by Abdolmehdi Riazi and Mohammad Javad Riasati (2008), concerning the identification of styles and preferences of language learners has shown that teachers are aware of learner's learning preferences in some cases, but not in all the cases assessed. This study aims to identify language learning preferences and needs of ESP adult learners. It further investigates whether teachers are aware of the needs and preferences their students have in respect to English language learning. It addresses the need for tailored class management between teachers' teaching methods and ways the adult learners of English for Specific Purposes (ESP) prefer to learn. This paper contains clear report on identification of needs and preferences of adult ESP learners who learn English in private schools in the Republic of Macedonia. The obtained results of this study stimulate and encourage further research addressing the importance of teacher-student cooperation in regards to syllabus design.
Key words: needs, preferences, adult learners, syllabus

Introduction
There are different factors that influence a foreign language learning, among which is age, motivation, gender, anxiety, attitude, learning strategies, language learning styles, etc. In many previous studies, age has been considered as a major factor in second of foreign language learning. Though a considerable number of researchers claim that language learning is better if learned during the early years in life, there are also researchers who claim that numerous adults accomplish necessary proficiency, even though they learn a language in later years of their lives.

It is important to mention that adult learners carry a learning experience with them, which makes their path to language mastery easier. They are goal oriented with tendency in achieving the defined goals. The thing that is very positive about adult learners is that they know what they need to learn, and do not spend considerable time learning things that will never use in their future. Coupled with age, motivation is another major factor in language learning. For the most part children get motivated by a reward, often given by their teachers or parents, adults set clear goals and continuously attempt in order to achieve them. Such goals vary from one individual to another, but in most of the cases they are related to their personal growth and social recognition. Having obvious purposes and clear goals, adults can also succeed in learning a foreign language aside from "the earlier, the better".

Robertson (2002), based on his research with young and adult learners of English language in Korea, stated that "for later learners their age related decline is much more variable and is very different from one to another" (p.23). He claimed that this is highly influenced by the memory storage and their capability for visualisation. Results of the study proved that adult learners may learn a language faster and more efficiently in certain aspects. Considering all the above mentioned prevailing conditions in language learning, language learning preferences should be given due attention. While it is true that there is not only one type of learning preference, there is not only one way of teaching a language. Each learner brings in the same class a different background; different needs and preferences towards learning a language. While learners do so, teachers on the other hand, try to use their best methods of teaching and engage all students in a learning process. Having this in mind, few teachers consult learners about class content and class management. A large number of teachers do not do so, even though they acknowledge such teacher-learner cooperation. Other than teacher's decision, in some countries the roles of teachers and learners are strictly defined and the involvement of learners in decision-making is not permitted.

Benesch (2008), describes the history of ESP by dividing it into two types: ESP's official hisory and ESP's unofficial history. She stated that ESP was spread because it was the prevailing language of science and technology. She points out that: 'Dudley Evans and St.John (1998) describe the "flowering" of ESP resulting from "general developments in the world economy in the 1950s and 1960s," including the "increased use of

English as the international language of science, technology and business' (p.25). "Advocating the positive sides of ESP, Dudley Evans (2008) claimed that ESP was more efficient and cost-effective than more traditional teaching approaches based on a general coverage of the language system". (as cited in Benesch, 2008). "Prior (1995) suggests that teachers should not to assume a congruence between 'what students need for succes in class", "what they need for institutional progres', and 'their needs in profesional work after they graduate' pointing out that these may vary". (as cited in Benesch, 2008, p. 22-23).

ESP is still not introduced in state schools. In most private language schools, the only difference among ESP groups is the course content, where teachers are more focused in "what" learners want to learn rather than "how" they want to learn it. "The same has been previously noticed by

Hutchinson and Waters who claimed that ESP course as a journey whose destination (target needs) is known, but the route (learning needs) has yet to be discovered" (as cited in Benesch, 2008, p.29). In Macedonia, Southeast European University was among the first institutions to introduce ESP in the Faculty of Languages, Cultures and Communications.

The aims of the research

The reasons why adults learn English in Macedonia is mainly for job-related functions and future career. In most of the job announcements, it is required that each candidate should have knowledge of English language in order to perform properly in the work place. In situations when English is learnt for a particular job position, teaching should not focus only on the content of that particular field, but it should also consider learners' needs and preferences in class management as one of crucial and starting points for successful language learning and teaching. A possible failing of successful language teaching is the overgeneralization of teachers, believing that one thing that helps one learner might also help another. The purpose of this study is to identify language learning preferences and needs of ESP adult learners.

This study aims to give insight to the following:
- the teachers awareness of the students learning preferences;
- comparison of results of language learning preferences of adults with different professions;
- find out if learners' age and profession have impact on their language learning preferences.

The Research

This study consists of learners of ESP who are older than 30 years. These are learners who learn English in 9 (nine) private language schools in the Republic of Macedonia. Participants are grouped according to their profession: doctors, lawyers, businessmen, employees at tourist agencies, university professors, and state employees.

An adopted questionnaire from Brindley (1989) is used to identify learner's learning preferences. The questionnaires for students and teachers have been adopted and modified to serve the purpose of the study. 43 ESP learners and 32 teachers of ESP have answered the adopted questionnaire for learners and teachers. The questionnaire, having the same version for both parties, aims assessment of learning preferences of learners and their accordance to teachers' beliefs in respect to learners' learning preferences.

In several cases, the adapted questionnaire was given to students by their teachers. Trying to avoid cases when learners might misunderstand a question, the questionnaire was also translated into Albanian and Macedonian language. Learners who answered the questionnaire were informed that the questionnaire is available in three languages and the choice of language of the questionnaire was their own will.

Interpretation of results

The most characteristic results

Profession	Learner				Teacher			
Answer	Yes	No	Total YES	Total NO	Yes	No	Total YES	Total NO
Doctors	7/ 70%	3 / 30%			4 /57%	3 / 43%		
Lawyers	5 /83%	1 / 17%			3 /60%	2 / 40%		
Businessmen	5 /62%	3 / 38%	32 74%	11 26%	5 /83%	1 / 17%	22 69%	10 31%
Tourist agencies	8 /80%	2 / 20%			5 /83%	1 / 17%		
University Professors	2 /67%	1 / 33%			2 /67%	1 / 33%		
State Employees	5 /83%	1 / 17%			3 /60%	2 / 40%		

Item1: Satisfaction with achievements

Profession	Learner				Teacher			
Answer	Yes	No	Total YES	Total NO	Yes	No	Total YES	Total NO
Doctors	1 /10%	9 / 90%			2 /29%	5 / 71%		
Lawyers	2 /33%	4 /67%			2 /40%	3 / 60%		
Businessmen	3 /37%	5 / 63%	18 42%	25 58%	3 /50%	3 / 50%	12 37%	20 63%
Tourist agencies	8 /80%	2 / 20%			2 /33%	4 / 67%		
University Professors	2 /67%	1 / 33%			2 /67%	1 / 33%		
State Employees	2 /33%	4 / 67%			1/ 20%	4 / 80%		

Item 4: Ways of learning; d) By repeating what you hear

Profession	Learner				Teacher			
Answer	Yes	No	Total YES	Total NO	Yes	No	Total YES	Total NO
Doctors	10/100%	/			7/100%	/		
Lawyers	6/100%	/			5/100%	/		
Businessmen	8 /100%	/	43 100%	/	6/100%	/	32 100%	/
Tourist agencies	10/100%	/			6/100%	/		
University Professors	3 /100%	/			3/100%	/		
State Employees	6 /100%	/			5/100%	/		

Item 6: Media Preference; a) television/video/films

Profession	Learner				Teacher			
Answer	Yes	No	Total YES	Total NO	Yes	No	Total YES	Total NO
Doctors	10 / 100%	/			7 / 100%	/		
Lawyers	6 / 100%	/			5 / 100%	/		
Businessmen	8 / 100%	/	43 100%	/	6 / 100%	/	32 100%	/
Tourist agencies	10 / 100%	/			6 / 100%	/		
University Professors	3 / 100%	/			3 / 100%	/		
State Employees	6 / 100%	/			5 / 100%	/		

Item 8: Performance evaluation; *b) By seeing if you can use the language you have learnt in real-life Situations*

Profession	Learner				Teacher			
Answer	Yes	No	Total YES	Total NO	Yes	No	Total YES	Total NO
Doctors	10 / 100%	/			7 / 100%	/		
Lawyers	6 / 100%	/			5 / 100%	/		
Businessmen	8 / 100%	/			6 / 100%	/		
Tourist agencies	10 / 100%	/			6 / 100%	/		
University Professors	3 / 100%	/	43 100%	/	3 / 100%	/	32 100%	/
State Employees	6 / 100%	/			5 / 100%	/		

Item 9: Progress satisfaction; c) feeling more confident in situations that you found difficult before

Findings

The findings obtained from this research provide valuable information, suggesting that:

70% of learners participant in the research have the same needs and preferences.

72% of teachers participant in the research are aware of the preferences their students have.

In 16 out of 32 items evaluated in the questionnaire, teachers and learners share same opinion (difference less than 10%);

In 7 out of 32 items evaluated in the questionnaire, teachers and learners share the exact same opinion;

The biggest discrepancy is seen in a preferred way of learning, which uses "repeat what you hear", where 91% of learners assessed it as positive, whereas only 37% of teachers did so (difference of 54%)

The results obtained from the study answered the following research question:

Are the learners' language preferences and needs the same regarding their age or regarding their profession?

- In order to determine the age importance in respect to learning needs and preferences, counted were only cases where learners have the same answer, having above 70% for the same need and preference. Out of 32 items assessed in the questionnaire, in 18 items, learners claim to prefer a certain issue for more than 70%. This means that in 56% of issues assessed, above 70% of students gave the same answer. This shows that in 56% of cases, learners have the same preference which is mainly influenced by the age they have.

Conclusions

Taking into account that ESP teaching is not defined by an entity such as is the case with the schools that are given curricula by a specific entity in the government, it is free to expand its methodology as to be able to incorporate the needs and preferences of every single student that enrols into ESP course. Overall, the research results have proved that adult language learners have different sets of preferences in learning English as a Foreign Language. It also proves that if teachers do not carry out needs analysis at the beginning of the course, meeting students' language learning preferences will result in failure.

The findings of the study are very important in terms of identification of needs and preferences of adult learners who learn ESP for professional reasons. They clearly show that preferences and needs of adult learners are influenced by their profession.

Findings prove that adult learners do not have the same set of preferences. Age seemed to be irrelevant to a certain degree in the set of learning preferences, as could be demonstrated in a situation of having adults with the same age and different preferences and needs, which mainly refers to their profession. As the findings emphasize, significant role in English language learning have factors, as the reasons for learning the language, which in Macedonia is closely related to the job position promotion.

The results have shown that in most cases, teachers are aware of students' preferences and needs. The evidence can support this fact, but the main one is that courses take place in private schools, and quite many of them are one-to-one classes or small groups. This shows that during the course (without carrying needs analysis at its beginning), teachers and students exchange sufficient information for the overall course management.

Research of students' preferences and needs has been a target field of many researchers before. The findings of this research have shown to be quite similar with specific studies conducted before, yet carrying out specifics of the sample and settings.

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Note 1: Brindley (1989) adapted questionnaire for students:

1) Are you satisfied with your achievement in English? YES NO

2) In class do you like learning
a) individually? YES NO
b) in pairs? YES NO
c) in small groups? YES NO
d) in one large group? YES NO
e) other (specify please) ....

3) Do you want to
a) spend all your learning time in the classroom? YES NO
b) spend some time in the classroom and some time practicing your English with people outside? YES NO
c) other (specify please).............................

4) Do you like learning
a) by listening? YES NO
b) by reading? YES NO
c) by copying from the board? YES NO
d) by repeating what you hear? YES NO
e) other (specify please).............................

5) When learning new vocabulary, do you like learning
a) by using new words in a sentence YES NO
b) by thinking of relationships between known and new YES NO
c) by avoiding verbatim translation YES NO
d) by guessing the unknown YES NO
e) by reading without looking up words YES NO
f) other (specify please).............................

6) Do you like learning from
a) television/video/films? YES NO
b) tapes/cassettes? YES NO
c) pictures/posters? YES NO
d) other (specify please).............................

7) Do you do the following in your class?
a) Role play YES NO
b) Language games YES NO
d) Talking with and listening to other students YES NO
e) Memorizing conversations/dialogues YES NO
i) Learning about culture YES NO

8) How do you like to find out how much your English is improving?
a) By written tasks set by the teacher? YES NO
b) By seeing if you can use the language you have learnt in real-life situations? YES NO
c) other (specify please)..............................

9) Do you get a sense of satisfaction from
a) having your work graded? YES NO
b) being told that you have made progress? YES NO
c) feeling more confident in situations that you found difficult before? YES NO
d) other (specify please)..............................