

Mutta, M., P. Lintunen, I. Ivaska & P. Peltonen (toim.) 2014. AFinLA-e. Soveltavan kielitieteen tutkimuksia 2014 / n:o 7. 134–145.

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Evaluation of foreign language courses by language instructors in liberal adult education institutions

Many language teachers who enter adult education have no qualification in the education of adults – their teaching qualifications focus on the education of children. The aim of this study is to examine language teachers' evaluation of foreign language courses given at adult education centers (AEC) in Finland. The main issues addressed in this paper are: a) language teachers' attitude toward teaching adults, b) AEC language classroom practices, c) success factors and obstacles in an AEC's language class. Ten AEC language teachers participated in the survey. The collected interview data suggested that autonomy of language teachers at AECs create positive and negative effects. On the one hand, the teachers who had favorable environment for experimentation had a better course delivery. On the other hand, teachers who lacked pedagogical qualifications could have a superficial approach to language teaching, resulting in negative classroom practices.

Keywords: adult education, adult learning, foreign language teachers

1 Introduction

In the last two decades, adult learning has become an important issue in education. Learning is a basic human need, and every adult is a learner (Jarvis 1995: 43). The benefits of adult learning are classified into the factors of economic, social and political domains. Increased employability, individual well-being, better health, improved civic participation and a strengthening of the foundations of democracy are some of the beneficial factors of adult learning (OECD 2003: 165). The focus of this paper is adult learning for private, social and/or recreational purposes, i.e., liberal adult education which comprehends general studies, oriented toward areas of personal interest.

Liberal adult education does not lead to a qualification. "Liberal adult education is not degree-oriented, nor is its content regulated by law; instead educational goals and content are decided upon by the administrators of educational institutions and organizations" (Anderzén 2012: 6). Liberal adult education institutions are adult education centers, folk high schools, summer universities, study centers, and sport institutes. Adult education centers are municipally owned adult education institutions. The focus of education is on various fields of art, handicrafts and languages, and courses are held in multiform studies. About half of the courses are language courses. So far, however, there has been little discussion about how foreign language courses are taught at AECs.

AECs are very different from formal educational organizations because of their loose network structure with a very small number of full-time teachers and a great number of part-time teachers working independently (Eloranta 2013: 13). The proportion of formally qualified teachers in liberal adult education institutions is about 70% (Ministry of Education of Finland 2003). Houle (1960: 35–38) defined three main categories of adult educators employed within the adult education service: those who teach on a voluntary basis, those who perform other educational activities on a part-time basis for remuneration, and full-time professional adult educators. Autonomy within the work and altruistic motives contributes to volunteer adult educators' satisfaction in work (Mee & Wiltshire 1978: 61–62). In contrast to this, part-time adult educators tend to acknowledge that adult education is recreational. Newman (1979) described part-time adult educators according to their motive and type: 1) the professionals, 2) the horse's mouth – who teaches about their experience rather than any academic discipline, 3) the passionate amateurs – who teach their hobbies, and 4) the school teachers – who teach the discipline that they teach at school or college. The main route into adult teaching in AECs appears through school teaching or lecturing in colleges, which explains why a lot of AECs' part-time teachers are school teachers. Many teachers who enter adult education have no qualification in the education of adults – their teaching qualifications

being in the education of children. In this case the difference between andragogy and pedagogy has practical implications. Even though there are common elements between these two disciplines, existing considerable differences may raise the suitability of pedagogic qualification for teaching adults.

Jarvis (1983: 35) suggested a triple foundation for an adult educator's competence: practitioner's knowledge, skill and attitude. According to him, the attitude results in a knowledge and commitment of professionalism, a willingness to play the role in a professional manner. The OECD (2003: 179) report develops the idea of a favorable environment for adult learning and a delivery which facilitates the whole adult education system. The report proposes teacher training and stresses the active role of an instructor:

Teachers need to be well trained with the range of adult learning processes and the attendant difficulties and they must choose the most suitable method to particular learners. It is important to reassess teacher's jobs and skills, provide a clear definition of responsibilities and redefine priorities in terms of practice, approaches and the skills needed to fully develop their adult learning experience. (OECD 2003: 179)

Another important study that recommends teachers' training at AECs is conducted by the Finnish Association of Adult Education Centres (KoL) at the behest of the Finnish National Board of Education (Anderzén 2012: 23–24). The study raised the concern that teachers must be trained to teach adult immigrants. Furthermore, bringing in qualified and/or motivated teachers of immigrants to smaller or more remote areas is difficult and sometimes even costly.

In AEC classrooms adult learners differ in many aspects: motivation to learn, responses to learning opportunities, age, their intelligence, personality type (extrovert, introvert), cognitive styles (convergent/divergent thinking), syllabus-bound and syllabus-free ('syllb' and 'syllf'), the need for stimulation, they may have different approaches to learning (serialist and holist, field-dependent, field-independent), reactions (impulsivity and reflectivity) (Lovell 1984). At AECs learners choose the foreign language courses and are free to move from one level to another without any exams; they can take one and the same course for several times and become fluent at that level. This kind of learners' autonomy may create a big linguistic difference in a group and put the language teacher in a challenging environment. Adult learners may practice autonomy to some extent, but they cannot take charge for their own learning because they do not know the language they are learning. It is the responsibility of the teachers and technology to help to direct students effectively (Pemberton, Li, Or & Pierson 1996: 36). Although extensive research has been carried out on adult education, no single study exists which adequately covers foreign language instructors' experience at liberal adult education institutions.

The purpose of this study is to evaluate teachers' attitude toward foreign language courses in liberal adult education institutions in Finland. This study is expanded to include teachers' evaluation of their role and practice in AECs' language class. Evaluation can have different meanings in language programs. Evaluation refers to the judgments about students made by teachers and external assessors, as well as the performance of teachers by their students, program managers and institutions. The evaluation research includes both the research and evaluation functions – information for judgments or decision-making process, and as research into the process of evaluation being significant on language program evaluation (Kiely & Rea-Dickins 2005: 6). The current study covers the evaluation of language teaching practice by teachers.

The overarching goal of the study is to determine what factors influence the success of a language program, according to a teacher's perception, in an AEC language classroom. The following questions guided this study: What is the attitude of instructors toward the language courses? What are the strengths and weaknesses of these language courses? The paper examines language teachers' experience as adult educators at liberal adult education institutions; how they cope with different approaches, while lacking adult education qualifications – andragogy vs. pedagogy in a specific educational setting – non-formal vs. formal education.

2 Method

This study was defined as a descriptive survey. The best procedure to adopt for this study was a survey, which is used to gather and describe the attitudes, views and opinions to determine relationship that exist between specific events (Cohen, Manion & Morrison 2007). The instrument to collect data was an interview, which is a flexible tool. The interview employed a combination of standardized open-ended interview and closed quantitative interview (Patton 1980: 206). The sequence and exact wording of questions were determined in advance. All interviewees were asked the same basic questions in the same order. Some questions were open-ended and some had fixed responses. Respondents chose from among these fixed responses. The answers were not taped, but they were written down; thus, the study is based on the self-reported data. The interviews were administered in AECs, at teachers' workplace, and lasted 40 minutes on average. The language courses usually start in September. The interviews were conducted in the second month of the course instruction. The interviewees' answers were coded and analyzed.

2.1 Participants

In Finland adult education is available within the official education system and in liberal adult education in adult education centers (230 institutions), folk high schools, and summer universities (Ministry of Education of Finland 2008). Initially it was planned to reach 20 teachers at Turku Adult Education Center (TAEC), Arbis (Swedish Adult Education Center, AAEC), and Aurala Community College (ACC). In autumn 2013, Turku Adult Education Center offered 86 language courses, Aurala Community College 26 language courses, and Arbis Adult Education Center 18. Each AEC provided a shortlist of employed teachers and their email addresses. All the teachers were contacted by email, introduced with the research goal and asked for the interview. In this paper, the initial results and findings are presented based on the interviews of 10 instructors (1 male, 9 female): 7 instructors from TAEC, 2 instructors from AAEC, and 1 instructor from ACC.

The participants were divided into 3 age groups: 1) below 40 – 4 teachers, 2) from 40 to 50 – 3 teachers, and 3) above 50 – 3 teachers (see Table 1). 7 respondents were of Finnish nationality, and 3 of different nationalities (the nationalities are not mentioned here in order to avoid respondents' disclosure). These 10 teachers taught the following languages: Finnish, English, Estonian, French, Italian, Swedish, Dutch, and Russian.

TABLE 1. Foreign language instructors' data.

Age groups	I group (below 40)	II group (between 40–50)	III group (above 50)
Number of instructors	4	3	3
Instructors' academic degree	4 – MA degree	2 – BA degree, 1 – MA degree	2 – MA degree, 1 – BA degree
Mean of overall teaching experience (in years)	6.5	16.3	24.6
Mean of teaching experience at the AEC (in years)	2.75	7.5	19.3

7 teachers hold an MA degree and 3 have a BA degree; 6 teachers have got pedagogic qualifications. The overall teaching experience of the second and third age groups is higher: in the second group 16.3 years, and in the third group 24.6 years. The teachers' working experience is diverse. They have worked in several education institutions: adult education centers, universities, public schools, summer universities, training companies, private schools, etc. Only one teacher was a novice at the AEC at the time of the interview.

2.1 Material

The questions for the interview were divided into 4 categories: 1) personal data, 2) teaching experience, 3) description/characteristics of target language class, and 4) teacher's attitude, characteristics and views about their students. In the first category there were questions about age, gender, nationality, and educational background. The second category consisted of questions about teaching experience in total, previous workplace and teaching experience at the adult education center, and reasons for working in an adult education center. In the third category the questions related to the target language class (frequency, duration, and number of classes in a course), overall goal, strong and weak sides of the course, the activities that contribute most and least to learning, possible improvement to the language course, problems in teaching, learners' attendance, and overall trend of course completion. The last category consisted of the questions which had fixed responses and were aimed to rate the teacher's attitude toward teaching adults and teacher's beliefs about adult learners.

3 Results

3.1 The characteristics of the language courses

Based on the interviews, the language courses have been analyzed and described. Language courses are divided into intensive and regular courses. Intensive courses usually last 2 months, and classes are held three times a week with the duration of 120 minutes. Regular courses consist of 24 weeks of instruction. Classes are held once a week with the duration of 90 minutes. All the interviewed instructors prepared for their classes, found the material, and chose activities but did not apply timing for them. Only the novice teacher, who had been teaching for 1 month, said that she was provided with a designed course and instructions to give an intensive course. 7 instructors reported introducing the overall goal to the learners at the beginning of the course. A few instructors (3) thought that there was no need to set a goal, because the course was "leisure and like a hobby" and it was the learner's choice to study or not.

Most teachers were certain in the efficacy of their teaching. 8 instructors were confident that their teaching was effective, and only 2 answered that it was not so effective. According to the teachers' answers, the effective teaching resulted in learners' ability to communicate in the target language, travel to a target language country and study there. The interesting finding of the study was that foreign language teachers compared non-formal and formal education settings: "If we compare this learning

to which happens in formal environment, then it is not so effective. The goal here is different; it is more connected to leisure and fun. However, the result is always visible.”

They gave explanations to the nature of learning that occurred in AECs laying the whole responsibility to learn on students: “If students are willing to work, then they have results. If students do not do homework then it is very difficult to teach a language.” Some teachers used questionnaires and tests to track the achievements and needs of their learners.

3.2 Language practice

The teachers were asked to name the activities that contribute most and least in teaching adults (see Table 2); two teachers explained that they did not use any ineffective tasks.

TABLE 2. Effective and ineffective practices in AEC language classes.

Effective activities	N	Least effective activities	N
speaking activities	3	pair-work	1
‘combination of different activities’	1	depends on learners mood	1
vocabulary activities	1	discussion topics unfamiliar for students	1
reading unknown texts, games	1	writing and listening activities	1
creative activities, speaking, pair-work	1	activities not related to language learning	2
listening, video, writing activities	1	discussion with students whose vocabulary is poor	1
listening, writing activities	1	teacher reading the passage, which has the audio recording as well	1
group-work, problem-solving, games, listening activities	1	no practice of such activities	2
Total	10	Total	10

It is apparent from this table that the same activities were indicated in both categories: as effective and ineffective. This controversy in responses needed further analysis. The instructors were asked if learners complained about anything. More than half of the instructors (6) reported that learners in their language courses had some kind of complaints during the instruction: (1) textbooks / design of textbooks, (2) not enough exposure to the target language, (3) fast/slow pace, (4) not understandable audio material, and (5) learners’ willingness for more homework.

The teachers considered the strong sides of their courses, which might be called as success factors. The factors for successful language courses were divided into 2 groups: 1) related to the teacher and 2) related to the teaching process. According

to the teachers' answers, the language courses were successful if the teacher was a native speaker of the target language and aware of the target language culture, had rich teaching experience, and was motivated. According to the teachers' answers, the teaching process was successful if a) the textbook was chosen properly, b) there were excursions to the target language country, c) there were different approaches to teaching, e.g. tandem-teaching, d) rich main and supplementary materials were chosen, e.g. task-based activities, internet resources and applications (Moodle – open source learning platform), songs, e) there was a relaxed environment for learners in the classroom, e.g. interaction happened freely, group environment was favorable and fun, f) instructional language was native to learners, e.g. learners' questions were answered, students could discuss the content of the course, and g) the course had appropriate length.

3.3 Negative factors in AEC language teaching

The instructors were asked to reflect on the weaknesses of their courses. We called weaknesses all kinds of obstacles caused by any parties (administrators, learners, and instructors) involved in course delivery. The interviewees' answers were analyzed and grouped into three categories: negative factors related to 1) administration, 2) learners, and 3) teachers.

One of the negative factors related to administration was oversized groups or too many learners in a group (e.g. more than 25 learners in a group). This diminished learners' interest and motivation, as not all learners had a chance to participate in the classroom activities. The next factor was a lack of instructional hours per week. Meeting once a week for an hour and a half was not enough for effective language learning. In most cases the learners did not remember the material covered in the previous week, and the teacher had to give an explanation again. In general, learning happened very slowly and moving forward was unhurried; consequently, learners would lose interest in their studies. The last factor was about class hours. Some classes were in the evening. Those teachers who worked during the daytime and were on part-time terms in an AEC felt tired in the evening and admitted that their tiredness affected the quality of teaching.

In the second category we placed negative factors related to learners. First, learners with different learning abilities in a group created cumbersome conditions for a teacher. Younger learners with better educational background grasped the material fast and did their homework regularly, but older learners, who had their schooling long ago, seemed to suffer from the difficulty of comprehending the material, and they were usually passive and timid participants. Thus, the teacher had a problem with proceeding with new material; some learners wanted to go faster and some slower. Next, if learners (at intermediate level) were able to ask questions and communicate in the target

language, but still preferred to use the instructional language whenever they spoke in the classroom (in this case the mother tongue), these were the 'weak side' of the course. The last factor was the attendance of students. Teachers admitted that students missed classes. Some courses had online resources to help the students to catch up with the missed material. Most students did not study the missed material; naturally, students were lagging behind and struggling with the material. Students would gradually lose interest in the course if they did not get support and, finally, they would drop out of the course.

In the third category teachers mentioned problems that were mainly connected to them. First, if the teachers were foreigners teaching their native language, they were expected to talk fluently in an instructional language (learners' mother tongue) in order to explain grammar and language phenomena to learners. Some teachers felt uncertain about the clarity of their explanation. The second factor was grammar teaching. Some language courses started with pure grammar teaching, which made classes boring for learners and the instructor. One of the teachers considered grammar teaching as a difficult, obligatory task and a 'weak side' of the course. The last factor was about one of the language skills not practiced with senior learners. The interviewee admitted that it would be better to teach and practice a little writing with senior learners in the target language; on the other hand, the interviewee thought that it would be an extra 'load' on learners' memory.

The majority of the teachers (8) acknowledged that the language course design and delivery could be improved. However, two teachers were not sure what could be changed; they considered utilizing computers and audio equipment in teaching. Alternatively, they believed that senior learners seem to be happy learning a language without computer technology. Only one teacher said that there is no need for changes. Almost all of the interviewees believed that their students like the language course very much. To the question how many students out of 100% would finish the course, five teachers answered that about 80% of the students in their groups were expected to complete the course, and four teachers said that this number varied between 60% and 80%. The striking result to emerge from the data is that all of the interviewed teachers strongly agreed with the statement that they liked teaching adults; however, the reasons for working at AECs varied and were set in four groups: (1) teacher's main job, (2) additional income – "I need money," (3) attractive working conditions (autonomy within work), and (4) maintaining foreign language skills by teaching it (hobby).

In summary, the study contributes to existing knowledge of liberal adult education by providing account on foreign language courses at AECs and how language instructors perceive their teaching, how to organize a successful language course, and what obstacles they may encounter in adult teaching.

4 Discussion and conclusion

This study set out with the aim of describing the foreign language instructors' teaching experience at liberal adult education institutions. It studied adult educators' evaluation of their teaching, classroom practices, and their beliefs about adult education. The study revealed that teaching foreign languages at AECs is a multifaceted process. One of the interesting findings was the list of activities considered as effective/ineffective by different teachers. This inconsistency may be due to lack of pedagogical knowledge/ qualifications or lack of experience. The instructor chooses a teaching approach and goes through trial and error. Hence, it could conceivably be hypothesized that autonomy of language teachers at AECs created positive and negative grounds, suggesting that teachers have favorable environment for experimentation to improve course delivery. On the other hand, teachers who lack pedagogical qualifications may exercise superficial approach to language teaching, resulting in negative classroom practices. However, with a small sample size, caution must be applied, as the findings might not be transferable to all language adult educators at AECs. Another important finding was that most teachers see the significance of teaching experience. How can this experience be created? As it was mentioned in the literature review, teacher training is one solution for the teachers who are new to the work and do not have any guidance. Senior teachers can organize training or discussions to share their experience with young teachers. Foreign language instructors need to build systematic knowledge about different learning styles, language skills, how the pair-work/group-work activities are organized, etc. Teachers need to reflect and diagnose their classes (Richards & Renandya 2002: 14): Who are their learners? What abilities do they have? Are the activities satisfactory for the majority of students in a class? Adult learners' experience as foreign language learners at school goes back on average 35-45 years. Most of them were taught foreign languages by the methods which were popular at that time: Grammar Translation Method, Communicative Language Teaching, etc. The teacher should present some helpful strategies to learners how to become autonomous learners.

The results of this study (the negative factors related to administrators) show that the communication between the teachers and course administrators/organizers may be severed. A possible explanation for this might be the independence of instructors or their term of employment – in this case part-time (mentioned in the introduction part). More attention should be paid to the following problems such as the number of learners in a group, the frequency, hours of classes, and classroom size. In some cases teachers complained on the size of classrooms which prevented them from doing some activities that require moving freely around the room. Some teachers do not use computer technology in their language classes, even though the classrooms are equipped with

the technology. The reason for this is not clear but the possible reason may be language instructors' poor computer skills. Administrators should provide adult educators with proper computer training and explain how computer technology provides adult educators and learners with flexibility in program delivery methods. Flexibility also allows adult educators to be more responsive to learner needs.

Based on the study the foreign language educators' attitude towards language courses at AECs is positive toward teaching adults. There are several possible explanations for this result. For most teachers teaching at an adult education center is a job which offers less stress, less responsibility, and less control. On the other hand, the job does not pay well. This can be the reason for teachers' low motivation and lack of goal-oriented planning. In general, it seems that widespread judgments "this course is for fun, it is a hobby for the learners" among language teachers of adults can create a perfunctory attitude to teaching. It is important to realize that learners come not only for leisure, but they value learning and have certain goals. Teachers are facilitators in achieving these goals. Teachers should check if learners' needs are met. It is in this primary relationship of trust that teachers can help the learners to reflect and learn. Such a relationship which can be rich and rewarding may also have the potential to become personal and emotionally charged since both teachers and learners are adults.

5 Limitations of the study

Finally, a number of important limitations need to be considered. First, the sample size was small. Due to some personal reasons instructors did not respond to invitations for the interviews. Second, the author is not fluent in Finnish and was limited in being able to read and interpret Finnish language research studies on the topic. Third, the study itself – reported data – may contain several potential sources of bias that should be noted as limitations: (1) selective memory, (2) telescoping, (3) attribution, and (4) exaggeration. The author considers as a shortcoming of the study that interviews were done not in the respondents' mother tongue; seven interviews were conducted in English and three in Russian due to the interviewees' request. The interviewees had problems with understanding some questions correctly, and it was necessary to simplify the questions. A further study could access more adult educators to explore and describe the ways of improving language teaching at liberal adult education centers.

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