

THE EVERGREENS AT THE GOLDEN MEMORIES HOTEL – HOW TO LEARN ENGLISH AT AN ADVANCED AGE?

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An increasing number of older adults take part in English language courses offered by e.g. 'kansalaisopisto', the widely spread municipally maintained adult education system in Finland. Elderly (60+) students are a very heterogeneous population in many respects, yet they share a strong intrinsic (rather than instrumental) motivation for learning. In this paper I outline my research, which aims at finding out the learning strategies of elderly learners of English and their reactions to certain teaching practices. The focus is on the students, 'the Evergreens', and their special traits due to age. I also present some didactic means which seem to facilitate their learning processes. These practical educational solutions collected under the heading 'the Golden Memories Hotel' seem to be theoretically confirmed by the social constructivist model presented by Williams and Burden in 1997.

Keywords: *Language teaching, elderly learners, learning strategies*

1 INTRODUCTION AND BACKGROUND TO THE RESEARCH

This paper begins with a short description of a study of **teaching English to elderly learners**, which will hopefully grow into a licentiate thesis for the Centre for Applied Language Studies at the University of Jyväskylä. The emphasis, however, will be on 'the Evergreens', the students themselves, and the principles and practices of teaching them. The point of view of the writer is that of a teacher reflecting on her own work.

I have been working as a language teacher for adults at Porvoon kansalaisopisto (education centre for adults) for over twenty years. During

this time there has been a constant increase in the number of elderly (60+) learners of foreign languages. Most of them take part in ordinary courses for adults, but several special courses for senior citizens have also been offered over the years. The question these students very often ask their teacher is 'Can an old person learn a foreign language?' On the basis of a long teaching experience supported with recent psychological and gerontological research the answer is 'Yes'. Age alone does not prevent learning.

But the teacher also has questions in mind: Why do some older learners find learning more difficult than others? How do they try to learn? What kind of learning strategies do they use? What can the teacher do to facilitate learning? How do the students react to different teaching practices? Are special pedagogic and didactic methods required to teach students of an advanced age? In my opinion the students themselves are the best experts on their own learning. So I decided to ask them.

2 ACTION RESEARCH SINCE 1991

The point of departure as well as the goal of my study were very practical: to chart the field of older adults as learners of English, their special problems due to age, and to propose solutions to the problems by developing suitable didactic means that would be applicable to an everyday teacher's work. My approach would be **qualitative**, and my main tools would be different techniques of interviewing and observation.

I was soon to realize that instead of simply collecting the data and drafting a report on the basis of it, I would be doing **action research**: after having collected the first data I felt the need of improving my questions and also somewhat changing my teaching practices. Later on I widened the scope of the learner population included in the research by adding different levels of students to it. This took place in the years 1991–93, as described below in more detail. Ever since the action research has been going on in the sense that both teaching strategies and learning strategies are continually being reflected on and also discussed together with the students, 'the Evergreens'.

As a result I have been able to construct a learning environment that seems to correspond to the needs of elderly learners in many respects. I call it 'the Golden Memories Hotel'. Pedagogically I have relied on my long experience of using various communicative language teaching strategies, like *suggestopedia*; I have also adopted principles offered by gerontological research. This means in practice that in the teaching/learning proce-

ss the learner is the key figure and responsible for his/her learning, and that the learning tasks and activities are found meaningful. The physical, emotional and social learning environment supports learning by providing positive experiences. The teacher is not only an instructor but above all a facilitator, whose job is to guide and inspire the learners from task to task, and who monitors and reflects on her own performance.

It is with some enthusiasm that I have studied Williams and Burden's book *Psychology for Language Teachers* (1997), which I quite recently got hold of, for it seems to give a scientific explanation to the success of these teaching practices. In the book the writers present **a social constructivist model** of language learning. It is based on a constructivist view of learning in general, that is, the belief in the centrality of learners constructing their own knowledge and understanding. According to the writers, this constructivist viewpoint operates within a social interactionist framework: the learning occurs through social interactions within a social environment (Williams & Burden 1997: 30). Their social constructivist model of the teaching learning process consists of four main elements: the teacher, the learner, the task, and the context. These elements interact in a dynamic way: "Teachers select tasks which reflect their beliefs about teaching and learning. Learners interpret tasks in ways that are meaningful and personal to them as individuals. The task is therefore the interface between the teacher and learners... In addition to this, the context in which the learning takes place will play an important part in shaping what happens within it." The context includes e.g. the emotional, the physical, and the social environments. The writers conclude that this can be represented as a set of concentric circles, influencing each other, "with the participants, of course, playing an ongoing part in shaping those environments" (Williams & Burden 1997: 43–44).

I find this model most interesting when I view my 'Golden Memories Hotel' against it, and I expect it to yield theoretical support to my practical solutions. This calls for further study. I shall now proceed to an outline of what I have done so far.

3 THE FIRST THREE PHASES OF THE STUDY

I started my research at Porvoon kansalaisopisto by setting up groups of English specially designed for elderly learners. The empirical part of the research was conducted in three phases during the study years 1991-93. Of the about 50 students involved only 6 were males. The level of English

of the students in the first phase was pre-intermediate: they were familiar with the basics of English, and they were offered the chance to brush up and activate their practical English skills on the course named *English for the Evergreens*. In the spring term 1992 another group called *Senior English*, whose level of English was remarkably lower, was included in the study. A year later a new course for beginners, *Aivojumppaa englanniksi* ('Brain gymnastics in English'), was started and incorporated in the research.

My leading principle was to carry out the research in as normal teaching/learning circumstances as possible. Therefore much of the data was collected from the **learning-to-learn discussions** with these groups; in the first phase they were audiotaped, in the later phases I made notes of them. Written **questionnaires** were used to ask about motives of learning English and learning strategies; in the third phase the questions were focussed on the students' experiences of three particular lessons (reactions to teaching practices, learning tasks and activities) and their ways of preparing themselves for the lessons (independent homework). From the students of the first phase I also got a few **diaries**, which contain some interesting information.

What follows is an account of 'the Evergreens', that is the students involved in the different phases of my study, and their English learning environment, 'the Golden Memories Hotel'.

4 THE EVERGREENS

The elderly learners of English involved in the present research well deserve the epithet 'evergreen': in spite of their advanced age, 60–90 years, they are active participants in their study groups, positive in their attitudes, open-minded and determined to learn – ideal students in many respects. (I use the present tense, because a great number of these Evergreens still continue their studies, and many new have joined in.)

It is, however, important to notice the great **variety** of individuals within this learner population. The thirty years' difference in age alone means a spectrum of life-histories. There are also big individual differences in **health and other physical factors**, like hearing and sight. It is a well known fact that old age is usually accompanied by sensory impairment. Another typical feature is the **decline of speed** in both mental and physical performances, the degree of which of course also varies from person to person.

From the point of view of learning it is also necessary to keep in mind the different **educational backgrounds** of the older adults: some have got university degrees, while others have only primary school education. Some have not learned any foreign languages until quite late in life, maybe after retirement, whereas some others have learned several languages even as children at school. No doubt their approaches and attitudes to foreign language learning as Evergreens differ greatly.

Irrespective of their many individual differences the Evergreens have one common complaint: the '**bad memory**'. It often happens that they cannot recall the right words when needed, or that they forget the new words as soon as they learned them. The memory is to blame.

The workings of memory have called a lot of attention from researchers of aging and especially in connection with learning. It is true that although most people do not suffer great losses of cognitive powers in old age, several studies have shown that memory ability does decrease with age. On the other hand, means of compensating for impaired memory have been found out. With regard to learning tasks, it is essential that they should be meaningful, so that the learners find them worth remembering (Brown 1983; John 1989).

This leads us to another central factor in learning, that is, **motivation**: Why do so many older adults in Finland want to learn English? According to my Evergreens the most important reason for taking part in an English course was to refresh and activate one's brain and memory. Next came the usefulness of English for travel, and a pure interest in the language. The social factor of coming together and meeting the other students was also often mentioned, as well as the wish to understand television programmes or English speaking friends and relatives. A few of the students had special hobbies for which they needed English. Varied as their motives may be, the Evergreens had / have one basic learning strategy in common: they have all made the decision to attend a course to learn English. They also seem to share the intrinsic motivation that they find learning English enjoyable in itself (Williams & Burden 1997: 123). Only this can explain their willingness to continue their studies year after year.

5 THE GOLDEN MEMORIES HOTEL

'The Golden Memories Hotel' was the concrete (though imaginary) setting of the first *English for the Evergreens* course in 1991, but the name also contains some of the main principles I have adopted for teaching older

adults in general. A 'hotel' as a **learning environment** is easily associated with travelling, which is a popular and motivating topic area in language courses for adults. It brings along pleasant notions: being abroad on holiday, visiting new places, relaxing, letting go all daily worries, meeting interesting people – and speaking English with them. The name of the hotel 'Golden Memories' points to the Evergreens' vast life experience, which serves as a valuable resource even for the purpose of learning a foreign language. As a matter of fact, a considerable amount of the **input** on these courses (except for the elementary ones where text books are being used) comes from the participants. **Working methods** are mostly co-operative, and interaction between groups as well as individual students is encouraged. In accordance with **humanistic approaches** to learning, the learners are treated as whole persons with their emotions and physical bodies. Therefore artistic elements – music, poetry and even drawing – are incorporated in the courses, as well as gymnastics and relaxation exercises and other activities in which the students move about in the classroom. Learning oral communication being the students' main interest, the majority of the tasks offer chances to speak English. Written exercises are mostly elaboration on new words and structures in the form of sentences or little stories created by the students themselves.

Independent of their level of English the students are encouraged to use their imagination, their mental images and sense of humour. A good **example** is the process of creating the Golden Memories Hotel for the first time. The hotel was to be situated in London, because that was the city the group of the thirteen Evergreens wanted to visit. All the details about the hotel were determined together: exact place, surroundings, when built, style and size. The discussion continued in small groups about furniture and equipment of the rooms, services available, hotel staff, etc. Each group presented its ideas to be discussed together. Interesting words and phrases were noted on the board. Afterwards the language material was recycled for example by discussing the students' memories and experiences of other hotels in different parts of the world.

The **teacher's role** in this kind of teaching is in the first place that of a facilitator or mediator (Williams & Burden 1997), who not only instructs her class in the English language but also aims at supporting and guiding actively the students' own efforts at learning. An important part of the teacher's work takes place before the lessons, planning the tasks, which should make up a meaningful whole and at the same time offer variation of both form and content. In the course of the lessons the teacher alternately acts as a 'chairperson' in front of the class or withdraws in order to listen

with a sensitive ear and an alert mind to what the students are saying and doing in their small groups.

6 CONCLUSION

Above, I have described my research on elderly learners of English, which began with the three-phase empirical study in Porvoo. I have paid a lot of attention to the students themselves, 'the Evergreens', in the light of recent psychological and gerontological research; and I have given an account of my principles of teaching older adults, which 'the Golden Memories Hotel' serves to illustrate. As a researcher I first wanted to find out how the students worked in order to learn; as a teacher I have tried to help my students learn and develop their learning strategies. At the moment I am looking at my work both as a teacher and a researcher through **the social constructivist model** recently presented by Williams and Burden (1997), and I am becoming more and more convinced that the same principles apply to teaching older adults as to all good teaching.

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APPENDIX 1

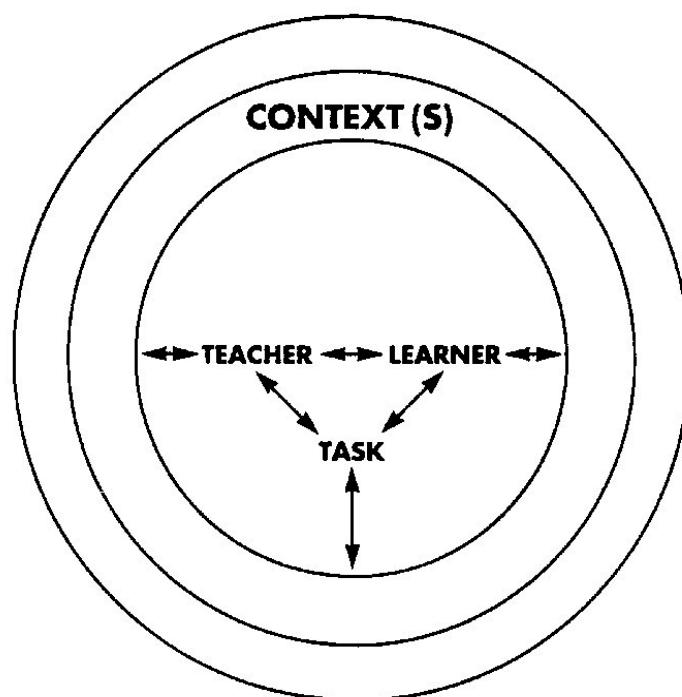


FIGURE 1. A social constructivist model of the teaching-learning process (Williams & Burden 1997: 43).