

# Learning / Teaching EFL to Adult Learners at Language Courses

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**Summary.** The article presents the definition of a concept of an adult learner and provides the tips for teaching EFL to adults. The current paper aims at examining the needs, experiences and expectations of adult learners of English at the Lithuanian University of Educational Sciences as well as suggesting some ways of overcoming the challenges teachers face. The data of the current research is taken from the survey of adult learners doing an English course at LEU. The main motivating factors, the most difficult and the most important communication skills, the most difficult language aspects and the most useful teaching methods were identified.

**Keywords:** *EFL, adult learners, teaching techniques, motivation, communication skills.*

## Introduction

Teaching English to adult learners differs from teaching young learners. The reason is that adult learners have very clear goals about what they want to learn and how they are going to achieve that. They also have very limited time and do not accept spending it on playing around with the language for no particular purpose. Therefore, to teach English to adults successfully a teacher needs to follow methods and techniques that are fit for adults. Adult learners bring to the classroom a lot of issues that a teacher must address creating a successful learning environment. Teachers must be prepared to understand their needs and be flexible enough to alter lessons when they are proving to be ineffective in the classroom.

The object of the research is teaching EFL to adult learners. The material for the current research was collected from the survey of 30 adult learners between the ages 18 to 60, doing an English evening course at LEU in spring 2014. The aims of the present paper are (1) to define an adult learner, pointing out his/her characteristics, and (2) to identify and analyze the needs, experiences and expectations of adult learners of English at the Lithuanian University of Educational Sciences; to suggest the ways of overcoming the challenges teachers face.

The following methods were used for the study:

1. The descriptive method was used to define, explain, and clarify the meaning and characteristics of an adult learner and tips for teaching adults,
2. Theoretical literature analysis was used to provide some theoretical background to the issue,
3. Quantitative analysis of the survey.

## 1. The Definition of an Adult Learner

Adult learners have characteristics that set them apart from traditional school or university learners. According to Parrish (2004), traditional university students are generally defined as recent secondary school graduates between the ages 18 to 24, financially dependent upon their parents, and often living away from home for the first time. Nontraditional students are those learners who do not fit this general mold. Adult learners are considered to be the most common group under the umbrella term of non-traditional students. Orem (2005) claims that as the number of adult learners in university classrooms increases, teachers should understand that the needs, expectations, and experiences of these students may differ from those of traditional students. All adults come to courses with a variety of experiences, both in terms of their working life and educational backgrounds. This impacts on how and why they participate in learning. Although each student has individual learning needs, according to Merriam (2013, 11–12), and other authors, there are some characteristics that are common to all adult learners:

- Adults have accumulated life experience. They come to English courses with experiences and knowledge in diverse areas. They tend to favour practical learning activities that enable them to draw on their prior skills and knowledge.
- Adults have established opinions, values and beliefs which have been built up over time and arrived at following experience of families, relationships, work, community, politics, etc. These views cannot be dismissed and must be respected.
- Adults are intrinsically motivated. Learners increase their effort when motivated by a need, an interest, or a desire to learn. They are also motivated by the relevance of the material to be addressed and learn better when material is related to their own needs and interests.

- Individual differences. Adults learn at various rates and in different ways according to their intellectual ability, educational level, personality and cognitive learning styles. Teaching strategies must anticipate and accommodate different comprehension rates of learners.
- Adults learn best in a democratic, participatory and collaborative environment. They need to be actively involved in determining how and what they will learn, and they need active learning experiences.
- Adults are goal - oriented. They want to know why they are learning something. Adults have needs that are concrete and immediate. They are task- or problem-centered rather than subject-centered.
- Adults are autonomous and self- directed. They are self-reliant learners and prefer to work at their own pace. Individuals learn best when they are ready to learn and when they have identified their own learning needs.

## 2. Four Basic Communication Skills

Reading, writing, speaking, and listening are basic communication skills necessary for effective communication in any environment, especially in the workplace.

Reading is the receptive skill in the written mode. According to NCLRC website, reading is *„an activity with a purpose. A person may read in order to gain information or verify existing knowledge, or in order to critique a writer’s ideas or writing style. A person may also read for enjoyment, or to enhance knowledge of the language being read. The purpose(s) for reading guide the reader’s selection of texts“* (<http://www.nclrc.org/essentials/reading/reindex.htm>). Reading can develop independently of listening and speaking skills, but often develops along with them. Reading helps building vocabulary that later helps listening comprehension. Teaching reading in EFL is different from teaching reading of native speakers. Vocabulary is an important part of reading. However, teaching the reading skills of surveying, skimming, scanning, inference, predicting and guessing are also very important. The concepts of surveying, scanning and skimming are moving from the big ideas of a text to the specific details. The contents of a book, the chapters, headings, subheadings, sidebars, pictures, words in italics and bold type help to find the information a person needs. Students also need to be taught to guess the meanings of words based on the context of the reading and to learn how to predict what might happen next.

Writing is the productive skill in the written mode. Teaching writing is often about teaching grammar. It involves not just a graphic representation of speech, but the development and presentation of thoughts in a structured way. As the present world has gone high-tech and people need to communicate through a number of media, in a personal or business setting, the ability to communicate effectively through written

correspondence is a must. Written communication can take on many forms including email, text messages, memos, or letters. Effective written communication skills start with using the proper format for the type of correspondence a person wants to send. (<http://www.ehow.com>).

Speaking is an important part of learning any language. Many people who learn English as a foreign language (EFL) are especially interested in learning English for conversation while traveling or for use in business, as it is considered an international standard language for communication. As stated by Harmer (2003), "communication is the sharing or conveying of information, ideas and/or feelings by using gestures, words, intonations or other symbols. Reading and listening are receptive forms of communication" (Harmer, 2003, 87). Compared to writing, "effective speaking requires a number of things: a high degree of organisation in the development of ideas, activities and information" (Hedge, 1988, 5). Students are supposed to know grammatical patterns, proper use of vocabulary and sentence structures to fulfill properly their communicative activities. Speaking is considered to be the hardest of four communication skills as it takes a considerable amount of knowledge, time and specific skills to be able to communicate in the world.

Listening comprehension is the receptive skill in the oral mode. Listening is one of the most important aspects of effective communication. Listening is the ability to hear attentively and to understand what others are saying. When defining listening it is necessary to consider the following listening components: understanding of the accent; the way words are pronounced; grammar rules; and learning vocabulary which help a person to understand the whole meaning of what the emitter is saying in context. Effective listening depends entirely on the relationship between these components. Successful listening means not just understanding the words or the information being communicated, but also understanding how the speaker feels about what they are communicating. (<http://www.01.sil.org/lingualinks/LANGUAGELEARNING/OtherResources/GudInsFrALnggAndCltrLrnnngPrgrm/WritingSkill.htm>).

### 3. Tips for Teaching EFL to Adults

The cultural background of adult English students can play a huge role in learning. Brookfield (2013) states that adequate personal connection with each student is important and should be established before any aspect of the language. Students should want to communicate with their teacher before he/she can help them learn how to communicate in English. Furthermore, every adult learner that walks into the classroom, no matter his/her educational background, has his/her own individual knowledge regarding language. According to Włodkowski (2008), lessons should have attainable and measurable objectives. A specific objective will help adult students to understand their goals for learning

during the lesson. If the objectives are unclear, they may fall behind in the lesson. Peer collaboration and team activities can spur language learning. Galbraith (2003) claims that placing students in cooperative groups will give each student personal attention from their peers. Groups can create a community setting and help students learn from each other.

There are three general learning styles: visual, auditory, and kinesthetic. Visual learners rely on pictures. Auditory learners listen carefully to all sounds associated with the learning. Kinesthetic learners need to physically do something to understand it. Most people use all three styles while they are learning foreign languages, therefore, all the communication skills-reading, writing, speaking and listening-should be developed in the English classroom.

There are a number of basic tips of teaching adults successfully.

- According to Fleming and Garner (2009), EFL teachers should get to know their students and their needs. English language learners' abilities, experiences, and expectations can affect learning. Get to know their backgrounds and goals as well as proficiency levels and skill needs.
- Ambrose and Bridges (2010) claim that teachers should model tasks before asking their learners to do them. Learners need to become familiar with vocabulary, conversational patterns, grammar structures, and even activity formats before producing them. Demonstrate a task before asking learners to respond.
- Bouchard (2005) states that EFL teachers should watch their teacher talk. Teacher talk refers to the directions, explanations, and general comments and conversations that a teacher may engage in within the classroom. Teacher talk should be kept simple and clear.
- Hernandez- Gantes and Blank (2008) argue that it is important to bring authentic materials to the classroom and use materials like newspapers, signs, sale flyers, telephone books, and brochures in the classroom. These help learners connect what they are learning to the real world and familiarize them with the formats and information in such publications.
- According to Hughes and Schwab (2010), it is important to balance variety and routine in their classrooms. Patterns and routines provide familiarity and security and support learners as they tackle new items. But English language learners, like all learners, have a variety of preferences for processing and learning information. They also can get bored.
- EFL teachers should not forget that adults are sometimes tired when they attend classes. Therefore, they appreciate varied teaching methods that add interest and a sense of liveliness to the class. According to McKay (2000), adults frequently worry about being the oldest person in a class and are concerned about the impact this may have on their ability to participate with younger students. Creating an environment where all participants feel they have a valuable contribution can work to allay such concerns.

- Norris (2003) states that some adult students may have insufficient confidence. They may have had poor prior experiences of education leading to feelings of inadequacy and fear of study and failure.

Different teaching experts add a number of secrets how to teach adults successfully. Marshall (2002) emphasizes, that having an interest in your own subject is vitally important. No one will learn anything if the teacher does not seem to care. Adults can tell immediately if you do not have an interest in what is going on, and they themselves will then be likely to switch off. It is essential to encourage them to ask as many questions as possible, to include everybody in the class equally rather than focusing on those who are participating. Adult learners should not be overloaded. The teacher should strike a balance in each activity between elements that are familiar and mastered and those that are new. Asking learners to use both new vocabulary and a new grammatical structure in a role-playing activity where they have to develop original dialogue may be too much for them to do successfully. Teachers should try to foster a safe classroom environment. Like many adult learners, some English language learners have had negative educational experiences. Many will be unfamiliar with classroom activities and with expectation. EFL teachers should include time for activities that allow learners to get to know one another. Moreover, showing a happy, pleasant, smiling face will definitely get the whole class more relaxed. According to Blumberg (2013), correcting the mistakes made by adult learners should be done in a way that sounds less patronizing. Paton and Wilkins (2009) warn English teachers, that adult learners might be tempted to slip into their native tongue and this can be detrimental. If this happens, teachers should see if they can say it in English, which will help them to learn some new vocabulary. Furthermore, teachers and adult students should celebrate success. Progress for language learners can be slow and incremental. Adult learners need to know that they are moving forward. Teachers ought to make sure that expectations are realistic, create opportunities for success, set short-term as well as long-term goals and help learners recognize and acknowledge their own progress. Finally, Ambrose (2010) claims, that adult students should have some fun in EFL classrooms. No one ever said that school and learning had to be boring, so it is important to make the class fun which will in turn engage the students a lot more. It will also help to loosen up the atmosphere and get some of the most shy students talking. And the more they talk, the better their English will become.

## 4. Questionnaire Findings

The questionnaires were submitted to a group of people between the ages 18 to 60, doing an English evening course at LEU in spring 2014. The survey consisted of 5 questions

and possible answers presented. The data of 30 sampled questionnaires was analysed, calculated and submitted in diagrammes. The distribution of motivating factors for learning the English language for adult learners is shown in Figure 1.

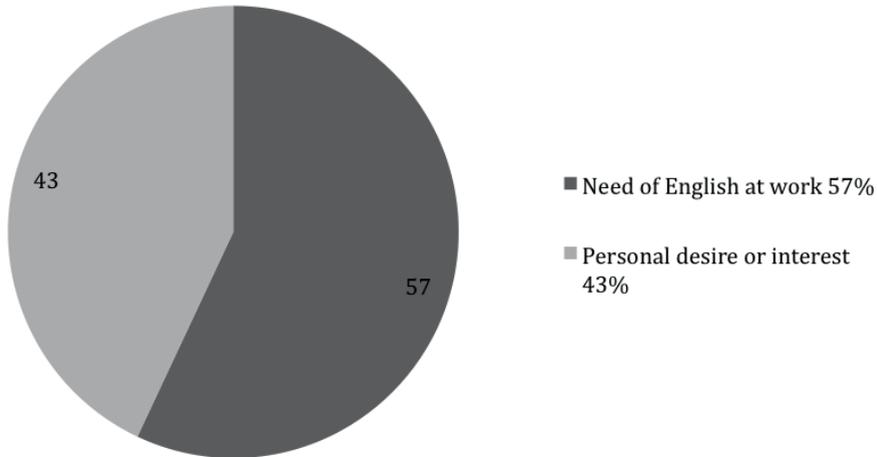


Figure 1. *Motivating factors*

The distribution of the most difficult communication skills for the respondents is presented in Figure 2. As it can be seen, 40% of adults consider listening as the most difficult communication skill, 37% of learners choose speaking, 20% of people reckon it is writing and the least difficult skill is reading (3%). Listening and speaking are considered to be the most demanding communication skills for students as they need a big amount of knowledge, time and practice to acquire them.

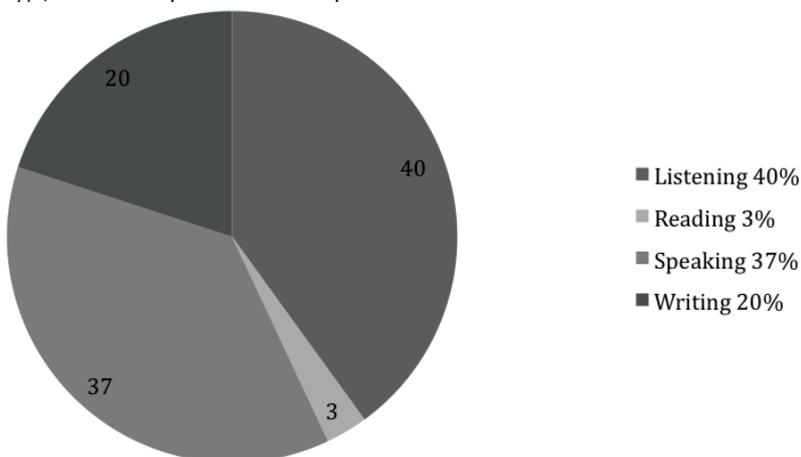


Figure 2. *The most difficult communication skills*

The distribution of the most important communication skills for adult learners is presented in Figure 3. As we can see, the most important communication skill for adult learners is speaking (it is mentioned by 97% of the respondents), listening appears in 3% of answers, reading and writing (0%) is not chosen. Learners reckon speaking as the most important communication skill because they consider English language as an international standard language for communication. Moreover, they need it to communicate while traveling or for use in the working environment.

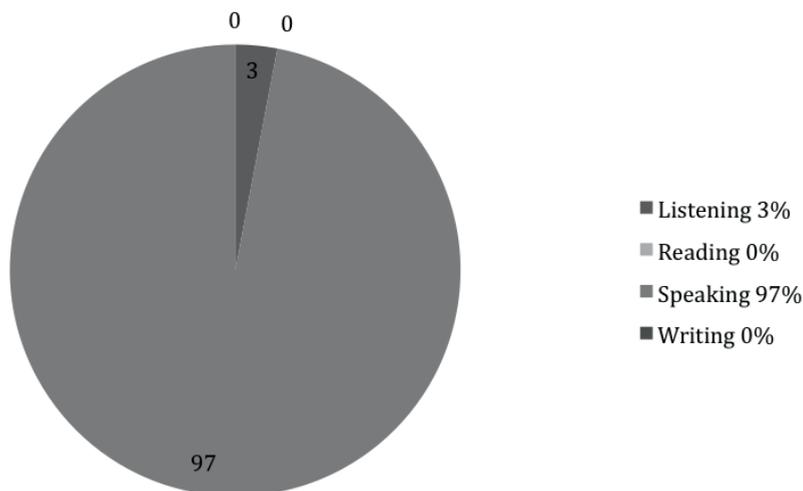


Figure 3. *The most important communication skills*

The distribution of the most difficult language aspects is presented in Figure 4. It presents the distribution of the most difficult language aspect for respondents is learning English grammar (it makes up 70% of all the analyzed responses), learning English vocabulary is chosen by 30% of adult learners. All four communication skills require the knowledge of grammatical patterns and rules as it is essential for learning any language.

The distribution of the most useful teaching methods is presented in Figure 5. As we can see, pairwork makes up 46% of all answers, individual tasks – 27%, group work – 20% and role play – 7%. The most useful teaching method is pairwork that occurs in 46% of all analyzed data, while the rarest chosen variant is role play (only 7%). Pairwork is considered effective as students have the chance to work with and learn from their peers; struggling students can learn from more capable peers and it is especially useful for students who prefer interpersonal learning settings.

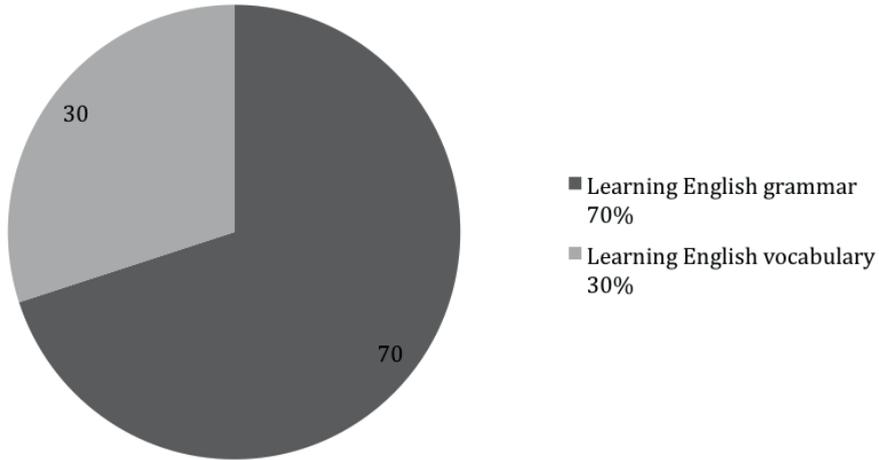


Figure 4. *The most difficult language aspect*

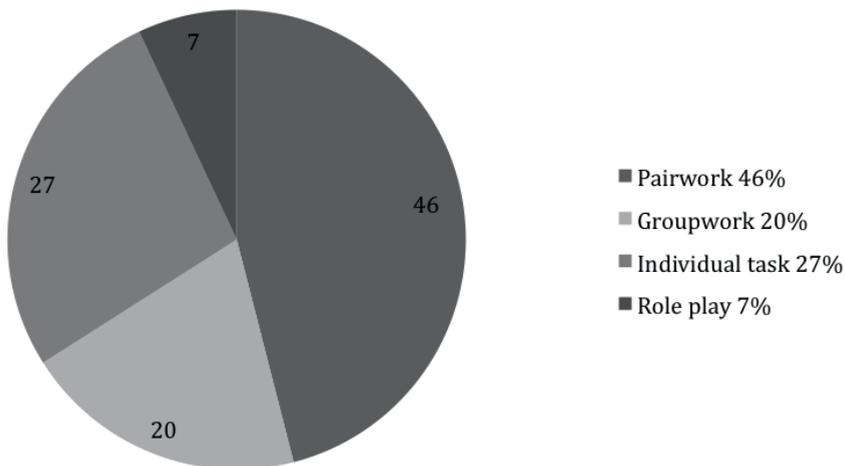


Figure 5. *The most useful teaching methods*

To sum up the results of the research, the main motivating factor for learning English language by adult learners is need of English at work (57% of the analyzed data), the most difficult communication skill is listening (40% of the analyzed data), the most important communication skill is speaking (97% of the analyzed data), the most difficult language aspect is learning English grammar (70% of the analyzed data) and the most useful teaching method is pairwork (46% of the analyzed data), while the rarest chosen

variants in the survey are: reading – as the most difficult communication skill (3% of the analyzed data), reading and writing – as the most important communication skills (0% of the analyzed data) and role play – as the least useful teaching method (7% of the analyzed data).

## Conclusions

Teaching adult learners can be very rewarding, but very challenging as well. EFL teachers must not forget that they are dealing with individuals who have their own lives outside school, some with very busy schedules. But adult learners are also better equipped for dialogue and exchange. They come to class with a set of tools and information that can be of great use. Moreover, teachers need to provide them with reasons why every aspect of what they teach is important. Furthermore, adults need practical applications to solidify what they learn. It is essential that the training environment should be welcoming so that all learners feel safe to participate. The training should be presented in a respectful manner, where learners have an opportunity to share their experiences.

1. Most adult students are in the English classroom because they want to learn something new.
2. Listening and speaking skills are the most difficult skills for adult learners to master.
3. Speaking is the most desirable communication skill among adult learners.
4. English grammar is the most difficult language aspect to acquire.
5. Pair work is the most useful teaching method according to adult learners of English.

It is always important to remember that adult students are not really that different from younger ones. They have more life experience and will be more critical, but they are still novices when it comes to English.

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## Anglų kalbos mokymas(-is) suaugusiųjų kursuose

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### Santrauka

Straipsnyje pateikiamas suaugusio besimokančiojo sąvokos apibrėžimas ir pateikiami patarimai, kaip mokyti suaugusius anglų kaip užsienio kalbos. Šiame straipsnyje yra bandoma išnagrinti suaugusių besimokančiųjų anglų kalbos Lietuvos edukologijos universitete (LEU) poreikius ir lūkesčius. Taip pat yra pateikiami pasiūlymai, kaip įveikti sunkumus, su kuriais susiduria mokytojai mokymo procese. Šio mokslinio tyrimo duomenys yra paimti apklausus 30 suaugusių besimokančiųjų anglų kalbos LEU. Analizės metu buvo nustatyti pagrindiniai besimokančių motyvuojantys veiksniai, sunkiausi ir svarbiausi komunikacijos įgūdžiai, sunkiausi kalbos aspektai ir naudingiausi mokymo metodai.

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***Esminiai žodžiai:*** anglų kaip užsienio kalba, suaugę besimokantieji, mokymo metodai, motyvacija, komunikaciniai gebėjimai.

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