Preparing Student Teachers for Teaching Adult Learners

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Abstract

Globalization has brought new dimensions to adult education [1], [2] whose roots dated back to the beginning of the twentieth century. In today's rapidly changing world, considerable number of adults continues their education and with the impact of globalization, more and more adults need to learn a foreign language. Teaching English to adults requires a specific preparation, as adult learners are different from young learners and teenagers. The student teachers need to equip themselves with the essential knowledge and skills to address the learning needs of adult learners. Therefore, this study aims to describe the steps that can be followed in ITE (Initial Teacher Education) for effective lessons for adult learners of English. As for the first step, the theories on adult education and adult language learning are discussed to highlight the characteristics of adult learners. The second step is to examine and review the lesson plans particularly made for adults by using ICT (Information and Communication Technologies). After sharing the theoretical and practical insights, the student teachers work in collaboration to prepare effective lesson plans for adult learners. Taking interest areas of adults into consideration, they are expected to design their lessons around topics, which can be relevant to adults' life experiences. The final step that takes place after teaching sessions is devoted to evaluation.

1. Introduction

The roots of adult education date back to the beginning of the twentieth century and the studies of Eduard Lindeman are accepted as the pioneering contributions to the field. In the second half of the twentieth century, Malcolm Knowles (1913-1997), the founder of Androgogy, wrote the major texts of informal adult education having been influenced by the studies of both Eduard Lindeman and Carl Rogers. In his influential texts, The Modern Practice of Adult Education (1970) and The Adult Learner (1973), he defines androgogy as the art and science of helping adults learn. He identifies six principles of adult learning [3] and these principles can be summarized as follows [4], [5]*:*

1. The need to know: Adult learners want to know why they learn something.
2. The learner's self-concept: They know that they are responsible for their own learning, which leads to autonomous and self-directed learning.
3. The role of the learner's experiences: They bring their previous knowledge and experiences to their new learning environment.
4. Readiness to learn: They become ready to learn when the learning is relevant or useful to them. They want to know the relevance of what they are learning.
5. Orientation to learning: Their learning includes tasks or problems which they can encounter in real-life situations; therefore it is task or need-based. Knowles [3] state that they learn in order to cope more satisfyingly with real life tasks or problems.
6. Motivation: Adults are more internally motivated and self-directed. According to Fidishun (2000), they resist learning when they feel that others are imposing information, ideas or actions on them.

In addition to the ideas and principles put forward by Knowles, another scholar, Paulo Freire (1921-1997), who was involved with the informal adult education projects in Brazil, also made contribution to adult education. To Freire [6]*,* through education, adults can make and remake themselves, and are able to take responsibility for their learning. Cunningham and Burt [7] state that all adult learners need adult appropriate content, material and activities that speak to their needs and interests and allow them to demonstrate their knowledge and abilities.

Recently almost everywhere in the world, the need for adult education has grown considerably with the impact of globalization. This growth can be associated with life-long learning, the global educational desire which is essential to establish knowledge-based societies in which active

citizenship is involved (see the References [8]). In today's societies, when the period of formal education is over, adults are expected to equip themselves with the knowledge and skills which can provide better standards for both themselves and the societies they live in. The European Commission has been emphasizing the value of lifelong learning for the sake of continuous development and the reinforcement of democratic order. As a consequence, education is no longer considered within the borders of formal education given to children and young ones.

In the context of lifelong learning which addresses the changing needs of adults, communication in foreign languages has been one of the key competences since more and more adults need to learn a foreign language. In this respect, English, as the language of international communication, has been taught to the considerable number of adults for several reasons. In order to meet such a growing learning demand for adults, the educational institutions in state and private sectors have been offering different programs. One of the main factors which affect the desired achievement in teaching English to adults is the teaching repertoire of English language teachers. They are expected to have background information on the characteristics of adult education and how they learn a foreign language. Such a professional content knowledge and related teaching practices should be included in initial teacher education (ITE) programs to prepare the student teachers for the future teaching requirements.

In Turkey, thousands of adults who have already completed their formal education periods are willing to learn English or to improve their English in order to become independent users of the language mostly for the instrumental reasons such as getting better jobs with higher salaries, being promoted at work and pursuing their academic careers. When the courses offered in ITE are examined, the main focus related to learner age is on the young and teenager learners. The courses on teaching English to adults are quite few and selective. Also, the curricula in ITE do not give the student teachers the opportunity of choosing one age group and specializing on it. As a consequence, novice English language teachers are expected to be able to teach young learners, teenagers or adults, which changes according to the requirements of the institution where they are employed.

Apart from the English courses and preparatory schools specially designed for under graduate and postgraduate students at universities, adults are taught English in mostly private language courses and free public courses given by the Ministry of Education. Since the private institutions offer more flexibility in their English courses, they are preferred mostly by adult learners. Hence the teachers who work at such institutions are expected to equip themselves with the essential knowledge and skills to meet the learning demands of adult learners. In this respect, designing courses on teaching foreign languages to adults for faculty programs or offering in-service programs for novice teachers has already become a necessity.

2. The course procedure

"Teaching English to Adult Learners" is a selective course given to the fourth year students of the Department of English Language Teaching at Mersin University, Faculty of Education. The aim of the course is to help student teachers develop their teaching skills for adult learners and provide practice opportunities.

In the first step of the course, for a sound theoretical background, the literature including the assumptions and contributions of the influential scholars like Lindeman, Rogers, Knowles and Freire is reviewed. Through the selected articles, the useful tips and strategies for teaching languages to adults are highlighted. Another concept focused on is lifelong learning and its association with adult education. The activities of the European Commission for increasing and supporting adults' participation in lifelong learning are examined and discussed. As a last point, the situation in Turkey is studied. The discussions in this step encourage the student teachers to express their views and experiences on the issue since they are also adult learners. As a whole class, they try to draw a profile of adult English learners in Turkey and identify the needs and reasons for their learning English.

The second stage of the course is devoted to the preparation for developing topic based lessons for adults. Since the relevant topics can be linked to adults' previous knowledge and life experiences, they can be effective tools to provide meaningful learning contexts. For this reason, the groups of three or four are formed and each group chooses a topic around which they can plan the four skills integrated lessons. They give a special attention to topic choice as it is expected to reflect the common interest areas of adults. The frequently preferred topics can be listed as follows: The issues on social matters such as gender discrimination, empowering women through lifelong learning activities, the problems of immigrants, the functions of nongovernmental organizations and charities, homeless people; the ones on environmental problems such as pollution, deforestation, urban farms; the ones on personal growth such as career planning, success stories, leadership; the health related ones, the artistic topics

and the ones on benefits and drawbacks of technology. The topic choices usually indicate the interest areas of the student teachers.

After choosing topics, they select the materials, particularly the authentic ones for fostering better communication. Their use of ICT in this stage provides numerous opportunities on their way to become ready for practice part.

In the third stage, micro-teaching sessions take place. The student teachers present their lessons as groups, each taking responsibility of one part. The lessons are video-recorded for self and group evaluation and they receive feedback both from the instructor and the members of the other groups. At the end of the course they exchange their lessons designed around different topics with relevant materials and communicative activities.

3. Conclusion

Since teaching English to adult learners has already become a growing educational demand in Turkey, developing topic based syllabuses for learners and equipping teachers and teacher candidates with the essential knowledge and skills must be on the agenda of the teacher educators and the other responsible bodies. The course model offered above aims to facilitate student teachers' professional learning by supporting them to be the designers of their own lessons. Throughout the course, the student teachers actively participate in discussions; guess the needs of adult English learners in Turkey by using their experiences and present lessons in collaboration. Such a process may enhance their professional understanding and creativity.

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