TEACHING PRACTICES IN A LANGUAGE SCHOOL IN SERBIA: PRACTICAL CONSIDERATIONS BASED ON THE ANDRAGOGICAL PROCESS DESIGN

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ABSTRACT: In this paper, we outline English language teaching practices from a private language school in Serbia. We use data from qualitative interviews with six English language instructors from one private language school in Serbia to understand how these individuals prepare for and teach adult learners. We discuss these based on the andragogical process design, which offers a step-by-step approach to teaching adults, and highlight key elements and challenging issues from the perspectives of six language instructors. Finally, based on our findings, we outline practical implications related to teaching English as an additional language to adult learners. As the focus of this paper is on practical implications, this paper will be useful to instructors who teach adult learners, especially those who teach English as an additional language or administrators in charge of organizations in which such teaching occurs. As we discuss issues related to both linguistics and adult learning, scholars and practitioners from both fields will also benefit from reading this paper.

Keywords: English language teaching, language school, Serbia, adult learners, andragogical process design

Introduction

Considering the popularity of the English language globally, the number of adults who need this skill to effectively communicate in international settings is constantly increasing. This is especially true for adults who work or aspire to work for multinational organizations. In fact, due to its prominence, English has been proclaimed the global language of business and is required of workers in numerous companies worldwide (Borzykowski, 2017; Neeley, 2012). Given the high likelihood of the persistence of this trend, the number of adult English language learners will also likely remain high.

With a growing need for individuals to develop English language skills in adulthood, especially if they come from countries and areas in which English is not spoken as an official language or was not taught as part of their elementary/formal education, there is a need to understand how to effectively teach this age group. This is also the case because, despite the breadth of our theoretical knowledge about how adults learn (see Knowles et al., 2020), practice-informed research and knowledge about teaching adults, especially with regard to specific content areas (such as language), is still scarce (Blondy, 2007; Jung, 2013; Knowles et al., 2020). With this in mind, the overarching research question that guided this qualitative inquiry was: *How do instructors in a private language school in Serbia prepare for and teach English to adult learners?* An additional question we

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sought to answer was: *Which practical considerations regarding teaching English as an additional language to adult learners can be drawn from the experiences of English language instructors from a private language school in Serbia?*

In existing literature, English language teaching is explored either in the context of English as a foreign language (EFL), specifically with the focus on the Asian context, or English as a second language (ESL), as taught in countries in which English is the dominant language (e.g., Canada, the United States). There is much less research done in other contexts/locations, such as Europe, which boasts the highest English language proficiency of any region (Education First, 2020) and where English is the most frequently taught additional language (Devlin, 2018). By examining the situation in Serbia, which falls into the category of European countries whose speakers have high proficiency in English (Education First, 2020), we hope to contribute to the research on the topic. Further, by conducting the study in an adult education setting, our goal is to extend the academic dialogue related to adult English language teaching, currently mostly situated in the context of higher education.

Despite being narrowly focused on certain contexts, existing literature reveals important issues pertaining to teaching adult learners. One specific concern is that English teacher preparation programs often focus exclusively on pedagogical principles used in the K-12 context (Deveci, 2007), leaving those individuals who go on to teach adult learners unprepared. Further, research has shown that in some locations, such as China, educators opt for using pedagogical principles even when teaching adults (Wang, 2006). This preference is explained, among others, by the fact that using andragogical principles takes more time, which is why educators may follow only select andragogical principles, even when they decide to use that approach in their teaching.

On the other hand, learners often have opposite preferences and opt for an approach more tailored to their needs (Biryukova et al., 2015; Deveci, 2007; Rismiyanto et al., 2017; Syamsuddin & Jimi, 2018), which is what they get when andragogical principles are followed. This approach can positively influence learners' language proficiency (Coker, 2013; Syamsuddin & Jimi, 2018) in both EFL and ESL contexts. Still, although researchers have highlighted the benefits of following the andragogical approach in teaching adults, more research is needed on how the principles of andragogy are used in practice.

Theoretical Framework

Considering that we examined English language instruction in an adult education setting, we used andragogy (Knowles, 1980; Knowles et al., 2020), specifically, the andragogical process design to frame this study. In defining andragogy, Knowles described adult learners based on six core assumptions including the learner's need to know why/what/how learning happens, learner's self-directedness, the use of prior experiences

in learning, learner's life-related readiness to learn, learner's problem-centered orientation to learning, and learner's intrinsic motivation (Knowles et al., 2020). These six assumptions, in addition to learner's goals and purposes, and individual and situational differences, form the *andragogy in practice model* (Knowles et al., 2020).

While discussions of andragogy typically focus on the andragogy in practice model and six core assumptions, Knowles also outlined specific steps in the adult learning process, called the *andragogical process design* (Knowles et al., 2020). While the andragogical process design may not have attracted as much research attention as the andragogy in practice model or specifically Knowles' six core adult learning principles, the andragogical process design is equally important for practice because it lists the steps of the adult learning process, from preparing learners to evaluating learning outcomes. The andragogical process design is comprised of eight steps which can help practitioners design adult learning experiences. In chronological order, these include:

1. Preparing adult learners by providing information about the learning process and content and developing realistic expectations.
2. Establishing a positive learning climate based on andragogical principles. Such climate would be characterized by trust, respect, and collaboration.
3. Involving learners in the planning process.
4. Involving learners in diagnosing learning needs.
5. Involving learners in setting learning goals and objectives.
6. Involving learners in designing learning plans.
7. Facilitating learning activities which allow for learner autonomy.
8. Involving learners in evaluating learning outcomes. (Knowles et al., 2020; see also Holton et al., 2001)

Specifically, our findings will shed light on the crucial steps in the process model when applied in an English language classroom and highlight possible challenges if the adult learning process is based on this model.

Methodology

Guided by our overarching research questions, we conceptualized this qualitative study as an instrumental case study (Stake, 2005). This means that our focus was on the phenomenon itself, in this instance teaching English as an additional language to adult learners, and that the case, one private language school in Serbia, was instrumental to understanding this phenomenon. Based on this design, we selected a typical case which would allow for transferability of the findings across similar settings (Stake, 2005).

We chose to focus on teaching English to adult learners because of the prominence of the language in global communication (Sonntag, 2003) and the importance of knowing and speaking English for academic and professional success in a global environment. We narrowed our focus to English teaching in Serbia because of the popularity of private language schools in which adults develop language skills needed for further education or

for working abroad. Another reason was the large number of individuals who leave the country due to socio-economic reasons (Radonjić & Bobić, 2021), signaling their need to obtain language skills needed to live and work abroad.

Focused on the most popular additional language learned in Serbia and the world – English – and on understanding typical practices of English language instructors in the selected setting, we analyzed data collected through interviews and examined documents (notably, the school's website and the teacher handbook) which included the school's mission and the descriptions of the teaching method used by the instructors in teaching adults. Six instructors from the selected language school participated in this study; we facilitated a focus group with five senior instructors (each had at least 12 years of teaching experience) and interviewed one novice instructor (with two and a half years of teaching experience at the time of the interview) from the school.

Table 1.
Participants' Demographic Information

Pseudonym	**Bobby Fisher**	**IP**	**Little Napoleon**	**Melissa**	**The Witch**	**Wallflower**
Age range	36-45	36-45	36-45	26-35	36-45	26-35
Ethnicity	White	White	White	White	White	White
Gender	Male	Female	Female	Female	Female	Female
Highest degree	MA, Philosophy	BA, Spanish	BA, English	MA, English	BA, English	MA, English
Years of teaching experience in the school	17	20	16.5	12	15+	2.5

Both researchers participated in interviews and took detailed notes which captured key ideas and participants' expressions and reactions to our questions. At the beginning of the interviews, participants were asked to select pseudonyms (which we use in reporting our findings and which are included in Table 1). We also asked the participants for permission to record the interviews, which we later transcribed verbatim. We used in-vivo and descriptive coding (Saldaña, 2016) in our analysis, opting for participants' own words as codes whenever possible, but using descriptive phrases where necessary. Codes from both the focus group and the individual interview transcripts were then organized into themes keeping in mind the eight steps of the andragogical process design.

We used the information from the document analysis to support the interview findings and to ensure triangulation (Marshall & Rossman, 2016; Merriam, 2009), a defining characteristic of case study research (Yin, 2018). This information helped us understand the school's teaching method and expectations from their instructors. By sharing our

analysis with peer researchers, we also employed peer-debriefing (Marshall & Rossman, 2016; Merriam, 2009) as a strategy of ensuring credibility of our findings.

Findings and Discussion

In this section, we first describe the context of the study and then discuss each theme. We present and discuss the findings based on the steps from the andragogical process design that were relevant for the examined case. In some instances, depending on our findings, we group several steps from the andragogical process design under a single theme.

The Context – Research Site and the School's Teaching Method

The case that we focused on was a private language school in Serbia, which has been doing business in the country for almost 30 years. The school offers different language courses (English being the most popular) and has students of different age groups (both children and adults). The school boasts a good reputation, having had more than 20,000 students successfully complete a course and prides itself on word-of-mouth referrals. The school offers both individual and group learning experiences, with the average size of the group being four to five students and the maximum being nine. The groups are formed based on students' entry level language proficiency (A1 to C2) as described in the Common European Framework of Reference (Cambridge Assessment English, 2021). Given the greater student interest in group than individual-based learning, possibly partly because of the lower cost, the findings we discuss are focused on teaching adults in group settings.

Regardless of the students' language proficiency level, teaching in the school is focused on communication in the target language, which is why the instructors are trained to teach the target language without using students' mother tongue in instruction. This strategy is supported by a three-stage approach to teaching adults prescribed by the school, which Little Napoleon described as student-centered. In chronological sequence, these stages are presentation, practice, and production, the first stage being the shortest and the last being the longest. Interestingly, the students are not passive even during the first stage, when they are engaged in elicitation of words and expressions and provided with the context in which to use the elicited words. During interviews, the instructors noted that the context is usually selected based on the students' experiences and interests. The next stage offers students guided practice, as instructors prepare prompts which students use to create complete structures in the target language. During the last stage, student-centered activities, such as paired discussions and role plays, are used to offer students realistic situations in which they can utilize the target language.

Preparing Learners and Establishing a Positive Learning Climate

While it seemed that not much time is devoted to preparing students for the learning process, given that there is no formal preparation period prior to the course start, all participants agreed that it is important to use the first few classes to get to know their students and establish a trusting relationship. For most, this meant purposefully memorizing students' experiences, interests, and hobbies, which they later use to modify classroom activities, because, as IP noted, "they're happy when you remember something that they said [because that means] 'you've been listening to me…I'm important here'". Wallflower summarized the importance of a positive learning climate in the following way:

> I think the main points of teaching adults are, you know, to make them feel comfortable, personalization as much as possible, and that's basically it. They need to feel, it has to be like a therapy to them…they have to relax and overcome any anxiety they have in order to be successful and in order to be able to make progress.

Wallflower and her colleagues highlighted that their students appreciate activities tailored based on their experiences and that such personalization helps students overcome any learning anxiety.

The Witch, who suggested that it is easier to help students feel relaxed in class and overcome learning anxiety if the students in the group have similar personalities, interests, and goals, also pointed out that she uses assessment interviews to prepare potential students for the learning process. She stated that:

> I always tell them when I do assessment interviews, "You are all here because you want to learn something. There is nothing to be ashamed of." And, I mean, maybe they feel like that the first class, and the second class, we throw them into fire, they have to speak, there's just no choice. And they're just taken by the group and the atmosphere and everything, and I guess they get used to, it helps them break the ice a little bit and they really get friendly, and nobody is like "Haha, you don't know that" that's not usually what happens.

The sense of connection and support among group members may be further increased when, as Melissa suggested, students often socialize after class.

Involving Learners in Planning, Needs Diagnosis, Design, and Goal Setting

In the case we examined, involving learners in the planning process may not be done easily or frequently, given that even instructors are not engaged in curriculum or syllabus development. Yet, when it comes to specific classes and topics, instructors "have the

freedom to modify and deliver according to the needs of the group" (Bobby Fisher). Wallflower is proactive about this, and she has a strategy which somewhat helps her engage her students in planning and which she uses at the beginning of every course. She said, "I always ask students if there is any need for me to adjust the vocabulary items or anything to include that is more relevant" and that she may "actually skip some targets that are not relevant to [students'] profession in any way." Asking students to identify their vocabulary needs helps Wallflower understand her students' key learning goals and plan instruction accordingly.

Involving students in diagnosing their needs may be somewhat easier during assessment interviews, because questions asked in those interviews are targeted at understanding students' needs. As Melissa indicated, "we have a questionnaire, actually, where we ask the students 'which level do you think you are? How do you feel about your knowledge?' So, we also take that into consideration." However, all participants agreed that students are likely to overestimate their knowledge and that only few ask to join a lower-level group to "brush up" what they know or start actively using the target language before moving further.

Facilitating Learning Activities Which Allow for Learner Autonomy

Expectedly, participants had most to share about how they prepare for and facilitate classes with adult learners. While the teacher handbook listed various activities that instructors can use to increase student autonomy (e.g., pair work, role plays, discussions, debates, projects, presentations), participants shared descriptive examples by recounting situations in which their students showed autonomy. Little Napoleon shared the most illustrative example:

> They made a video as part of the project; they were filming the school and everything; they were supposed to make a video about their English language experience and when I realized how many good things they said about the school, the teachers, the group… they contacted people who were not in the group anymore to say something…that was for me the most rewarding, realizing, yes, this school matters to them and whatever we are doing here, we're doing a good job.

Given that the students were required to think beyond formal project requirements set by the instructor and engage in self-directed learning by developing and completing the project outside the classroom, Little Napoleon's example shows how independent adult learners can be, and it aligns with a remark made by Wallflower that, throughout the course, student independence only increases. She indicated that "you can increase [adult] Student Talking Time by showing them how to communicate in pairs or how to use that time effectively, while with children, you have to be fully focused on each and every one of them." This is why, as she said, the instructor "gradually becomes more of a facilitator,

so to say. I only enable them to, you know, I give them some clues and they use them in their own ways."

As expected, adult learners' autonomy in the classroom was linked to their language proficiency and the Witch indicated that "the lower the level, the less independent they are." Still, an important finding was that the participants recognized their students' need to be independent and they tried to foster that. The Witch said that even at lower levels

> adults still try hard; and the higher the level, we actually encourage them to be as independent as they can with tasks and topics that we cover, they have to, you know, say what they think and to justify their opinions as well as they can.

The participants also acknowledged the benefits of adult learners' autonomy in unforeseen circumstances in which even class facilitation is in students' hands. For Melissa,

> there was this class, I had a sore throat and by the time that class came, I would've lost my voice and it was a group of absolute beginners and I was actually using mimics throughout the whole class, 90 minutes, or just writing some words on the board, and they practically held the class, and it was so much fun, that just by tactile, movements, we had a very successful class.

This example shows that, even in situations in which it is not expected of students to be fully autonomous, they can be entrusted with that role, and they can compete the role well even with minimal instructor support.

Involving Learners in Evaluating Learning Outcomes

While participants engaged their students in formative assessment as part of entry assessment interviews, there was less student involvement at the end of the course. Given that these courses were held in a formal, "school" environment, this was expected. The students were given ample chances to develop their language skills during practice and production stages of the learning process that included game-like activities, role plays, discussions, debates, and independent projects; still, as in a "typical" school, end-of-course assessment was more structured and in written form. Given the efforts the instructors were making during the course to cater to their students' needs and goals, in spite of the predetermined curriculum, it seems that their evaluation process might need restructuring to better fit the adult learning process.

Implications

In this paper, we presented information regarding English language teaching practices used to teach adult learners in one private language school in Serbia. Specifically, we

described the English language teaching preparation and instruction process through the lens of andragogical process design, discussing specific steps which the instructors deemed necessary for successful language learning, as well as those which were more challenging to incorporate in a formal language classroom in which a predetermined curriculum is used.

Because of the unique characteristics of each adult learner and the distinctive features of different adult learning contexts, as Holton et al. (2001) suggested, it would be "unrealistic" to expect that all andragogical principles or process model steps be equally applicable in all adult learning settings. Our findings suggest that, in a formal English language classroom in Serbia, the steps of the andragogical process design considered most relevant were establishing a positive learning climate, involving learners in determining target structures to be covered during the course, and implementing activities that allow for learner autonomy.

Our findings offer several practical implications for similar contexts. Specifically, when instructors have little say in curriculum and syllabus design, they should make effort to adapt those syllabi or tailor individual lessons whenever possible based on their students' needs. This may mean placing greater focus on those units more relevant to their students' needs, including additional activities which help learners practice concepts they need most, or using students' past experiences in developing learning tasks, in accordance with core andragogical principles (Knowles et al., 2020). Additionally, considering the importance of fostering adult learners' intrinsic motivation (Knowles et al., 2020) as well as the fact that adult learners' views of the instructor and the course are powerful factors that impact student persistence (Evans & Tragant, 2020), fostering a positive classroom climate is just as important as course content and method. As such, English language instructors who teach adult learners should focus on establishing rapport, promoting friendly peer relationships, and expressing and fostering positive emotions. Practicing these and similar strategies continuously would promote a positive climate which would benefit the instructor as much as the learner.

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