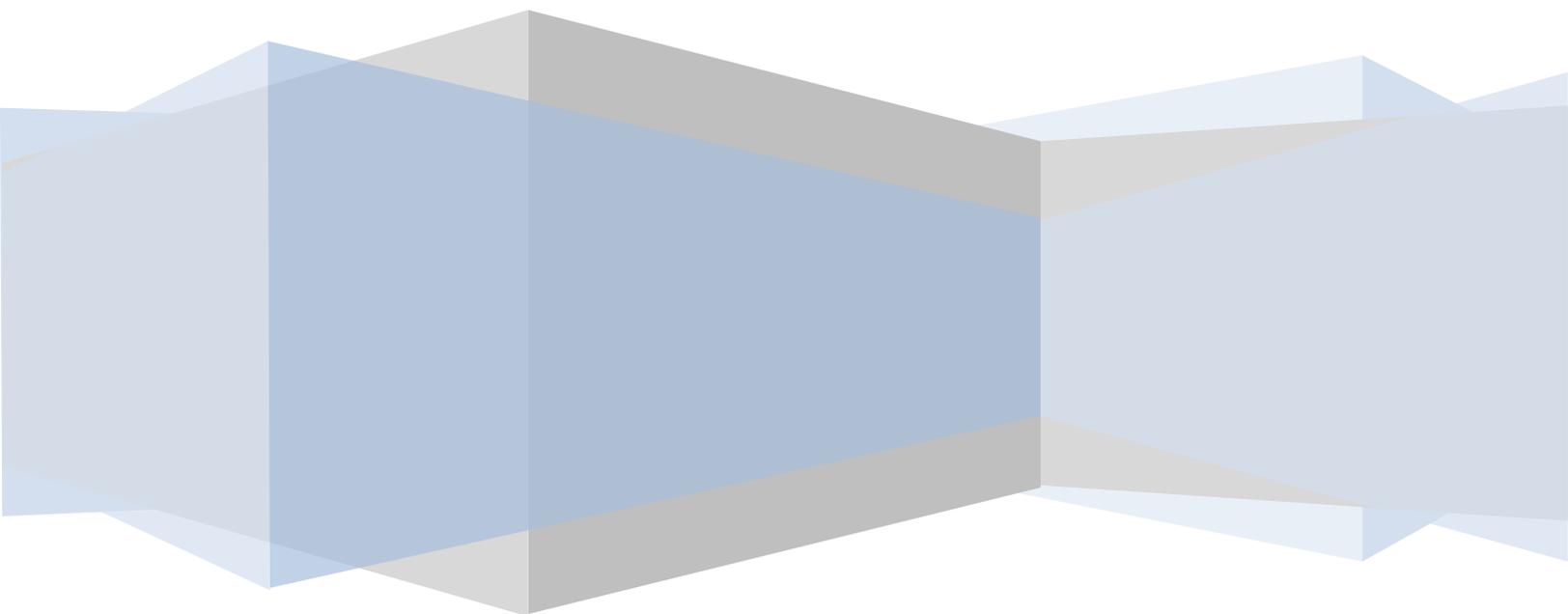# The Adult Language Learner in Quasi-EFL Environments

Summary of Individual Professional Development Project

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Introduction

The situation presented by the adult language learner, particularly beginners, is very complex. "Not only is the total vocabulary often very small but the 'feel' for what is acceptable and what is appropriate just is not there" (Brown 1974:1). In addition, while they have the cognitive abilities of adults and can express themselves freely in Ll, their ability for self expression in L2 can be quite limited and frustrating. It is assumed that because adults are at the stage of "communicative intelligence" in Ll that this ability can by transferred to L2. This, in turn, forces them to start talking too soon which turns learning L2 into an intellectual process (one that focuses on communicated intelligence) rather than one that is experiential (one that focuses on egocentric thought).

It should be remembered that in learning Ll there is a "silent period" that lasts for about 9-18 months (from birth until the child starts talking), and that during that time children are experiencing language without being forced to communicate verbally until they are ready. Therefore, approaches that advocate encouraging L2 students to start talking as soon as possible (i.e., The Silent Way: cf. Gattegno 1972), while encouraging them to demonstrate immediate language use, may actually inhibit rather than facilitate language acquisition. Students should be permitted to talk when they are ready, and not forced to do so beforehand. Obviously, this creates a problem for evaluating the proficiency of students who rarely talk. However, in the right environment, students will not only participate in classroom discussion, but will do so freely.

Learning English in Quasi-EFL Environments

Learning English in quasi-EFL environments[1] has severe limitations that make acquiring language in a natural manner a seemingly impossible goal. One of the most important elements of language acquisition is being able to receive "comprehensible input" on a regular basis. Comprehensible input can be described as the process of understanding a new element or rule[2] about the target language by "understanding messages that contain this new rule [, which] is done with the aid of extra linguistic context, knowledge of the world, and our previous linguistic competence" (Krashen 1985b:9). All Ll learners and some L2 learners are inundated with comprehensible input from birth or from some other point in their lives. Krashen (1985a), Smith (1986), and Cummins (1989) believe that some form of comprehensible input is the basis upon which true language acquisition occurs, and that students are "empowered" (enabled to be in control of the learning process) by this exposure.

In addition, all Ll acquirers have the opportunity of receiving comprehensible input from many different sources. In essence parents, friends, relatives, clerks, postmen, bank tellers, and others who come into contact with the L1 learner contribute to the learning process. L2 learners, however, typically interact mostly with their instructors, who can become tempted to adjust themselves to the inter-language spoken by their students, as in the case of the Canadian Immersion Program (cf. Swain and Lapkin 1982). This deprives the students of the opportunity to refine their language skills, a process that is absolutely necessary in order to become more adept at making oneself more easily understood by others.

Furthermore, because of not immersing themselves in the L2 environment, the learner neither has the time nor the opportunity to practice what has been acquired or learned. In fact, it may well be the necessity of having to express oneself in a language (what Firth refers to as "de-Babelizing")[3] that hastens one's acquisition of the language. Thus, L2 learners are not only deprived of comprehensible input, but are also deprived of the opportunity to practice and use the language in a natural setting.

Another major problem with learning L2 in quasi-EFL environments is that language is studied in isolation from its culture. Typical language instruction focuses on the grammar or literature of the language, rather than how the language is used as a means of verbal expression and interaction with others. Therefore, because "language ... is embedded in the human social experience" (Gregory and Carroll 1978), the sociolinguistic elements of the language (i.e., dialect differences, discourse. and register) can become completely ignored or relegated to a position of lesser importance. Unfortunately, it is the use of these elements that will permit the learner to effectively interact with native speakers or be isolated from them even though the learner has full command of the linguistic code.

Moreover, perhaps the most discouraging element of learning a language in this situation is its impact on motivation. Language is a vehicle of expression that is used to share ideas and feelings. As a result of using the language for self expression, the learner develops a full repertoire of linguistic elements. Without the demands caused by interacting with other speakers of the language, learners could become apathetic toward learning it beyond a certain point or restrict themselves to a particular function of the language (i.e., reading). If this was the original intent of the learner, then nothing is lost. This kind of situation is necessary in some cases because the language is learned strictly for special purposes (i.e., ESP and TTSE; cf. Strevens 1980).[4]

However, if the learner truly desires to use their L2 as a means of expression, then what can be acquired or learned will be severely restricted unless there is a strong enclave of native and fluent speakers of the language within the community. This is similar to learning English in a city like Geneva in which French is the primary language, but there are numerous native English speakers within the community. Or, in the case of German, the Goethe Institute (a society dedicated to the propagation of German) has numerous branches throughout the world which provide opportunities for German speakers to interact with one another.

Metacognitive Skills and the Adult Learner

Within academia there has been an on-going discussion on the power of self-directed learning. For adult learners, however, metacognitive skills (commonly referred to as "thinking about one's thinking" (Kaplan et al., 2013) provide additional resources for learning L2 in a quasi-EFL environment. Basically, "metacognitive skills include taking conscious control of learning, planning and selecting strategies, monitoring the progress of learning, correcting errors, analyzing the effectiveness of learning strategies, and changing learning behaviors and strategies when necessary" (Ridley, et al: 1992).

Anderson (2002) has a clearer definition of metacognition: "Learners who are metacognitively aware know what to do when they don't know what to do." The implication is that it is not possible to know everything, and by developing strategies to deal with the unknown, learners are able to put themselves in a position to achieve academic success.

Therefore, as described above, it is essential that teachers show students, especially adult students, a variety of strategies and discuss which strategies work best in particular circumstances.

Conclusion

Although acquiring English in a quasi-EFL environment presents some peculiar and sometimes overwhelming problems for the language learner, it does not necessarily change the approach needed to achieve optimal language acquisition. It just means that ESL teachers have to do all they can to make learning English an experience that is both enjoyable and meaningful for their students, and by doing so, motivate and encourage them to develop communicative abilities under seemingly adverse conditions, and even seek non-classroom relationships in English that they might not normally pursue.

ENDNOTES

1.   Quasi-EFL Environments are situations in which people live and interact with others within linguistic environments that are based on their L1. For example, there are areas within the Greater Los Angeles Area in which people can   live, conduct business, and interact with other people who speak Korean, Spanish, Farsi, etc. without ever or rarely having conversations in English. This is similar to the expatriate experience of many adult English speakers in that they are surrounded by the local language but primarily interact in English within their own linguistic environments. If they use the local language, it is only used transitionally.

2.   A reference is made here to Krashen's "$i + 1$" theory, which explains that true language acquisition can only occur when the learner is presented with an element of language that is slightly more advanced than what the learner already knows. However, expressing this as a formula implies that learning occurs linearly (which it does not). Although this is not Krashen's intent, had he expressed this as simply providing the student with language slightly more advanced than the student's current level (which is an uncontested principle of 1earning) without including the ormula, the meaning would have been clearer and less open to misinterpretation.

3.   "De-Babelizing'" in this context means eliminating any confusion about semantics and terminology: in other words, the process of being comprehensible in another language.

4.   ESP (English for Special Purposes) and TTSE (Technical, Technological and Scientific English)

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