

Teaching Adults
Handout 1
pbojo@cambridge.org

1. Adult learners – Characteristics

Adult Learning and Adult Education

Adult education is a special branch of pedagogy which, as the title suggests, focuses on adult teaching and learning.

The term “adult education” denotes the entire body of organized educational processes, whatever the content, level and method, whether formal or otherwise, whether they prolong or replace initial education in schools, colleges and universities as well as in apprenticeship, whereby person regarded as adult by the society to which they belong develops their abilities, enrich their knowledge, improve their technical or professional qualifications or turn them to in a new direction and bring about changes in their attitudes and behaviours in the twofold perspective of full personal development and participation in balanced and independent social, economic and cultural development.¹

A brief overview of Andragogy

An adult learner is traditionally considered within the recent pedagogical branch referred to as Andragogy. **Andragogy** is a branch of pedagogical sciences whose concern is to study adult learning. Adult learning contrast andragogy to pedagogy which primarily concerns learning and teaching of young learners. (*andra – adult, peda – kid*). The term is most closely associated with Malcolm Knowles, an educator who had a massive impact on adult learning field.

In 1950's Malcolm Knowles was and executive director of the Adult Education Association of the United States of America. He wrote the first major accounts of informal adult education and the history of adult education in the United States. Furthermore, Malcolm Knowles' attempts to develop a distinctive conceptual basis for adult education and learning via the notion of andragogy became very widely discussed and used. He also wrote popular works on self-direction and on group work (with his wife Hulda). His work was a significant factor in reorienting adult educators from 'educating people' to 'helping them learn'.²

A detailed distinction between pedagogy and andragogy is introduced in the table below. The first distinction between pedagogy being teacher centred whereas andragogy being learner centred is an extreme which quite heavily relies on traditional approaches to pedagogy. In modern approaches, pedagogy may be, and often is, learner centred.

Pedagogy (teacher centered)	Andragogy (learner centered)
Learners are dependent	Learners are independent (self-directed)
Learners are externally motivated (by rewards, competition, etc.)	Learners are intrinsically motivated (i.e. interested in learning for learning's sake)

¹ ATHANASSIOU, A at al.: Handbook for adult teaching staff, Nicosia 2014

² <https://www.cornerstone.edu/blogs/lifelong-learning-matters/post/a-simple-easy-to-understand-guide-to-andragogy>

The learning environment is formal and characterized by competitiveness and value judgements	The learning environment is more informal and characterized by equality / mutual respect and cooperation
Planning and assessment is conducted by the teacher	Planning and assessment is collaborative affair (i.e. teacher and students)
Teaching is characterized by transmittal techniques (e.g. lectures, assigned readings)	Teaching is characterized by inquiry projects, experimentation, independent study
Evaluation is accomplished mainly by external methods (e.g. grades, tests and quizzes)	Evaluation is characterized by self-assessment

There is a number of definitions of an adult learner, emphasizing various aspects. My understanding of an **adult learner** is, in fact, any learner who is over the regular age of traditional schooling (above 23 – 24 years old). With respect to stages of development, it is quite common to divide the period of adulthood into 3 main stages: 1. Early adulthood (from approximately 18 to 40 years of age), 2. middle adulthood (41 – 65 years of age) and 3. Late adulthood (66 + years of age).³

A **psychological definition** of an adult was introduced by Knowles in 1984. This definition indicates that an adult is one who has arrived at a self-concept of being responsible for one's own life, of being self-directing.

Then, a question may rise who is an adult learner?

An adult learner is a mature learner who is acquiring new knowledge and skills, developing new attitudes after having reached mature intellectual, physical and social development.⁴

When it comes to teaching and learning, the personality of an adult learner undoubtedly requires a targeted treatment, different from the one in kids. Malcolm Knowles, the pioneer of modern andragogy, refers to his newly born branch of pedagogical sciences as “The art and science of adult learning”⁵. Knowles based his approach on several assumptions about adult learners, the most crucial being the fact that adults are able to direct their learning: adults may be referred to as self-directed learners who strictly accommodate the subject and the way of learning to their actual needs (work, travelling, surroundings, etc.). adults are generally motivated to learn due to internal rather than external factors (Knowles, 1984, p.12)⁶. They are oriented towards achieving some educational goals. When learning, adults use a rich reservoir of their life knowledge and experience.

In the same time, Knowles marks adult learners as “neglected species” most probably because their specific educational needs and the treatment had long been neglected. This chapter is an overview of some selected features and characteristics, which dominates in adult learners.

³ Adolescence and Adulthood: <https://www.blackwellpublishing.com/intropsych/pdf/chapter10.pdf>

⁴ KAPUR, S.: Understanding the Characteristics of an Adult Learner, 2015

⁵ KOZMA, M.: The Challenge of Teaching English to Adult Learners in Today's World, 2015

⁶ KNOWLES, M.: Andragogy in Action, Applying Modern Principles to Adult Learning, 1984

Cozma (2015)⁷ elaborated on some basic characteristics of teaching and learning of adult learners, highlighting their needs and distinguishing the personality of an adult from a young learner.

Cognitive characteristics

There is a common misconception that adults are more ineffective in as learners than young learners. A major supporting argument towards this misconception is that young learners are “more flexible brains” and, consequently, their cognitive functions are better. This misconception has been challenged by research (Cozma 2015) with the result indicating that indeed, younger students may be better when it comes to acquiring pronunciation, but, otherwise, adults are perfectly able to reach high levels of proficiency in a foreign language. Moreover, methodologies (e.g. Harmer 2007) stress that adult learners have greater cognitive capabilities and conceptional complexity than younger ones. This is closely connected with the fact that adults have a longer attention span and higher level of abstract thinking. In addition to that, adults have greater understanding of metalanguage, the knowledge of grammar and vocabulary as well as the structure of language which may be drawn from their mother tongue and subsequent analytical processing. As a result, they may be better at constructing new sentences and may have better knowledge of spelling and pronunciation.

Attitudinal characteristics

It is widely accepted that motivation is a key factor of successful learning. Unlike young learners, adult always have sound reason why they are studying and this reason will be their primary motivation. Being motivated by their professional or other needs, they are usually very focused from early beginning of learning. The same needs encourage adult to sustain their motivation throughout the whole learning process. As Cozma (2015) highlights, adults are certainly more cooperative learners and, what is more important, their cooperation comes as a natural consequence of their seeing the point of the various instructional situations in which they are involved. Teacher may then have an easier job to do and he or she does not have to camouflage learning and make it a side product of games and activities that artificially prolong learner’s attention span. In general, self-directed learning is preferred with adults, because adults can control the content of their learning and how they learn. Adult learners need to:

- Be challenged and think about their learning
- Self-assess and reflect upon their performance
- Be given the right level of support
- Be provided with options and choices⁸

There are also situations when adult learners are less confident in their intellectual abilities which may make them anxious about learning a foreign language. Stephen Brookfield (1990) in Cozma (2015 introduced the term “impostor syndrome”, denoting a collection of feelings of inadequacy, of chronic self-doubt which make people think that their accomplishments are nowhere near as good as those of the people around them. If this is the case, Kuhne (2017) suggested the following implication for teaching practice:

- Employ learning strategies that build higher confidence in adult learners
- Take the time to teach better study skills and ways of improving reading comprehension

⁷ KOZMA, M.: The Challenge of Teaching English to Adult Learners in Today’s World, 2015

⁸ <https://virtualspeech.com/blog/adult-learners-effects-age-cognitive-ability-memory-retention>

- Use collaborative learning approaches in the classroom can do much to alleviate anxiety. (i.e. turn the classroom from a competitive environment to a collaborative one)

Behavioural characteristics

When compared to young learners, adults tend to be more disciplined and willing work even if they feel uncomfortable or bored. This does not literally mean that adults cannot talk to their neighbours or fail to do their homework or manifest other unwished behaviours in the class. It just means that this behaviour tends to be much less frequent than in younger age groups.

Overall, the following characteristics may be perceived as prevailing in adult learning. (Knowles, Holton, & Swanson, 1998; Merriam & Caffarella, 1999; Snowman & Biehler, 2006)

Experience: the adult learner utilizes prior knowledge and experience as a vehicle for future learning, readily incorporates new knowledge into similar prior learning and appreciates the application of knowledge into context of real-life problems. Adults have greater reservoir of life experiences because they have lived longer and seen and done more. Consciously or unconsciously, adults tend to link any new learning to their prior learning, a body of knowledge that is rooted in their life experiences (Kuhne, G. 2017)⁹. Kuhne suggested the following implications for teaching practice:

- Take the time to get to know more about the experiences of our learners and seek to help them to link new ideas to such prior learning
- Encourage discussions on how new ideas fit the experience of learners.

Self-concept: The adult learner moves away from self-concept based on dependency and towards the self-concept based on self-direction and personal independence. Adulthood brings an increasing sense of the need and responsibility for our lives and adults strongly resent it when others take away their rights to choose. When not given enough control over their learning, most of adults will resist learning and some will even attempt to sabotage educational efforts. (Kuhne, G. 2017). Based on self-concept and self-directness, Kuhne suggested the following implications into teaching process:

- Always seek to include the adult in the planning of educational efforts
- Allow for self-assessment and evaluation
- Understand adult learners desire for a peer relationship with teacher, rather hierarchical one.
- Recognize that adults also expect greater availability of teachers.

Communication: adult learners become increasingly able to effectively express and exchange their feelings, thoughts, opinions, and information through verbal and non-verbal modes of communication and varied forms of media.

Orientation to learning: Adult learners increasingly move away from a subject-centred orientation towards knowledge that will be applied at some future point in time to problem-specific application of knowledge in the context of real-world problems.

Motivation to learn: Motivation towards learning shifts away from extrinsic incentives such as course grades and becomes increasingly directed towards intrinsic incentives such as the completion of defined goals and tasks in the fulfilment of social and professional responsibilities.

Responsibility: Adult learners are capable of reflective reasoning. They analyse knowledge, personal behaviours and interactions on an ongoing basis, incorporate constructive feedback,

⁹ KUHNE, G. Characteristics of Adult Learners, Introduction to Adult Education 2017

and adapt knowledge, behaviours and interactions to reflect ethical, societal standards and values.

Interpersonal and intrapersonal skills: adult learners increasingly develop the ability to work independently and cooperatively with others and across varied circumstances and issues that affect the common well-being and one's own well-being in relationship to the world around them.

Critical inquiry and reasoning: Adult learners increasingly develop the ability to examine and utilize reasoning and decision-making strategies to select, apply and evaluate evidence in the context of real-world problems.¹⁰

According to (Knowles, et al., 1998; Merriam & Caffarella, 1999; Snowman & Biehler, 2006)¹¹ the basic comparison between an adult learner and a young learner can be illustrated as follows:

	Young learner	Adult learner
Instructor	The instructor is the source of knowledge, decides what is important and what will be learnt.	If present, the instructor is a facilitator or resource, and learners evaluate needs based on real-world goals and problems and decide what is important to be learnt.
Learning	Passive learners and individual work Accept learning experience and knowledge at face value	Active learners, team work and collaboration Validate learning experience and knowledge based on experiences and usefulness.
Content	Homogeneous and stable content Content learned in the abstract	Diverse and dynamic content Content learnt in context
Organization	Learning is organized by subject and content area	Learning is organized around personal experiences, context and problem solving.
Orientation	Acquiring entry-level competencies	Acquiring real-world, problem-solving competencies
Utility	Developing subject-matter attitudes, knowledge and fundamental skill sets	Developing life-long learning attitudes, expertise and skill sets

Questions

1. Define adult education
2. What is andragogy?
3. Give a brief overview of the history of andragogy
4. Compare pedagogy and andragogy. In what aspects do they differ?
5. What are the three stages of adulthood? Give the age range.
6. Define an adult learner as introduced by Knowles (psychological definition).
7. What are the cognitive characteristics of adult learners?
8. What are the attitudinal characteristics of adult learners? What are possible implications into teaching practice?
9. What are the behavioural characteristics of adult learners?
10. Explain the concept of Experience in the overall characteristics of adult learners.

¹⁰ POCIASK, D. F. at al: Learning as an Adult and Cognitive Factors in Learning 2018

¹¹ POCIASK, D. F. at al: Learning as an Adult and Cognitive Factors in Learning 2018

11. Explain the self-concept in the overall characteristics of adult learners. What are possible implications into teaching practice?
12. Briefly define / explain the following common characteristics of adult learners: communication, orientation to learning, motivation to learn, responsibility, interpersonal and intrapersonal skills, critical inquiry and reasoning.
13. What is the comparison of young learner and adult in terms of the following criteria? Instructor, learning, content, organization, orientation, utility.

Task 1: Choose a grammar item and prepare a micro-teaching at two levels

1. teach the selected grammar item in a young learners' class
2. teach the same grammar item in an adult class to demonstrate the differences

Language level: A2, **Length:** to be confirmed

Instructions for observers: when observing your peers, focus on:

- The clarity of their instructions
- Interacting with the class (types of questions, building rapport, etc.
- The appropriateness of examples used

Task 2: Choose a vocabulary item and prepare and prepare a micro-teaching at two levels

1. teach the selected vocabulary item in a young learners' class
2. teach the same vocabulary item in an adult class to demonstrate the differences

Language level: A2, **Length:** to be confirmed

Instructions for observers: when observing your peers, focus on:

- The clarity of their instructions
- Interacting with the class (types of questions, building rapport, etc.
- The appropriateness of examples used

Possible modifications: students may modify the items they have decided to teach and/or the language level.

Case study:

An executive manager from a financial company in his late 40s signed up for a B1 language course in the State Language School in Bratislava. Classes in this school are organized strictly by the language level, not by age. As the manager decided to take an early afternoon class, most of his classmates are teenagers. The manager has a good command of written language; however, his spoken language is slightly below the level, unlike his classmates. As a teacher, what would you do to smoothly include the adult learner (the manager) to this class?