Introduction

Who will use this book?

Throughout the world, people are moving from one country to another. Whether they are immigrants or visitors, most of these people have one thing in common: They must learn a new language in order to survive and thrive in their new environment. As a result, there are thousands of language classes for adult newcomers. There are great differences from one country to another with regard to these classes. In some countries government-sponsored programs are the norm, whereas in others there is a mix of public and private funding. In the case of immigrants, often a limited length of time is allowed for language study before newcomers are expected to be self-sufficient. Although we recognize these differences, we also feel that teachers of second languages to adults have much in common.

This book is intended for you, the teachers of adult second language learners. In it we address general questions concerning lesson organization and content as well as providing specific activities to make your classes more successful. Bearing in mind that in some situations teachers are expected to assess and place students and to organize their own curriculum in addition to teaching, we have included basic information on these topics. Books that provide additional information are listed in the Bibliography.

We have based this book on our own experience and on that of teachers whom we have come to know in our work and at conferences and workshops. We have tried to create activities which are easy enough linguistically for language learners, but which will appeal to adult learners' interests and needs. We hope that you will find it both useful and interesting.

Who is the adult second language learner?

Adults come to a new country for a variety of reasons. Some come simply to learn the language and culture, but most come to work or study. Some come in order to accompany or join family or friends and others to escape from difficult circumstances at home.

Just as reasons for coming vary, so does the length of stay in the new country. Some are short-term visitors, staying for a few months, others stay for a few years, and still others for the rest of their lives. Some, who do not need the language for employment outside their homes and whose family members take care of most of the practical aspects of their lives, attend classes primarily for social reasons. For them, the language class provides a respite from the loneliness of staying at home in a strange country. Others are immigrants who are under pressure to join the workforce as quickly as possible. Still others already have jobs but need to increase their language skills in order to keep or advance in their jobs.

Although these newcomers represent many countries, first languages, and cultures, they still have a number of things in common. They want and need to learn to *use* the language. They need to be able to shop, to bank, to use buses, and to work. To function successfully in their new environment they need to be able to speak to and understand the people around them, as well as read and write.

What do adult learners bring to a class?

Because of the heterogeneous nature of adult classes, it is important to consider the following dimensions.

Language

First, adults already know one language well, and that language is a vital part of their identity and the means through which they relate to others. The newcomer knows the sound and structure systems (and in many cases the written conventions) of his* first language, which both help and hinder learning a new language. In a social sense, using a new language represents a tremendous risk: of being misunderstood, of being corrected, of being laughed at, of feeling embarrassed or childish, and even in some cases of being rejected by one's own compatriots. On the other hand, the need and desire to communicate with others in the new language provides strong motivation for most newcomers.

Background knowledge

In addition to language, adult students bring background knowledge and experience of their own and other cultures as well as knowledge

* In order to avoid awkwardness in construction, we have chosen to refer to the learner as masculine and to the teacher as feminine throughout this book. No bias is intended, of course: Many teachers are men and many learners are women.

and experience gained from work or home. This knowledge of the world is a rich resource for the teacher who chooses to exploit it. By drawing on the students' previous knowledge, the teacher not only validates a lifetime of learning but also has a base on which to build new knowledge.

Expectations

These learners also bring with them the attitudes and knowledge developed in previous schooling. Those who have had little schooling and who lack literacy skills in their first language may find language classes intimidating unless a special effort is made to welcome and include them. Those who have studied a second language previously will be influenced by that experience. If they have been successful, they are likely to assume that they will be successful again. Not only will they be more confident, but they will also have developed strategies to help them learn a new language. Students who have had unpleasant or unsuccessful experiences as learners are likely to expect more of the same.

Learners with prior language learning experiences are also likely to bring with them expectations of how language classes should be organized and taught. They may associate language learning exclusively with grammar and translation, and feel threatened when they find that speaking and listening are major features of their new class. If they come from a culture in which the teacher's job is to transmit knowledge, they may feel uncomfortable with group or pair work and may question the validity of a class in which the teacher does not stand in front of the students and lecture. If they are from a culture in which the teacher is considered all-knowing, they may doubt the competence of a teacher who admits to not knowing something. It is important for the teacher to find out what the students' expectations are and to address areas in which the students' expectations differ from the teacher's or from each others'. Differences in expectations may sometimes necessitate that the teacher and students negotiate what and how to learn. In addition, the teacher needs to share with the students the goals and theoretical justifications for specific classroom activities.

Learning styles

Like all learners, adults have different learning styles. Some feel comfortable learning by watching and listening, whereas others feel they cannot learn unless they take down notes and analyze rules. They may also have preferences for learning through different sense modalities: touching, hearing, smelling, tasting, and seeing. The teacher

will need to understand and cater to these differences by utilizing cycles of teaching that exploit different learning styles at different points in the lesson. This will also have the advantage of enabling the students to extend their range of learning styles by exposing them to new ones.

Confidence

Adult learners also bring many other personal characteristics, perhaps the most important of which is confidence or the lack thereof. Many students with little initial proficiency leap ahead of their classmates, in large part because they are confident that they can and will learn the language. These students go out and take the risks involved in using the new language to communicate with anyone and everyone they encounter. Others of comparable ability and background may languish at a low level of proficiency because they lack the confidence to use the language. It is therefore very important to provide a supportive classroom atmosphere where risk taking and other positive learning behaviors are fostered.

Motivation

Students also vary considerably in their motivation. One student may want desperately to communicate with his neighbors and coworkers; another may perceive little use for the new language once his basic needs are met. Grades may provide additional motivation for younger students, but this is not the case for most adult second language students. They are not generally required to attend classes nor to take tests. Motivation, then, must come from within them and be based on their perception that what they are learning is of interest and of value to them. For such students the teacher can enhance motivation by providing interesting activities and by making clear the value of what is being taught and its relevance to their goals.

Personal circumstances

Age, health, and other personal circumstances also influence adult learners. Adult classes often include students ranging in age from 18 to 80 or more. Students may feel they have little common ground among them. Younger students may perceive those who are older as slow and rigid, while older adults may feel that younger ones are frivolous and irresponsible. Health, particularly for the older adults, may be a complicating factor. Difficulties with hearing, eyesight, and memory need to be taken into account. A history of arthritis or stroke may make writing difficult. In addition, personal circumstances, such as employment or lack of it, difficulties with child care or transportation,

or concerns about problems at home necessarily take priority, making attendance, punctuality, and concentration difficult for some students. Although we may not be able to change the students' personal circumstances, we can, by being flexible and by encouraging a sense of community in the classroom, provide a source of support.

Effective instructors need to inform their teaching by collecting information about their students' first language knowledge, knowledge of the world, previous learning experience, learning styles and preferences, personalities and personal circumstances, as well as their existing second language skills and goals.

How can instructors obtain information about their students?

Initial data collection

In most adult education programs, a great deal of information is collected before the student arrives in the instructor's classroom. Forms are filled out, interviews are conducted, and frequently formal tests are administered to ascertain the student's second language level. In some programs, instructors are involved in these placement procedures, but in others they are not. In either case it is important for the teacher to be aware of the information collected, as it relates to both the student's proficiency level and to his circumstances, goals, and background. In this section we talk about some of the tools that can be used at this initial stage.

FORMAL TESTS

Formal tests provide only a starting point for data collection because they generally focus exclusively on the student's proficiency in the language. It is possible to utilize either a standardized test or one created in-house. Standardized tests have the advantage of being normed across a large population, but an in-house test may provide information which is more pertinent to the particular program in which the student is enrolled. Furthermore, there is often a problem of fit between the adult program's typical focus on language use and the focus on form of many standardized tests. If a standardized test is used, it is important to make sure that it in fact provides information that is appropriate and relevant to the curriculum of the program.

INTERVIEWS

An interview provides another way to assess a student's proficiency while at the same time allowing the teacher to learn more about his background

and interests. In an ideal world, the interview should be carried on in a comfortable, quiet, and private setting, free from distractions. In practice a corner of the classroom or the corridor often has to suffice. In any case, it should be made clear to the student that this is an interview. Distractions should be kept to a minimum. The interviewer can create a sense that the student is the center of her attention by arranging chairs so that she and the student can look at each other without barriers such as desks between them. Needless to say, it is important for the interviewer to smile, to focus on, and to respond to the student's answers and not to perform other tasks at the same time. An interview is a time to listen and not a time to correct the student. It is useful to have pictures available to provide lower-level or shy students with visual support. This interview should be done alone, without intervention from friends of the student. Although this placement interview is usually carried out in the second language, it may be appropriate later, in order to learn more about the student's background and expectations, to conduct an additional interview in his first language.

The interviewer can begin by introducing herself. The body of the interview should be arranged from easier to more difficult questions. A possible sequence of questions and cues is provided in Box 1. Begin with formulaic questions concerning personal information. These familiar questions will help the student feel comfortable and will also give the interviewer basic information and an opportunity to ascertain the student's control of functions related to personal identification and verb tenses.

If the student has difficulty answering these questions, the interviewer should try to elicit language by using pictures. Every attempt should be made to allow the student to make some successful response. This includes the use of single-object pictures and yes/no questions.

If the student is successful in the first part of the interview, more difficult open-ended questions should be used. The interviewer should be sensitive to the student's verbal and nonverbal responses to these questions and change the topic if there is evidence of any discomfort. For more advanced students, a challenging task is to make comparisons of countries, cities, jobs, or schools. The interviewer should encourage the student to expand on his answers by use of follow-up questions and judicious silence. When it is clear that the student has reached the limit of his competence, the interviewer should end the interview by thanking the student.

It will, of course, depend on the individual program how students are placed based on the interview, but factors that may be considered are control of functions, structures, and vocabulary; complexity of thought and language, and risk taking. It needs to be taken into account that one student might avoid errors by using only simple vocabulary and structures, whereas another might take greater risks and consequently make more mistakes.

BOX 1

Interview sequence

What is your name?
How do you spell it?
Do you live in _____ (city)?
Do you have a job?
Where are you from?
When did you come to this country?
How long have you been in _____ (city)?
_____

Tell me about your daily routine.
Tell me about your family.
Tell me about your education.
Tell me about your job.
Tell me about your language learning experience.
What do you do in your spare time or on weekends?
What questions would you like to ask about the program?
_____

What are your plans for the future?
What are the main differences between _____ (country of origin) and _____ (country currently living in)?
What are the main differences between schools (or cities) in _____ (country of origin) and in _____ (country currently living in)?
If you could have any job, what would you like to be? (Why?)
I read an article saying that _____
What do you think about that?

WRITING SAMPLES

In addition to formal tests and interviews, a writing sample can give further information about literacy and about the student. The student can be given a choice of writing prompts (see Box 2). Alternatively, the student can be assigned a series of tasks of increasing difficulty to be completed in a given time period. Depending on his writing skill, he may or may not complete the entire sequence. The first task might be to fill out a simple form, followed by writing about a picture or sequence of pictures, and finally completing an open-ended writing task based on a topic such as learning English. A third way of eliciting a writing sample is to provide a single task that can be performed at various levels, such as filling in speech balloons in a cartoon.

Ongoing data collection

Once the students are placed and classes begin, the teacher will need to combine information about what the students know, what they want to know, and what the program would like them to know in order to determine what to teach. Because the students are now in the language classroom with the teacher, this information can be collected through language learning activities that are integrated into the curriculum. This does not preclude the use of interviews and writing tasks, but it does open up other possibilities.

BOX 2

Writing prompts

Write about your family.
Write about what you do every day.
Write a letter to your language instructor telling him or her about your past language learning experiences.
Write a letter introducing yourself to other class members.
You are applying for a new job. Describe your past work experience.

FINDING OUT WHAT STUDENTS KNOW ABOUT AND WHAT THEY CAN DO WITH THE LANGUAGE

1. *Observation*. One of the teacher's most powerful tools in data collection is systematic and ongoing observation of student performance. This enables the teacher to find out what students know about and what they can do with the language. Teachers constantly monitor what their students say and how they say it. While students are working together in groups, the teacher can walk around the class, listen, and take notes. This has the advantage of not disrupting the normal flow of classroom activities. Student-made tapes and writing assignments provide a way for the teacher to monitor oral and written performance outside of class.
2. *Asking questions*. To find out what students can do with the language, the teacher can simply ask them. This can be done orally or in writing. One technique is to ask students individually or in groups to respond to questions on large sheets of paper posted on the wall. Each paper should ask one question (see Box 3).

   In a different activity, students can fill in a chart saying what they can and cannot do with regard to a particular skill area or topic.

Having ascertained what the students know, the next task is to find out what they want to learn.

BOX 3

Poster questions

How often do you speak _____ (the second language)?
How often do you listen to _____ (the second language)?
How often do you read _____ (the second language)?
How often do you write _____ (the second language)?
With whom do you speak?
Where do you speak?
When do you speak?

FINDING OUT WHAT STUDENTS WANT TO LEARN

Questionnaires to determine the interests and goals of the students should be administered not just at the beginning of the term, but on an ongoing basis. This is particularly important in programs with continuous enrollment, as the students attending a class after six weeks may not be the same ones who were surveyed at the beginning of the term. Even in classes in which everyone registers at the same time, students' goals may change over time. Questionnaires can be administered orally or in writing, in the student's first or second language. Box 4 provides an example of a general questionnaire.

At the beginning of a unit it is also helpful to find out what students already know and what they want to know about the new topic. One way to do this is for students individually to fill out an open-ended chart like the one in Box 5 on page 13.

Alternatively, a formal questionnaire on a specific topic can be administered orally or in writing as in the Housing Survey in the Housing unit (Box 60, page 147).

It should be noted that these kinds of preliminary activities actually serve multiple purposes. In addition to the overt purpose of finding out what students know and what they want to know, they also serve to activate schemata (that is, to "awaken" or bring to consciousness existing knowledge) and to focus attention on the new topic.