

ELT



Ireland bulletin

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Teaching the Foundations of ESL to Adults: Challenges and Techniques

By Maximiliano E. Orlando

Introduction

I have always thought that teaching English as a second language (ESL) to adults who are beginning to learn this language is full of challenges. It could be argued that one of these challenges stems from the assumption that, contrary to learners who attend post elementary classes or lower intermediate ones, learners who are in classes for beginners do not have any English language



Concrete foundations are the basis for building fluency and accuracy

Pic By: Wikimedia

foundations which would allow them to understand teachers' input. However, classes which are addressed to adult beginners of ESL may also be attended by false beginners (I shall define false beginners as those adults who identify themselves as beginner learners of English but who have some knowledge of it), and this situation may be expected to add to the complexity and challenges of teaching these classes.

At the same time, it can be claimed that false beginners' prior knowledge can be turned to good account in a given class for beginners. The main reason for this is that, when working in pairs or in groups, false beginners may help absolute beginners with their class work or when they find teachers' input incomprehensible. Nonetheless, it may not be advisable to become dependent on this knowledge as a remedy to incomprehensible input. Indeed, it may be possible that absolute beginners become rapidly discouraged after realising that some learners may follow lessons whereas they cannot. Furthermore, absolute beginners may need to find teachers' input comprehensible without their classmates' intervention as continuous incomprehensible input may not only add up to the discouragement I have just mentioned but also eventually lead to a state of frustration.

Since all these factors make teaching the foundations of ESL to adult beginners a difficult task, I will share four of the techniques I have used while teaching ESL classes that aim to help adult learners to communicate in a range of everyday situations in Canadian contexts. Following previous literature on second language teaching which has highlighted the benefits of learning formulaic language and/or language chunks (Selivan, 2016; Zavalova, 2016; Sirkel, 2017), the use of this language and of these chunks underlies these

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techniques. It should also be pointed out that they do not follow a given order: they may be used concomitantly or in any order teachers may find useful. Finally, I would like to add that they intend to teach ESL to absolute beginners and false beginners by also helping the latter to polish up their English.

Technique 1: choice of topic and combinations of word categories

I always try to make sure that I start by dealing with topics that both false and absolute beginners are familiar with and that make reference to everyday aspects of their lives. Examples of these topics may be food, recipes, hobbies, habits and illnesses. I also try to combine different word categories so that learners can express themselves using language chunks. For example, when learners have familiarised themselves with the spelling, pronunciation and the objects a set of concrete nouns that belong to the semantic fields of any of the topics in question denote, e.g. different kinds of fruit, I move onto verbs so that learners can perform different functions. A case in point is expressing and asking about likes, dislikes, habits and preferences when writing a shopping list to make a fruit salad. Another example is giving instructions using a variety of verbs while making the fruit salad itself. A picture dictionary can be really useful while using this technique.

Technique 2: reading short stories

Reading short stories about everyday life is a very useful technique since it may allow both false and absolute beginners to learn basic chunks of everyday language and formulaic language that may be used in everyday situations. Short stories may also suggest situations where learners can revisit and consolidate this language. A good example of these stories is, in my opinion, a collection that has been published by Bow Valley College and funded by Immigration, Refugees and Citizenship Canada (see references below). Even though this collection deals with situations adult learners may encounter in Canada, some of these situations may also be experienced while living in other English speaking countries. The stories have been sorted out into levels, are accompanied by visuals, and may be read and/or listen to. However, some copyright conditions apply to use these stories.

Technique 3: body language combined with visuals

I am of the opinion that combining lots of body language with visuals may be a useful technique when teaching ESL to adults who are either false or absolute beginners. It can help teachers to grab learners' attention and to highlight notions. For example, the notion of largeness may be stressed by showing and pointing at places in a map. In addition, this combination can be helpful while going over concepts that have already been taught by different means but that some learners need to reinforce. For example, the adjectives tasty, delicious and yummy may be elicited by a face gesture accompanied by a praising utterance while looking at a picture showing

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food. Combining body language and visuals may also help learners to associate terms. In the two examples I have just brought up, for instance, word combinations, such as a big province or a crisp apple, may come up.

Technique 4: written and spoken language in context

I often work on basic language functions which may be conveyed in a range of contexts, both spoken and written. For example, learners may express their preferences for a certain kind of food in a role-play activity in which they order at a restaurant or in a text message while organising a picnic. This technique may help absolute and also false beginners not only to acquire new language but also to consolidate existing language. Indeed, the former may learn basic formulaic language, whereas the latter may review this language while also learning to use a wider range of formulae to perform language functions by different means and in different registers.

Conclusion

In this paper, I have briefly discussed a few of the challenges that teaching ESL to adult beginners may entail and also shared four of the techniques that have helped me tackle these challenges. While describing these techniques I have taken into consideration the use of language chunks and of formulaic language following previous literature that has highlighted the benefits of teaching this language. The four techniques are particularly helpful when I teach classes composed of absolute beginners and false beginners and do not necessarily follow a specific order. Indeed, teaching the foundations of ESL to adults may require a balancing act between different learners' needs and, as a result, some flexibility to reformulate the chronological or logical steps of a lesson plan depending on the learners' actual performance in class.

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