

## Challenge for Ukrainian Researchers: English as a Second Language

DOI: 10.15804/tner.2016.44.2.19

### Abstract

Ukrainian researchers face the challenge of the acquisition of foreign language skills at least at B2 level. The available formal opportunities do not satisfy their needs to the full. The initiative of the Institute of Pedagogical and Adult Education of the National Academy of Educational Sciences of Ukraine to organize peer-to-peer ESL and EAP courses is described and analyzed in the article in order to identify the factors which can stimulate the learning process of the specific category of adult learners. As a result, 4 groups of them were distinguished: andragogical, didactic, course and peer-to-peer principles. The conclusion was made that these principles can create an adequate theoretical and methodological basis for realizing the initiative in practice.

**Keywords:** *Ukrainian researchers, English as a Second Language (ESL), learning principles, peculiarities*

### Introduction

Globalization processes today set forward a great number of challenges before society and education. For the Ukrainian researchers the most urgent one is the acquisition of English as a second language (ESL) competence. Three reasons have made it very topical nowadays:

- the integration of Ukraine into the all-European political, economic, scientific and educational space and various spheres of activity;

- the initiative of the Ukrainian President, Petro Poroshenko, to make 2016 the Year of the English Language in Ukraine (President's Order 2015);
- the Decree of the Cabinet of Ministers of Ukraine "On Some Ways of Realizing Article 54 of the Law of Ukraine 'On Higher Education'" (Cabinet of Ministers of Ukraine Decree of 19 August 2015).

According to the latter document, Ukrainian scientists, researchers, and academics have to know a foreign language at least at B2 level according to the Common European Framework of Reference for Languages. They have to promote international cooperation with foreign educational and academic establishments more broadly, to publish their results in the internationally cited journals (Cabinet of Ministers of Ukraine Decree, 19 August 2015).

One more important driver for the increasing necessity to acquire ESL competences is researchers' need for professional and personal development. The knowledge of English, as the language of international communication, will provide them with wider access to the world of economic, social, educational and cultural possibilities. Thus, it will enhance their professional qualifications and personal development.

The problem of learning English as a second language has been studied for a long time by a lot of teachers in the whole world. Their interest has been related to diverse categories of students from primary to higher school levels. The question of learning ESL by adults has only recently drawn the attention of teachers, pedagogues, and researchers. Google search showed that numerous studies are devoted to the peculiarities of learning ESL by adults (14,700,000 results). However, when analyzing these resources, it has been found out that their content concerns mostly:

- the information on lesson materials, educational games, worksheets to study vocabulary and grammar, quizzes, crosswords, flashcards and other resources for both teachers and students (ESL Mania; Merrit, 2011; Adult ESL Strategies 2011; REEP world);
- a practitioner's toolkit for working with adult English language learners (National Center 2008; Center for Applied Linguistics 2003; Kerns, Knight-Mendelson 2006);
- advertisement of classes for adults to study ESL;
- blogs highlighting one's experience in teaching ESL to adults.

Only some Internet resources really touch on the problem of principles and strategies of adult ESL learning (Li, 2012; Zakhareuski, 2015; Pesce, 2015; Roth 2007). Seemingly, the question of ESL learning by researchers has never been considered at all. Thus, Google search for "ESL learning by researchers" offers 568,000

results. Seemingly, there are hardly any publications which illustrate the special features of teaching researchers and scientists. It does not mean the absence of interest in the problem, but a lack of the proper theoretical and methodological grounds to solve it. The situation requires studying the principles and strategies of teaching Ukrainian researchers ESL in non-formal settings.

## **Research Methodology**

### **Background**

To do that, we addressed an initiative by Professor Larysa Lukianova, Director of the Institute of Pedagogical and Adult Education of the National Academy of Educational Sciences of Ukraine, to use the peer-to-peer strategy to develop the foreign language competence of researchers in Ukraine. This initiative started in March, 2016. A thorough preparation had already been made before. The researchers from V. Sukhomlynskyi Scientific Library, Research Institute of Higher Education, Institute of Information Technologies and Learning Tools, Institute of Special Pedagogy were invited to participate in this initiative. Also, 6 future language trainers were chosen out of the co-workers. They have special foreign language education. Then a survey was conducted to identify the exact needs of the participants and the level of their English skills. On the basis of the obtained results, a template of the curriculum was designed. 42 participants were placed into 6 groups from beginners to the intermediate level, 7 participants in each. Two-hour lessons took place twice a week, and the time of the meetings was arranged as well. As this initiative was a testing experiment, it was to be held during 3 months starting in March and ending in May. All in all, the course was planned for 48 practical classroom hours and 48 self-study hours. The information on the ESL learning by Ukrainian researchers is constantly updated and is presented on the site of the Institute of Pedagogical and Adult Education of the National Academy of Educational Sciences of Ukraine under the heading *Language Training Centre* (Language Training Centre for Adults).

Although it is rather simple, it is quite effective. The strategy gives the researchers the most required benefits – the learning setup of the colleagues, similar objectives, peer-teachers who know the researchers' needs better than others. It also combines the learning opportunities of non-formal and informal education. Thus, this educational project has blended characteristics. On the one hand, it is done by peers, being informal by its nature. On the other, it is in the format of Eng-

lish courses, being non-formal. Such a combination has resulted in the following assumption: the foreign language courses of this format can be based on a complex of methodological principles.

## **Research Methods**

The overall research was undertaken to answer the questions: What principles create the adequate theoretical and methodological grounds for this method of acquiring a foreign language competence? Are there any issues that make this format different from ordinary foreign language courses?

Due to its mostly theoretical character, the qualitative exploration methods are used to find the answers to the posed questions. They cover analysis and synthesis, classification and high-level abstraction to form of a theoretical and methodological basis for non-formal/informal education of a special adult learner category. This approach allowed for the identification of a complex of key principles of the peer-to-peer strategy in acquiring ESL competence by Ukrainian researchers. The considerations made it possible to distinguish its major characteristics: adult learning, didactic, and peer-to-peer, course. In turn, they outlined the learning principles which can make or break the deal. Then these principles were analyzed, generalized, grouped and presented in the form of an image to explain the relationship between the principles.

## **Research Results**

Four groups of principles were distinguished.

The first group reflects the principles of how adults learn. So it can be called “**andragogical**”.

A review of the related literature has shown that researchers and practitioners have already substantiated the peculiar principles of adult learning. In the 1980s, Malcolm Knowles developed his ideas of how adults learn (Knowles, 1990). Since then his theory has been developed and principles have been added, specified, explained, and illustrated by many scholars. Yet, it should be mentioned that the basis for all studies is M. Knowles’ crucial characteristics of adult learners. They include:

- “Self-concept: As a person matures, his/her self-concept moves from one of being a dependent personality toward one being a self-directed being;

- Experience: As a person matures, he/she accumulates a growing reservoir of experience that becomes an increasing resource for learning;
- Readiness to learn: As a person matures, his/her readiness to learn becomes oriented increasingly to the developmental tasks of his/her social roles;
- Orientation to learning: As a person matures, his/her time perspective changes from one of postponed application of knowledge to immediacy of application, and accordingly, his/her orientation toward learning shifts from subject-centeredness to problem centeredness” (Knowles, 1990, p.57);
- “Motivation to learn: As a person matures, the motivation to learn becomes internal” (Knowles, 1984, p.12). The last feature of an adult learner was added by M. Knowles in 1984.

These assumptions show the difference of how children and adults learn. In other words, any adult teacher should know this and use it in his/her teaching practice. Applying these characteristics to the described ESL courses, a peer adult teacher bears them in mind when preparing for and performing the teaching process and evaluating his/her adult learners:

1. Adults are willing to be involved in the planning, performing and evaluating of their learning. They want to become co-workers in this process, equal partners. They do not want to be taught but to collaborate with their teacher.
2. Adults are willing to have freedom and at the same time to take responsibility for their contribution to the learning process. It is important for the peer adult teacher not to be a teacher in the original meaning of the word, but a facilitator of the learning process.
3. Adults are inclined to using their life experience in the learning process. The peer adult teacher should take it into account and encourage his/her adult learners to share their past knowledge and opinions and use them in the current learning activities. Not only positive experience, but also mistakes can provide the basis for the learning activities. The role of the teacher is to properly assist his/her adult learners in relating their past experience to the current learning process.
4. Adults are practical. Their practicality results in the professional or personal relevance of what is being learnt and how it can be implemented into practice. Adults need to realize how to apply the theory learned in class into real-life situations. What is more important for the adult teacher is to remember that “adult learning is problem-centered rather than content-oriented” (Kearsley, 2010). So, the peer adult teacher should choose the most appropriate ways to convert theoretical learning into practical activities.

5. Adults are goal-oriented. The learning goals should respond to the learners' concern, they need to get the necessary and relevant knowledge. In addition, adults need to know why this course is important for them and what learning outcomes they will acquire. So, the teacher should have to clearly identify them before the learning process starts.
6. Adults are motivated by internal motivators: e.g., the desire to increase their self-esteem, to personally and professionally develop, to improve their social status and the quality of their life, to name a few. The peer teacher should keep this powerful motivation tool active.

Although there is an opinion that "it is worth nothing at this point that there is no one theory or model that explains everything we know about adult learners" (Adult Learning Australia, 2015), it must be acknowledged that Knowles' ideas of adult learning really opened up the world of adult learning. Without them there is not a single learning process either in a formal or non-formal educational environment. And, as practice proves, informal learning setup is based on these ideas, as well. In our case, keeping to these principles is the guarantee of success.

Another characteristic feature of the peer-to-peer initiative, like any learning process, is based on didactic principles. The **didactic principles** of teaching ESL illustrate the peculiarities of acquiring foreign language skills. Traditionally, the communicative approach, principle of activity, interactive approach, conscious approach, durability, visualization and individualization are distinguished as the most fundamental ones (Principles of TE 2016; Шульгина 2015). In application to the described initiative they mean the following:

- The communicative approach means that course learners should be involved in both oral and written communication throughout the whole period of learning English.
- The principle of activity implies that learners should be active in the learning process and well-motivated. Besides, learning activities in the course are different as language acquisition involves the development of various activities: listening, speaking, reading and writing. Thus, adequate techniques, methods, and exercises are chosen to develop them.
- The principle of interactive approach implies that learners do not acquire the language as separate components: sounds, grammar units, or lexical items. They acquire them in a complex: sentence-patterns, pattern-dialogues related to certain situations from the scientific environment.
- The principle of conscious approach means that ESL learners do not learn mechanically. They understand what they learn.

- The principle of durability implies the learners' ability to keep in memory the language material they have learnt and use it whenever they need it for oral or written communication. The durability is ensured by vivid presentation of material, by constant revision and drills, by the use of the material on the part of the learner for communicative needs.
- The principle of visualization allows for making ESL learning emotionally coloured, closer to real-life situations, and thought-provoking.
- The principle of individualization presupposes individual approach to every learner, using the learning activities which help learners to maximally use the benefits of their learning styles and develop the qualities they need.

Thus, the andragogical and didactic principles described above are incorporated in the learning process of ESL courses. They make ESL acquisition by adults effective. However, this way of ESL acquisition by Ukrainian researchers has two more characteristic features: peer-to-peer and course ones. The former means that the learning process is conducted by peers. The latter implies the format of intensive foreign language courses which are limited in time (48 classroom hours). These features are based on the principles which can be called "peer-to-peer" and "course" ones.

The first group of the principles, which outline **peer-to-peer** learning technology includes:

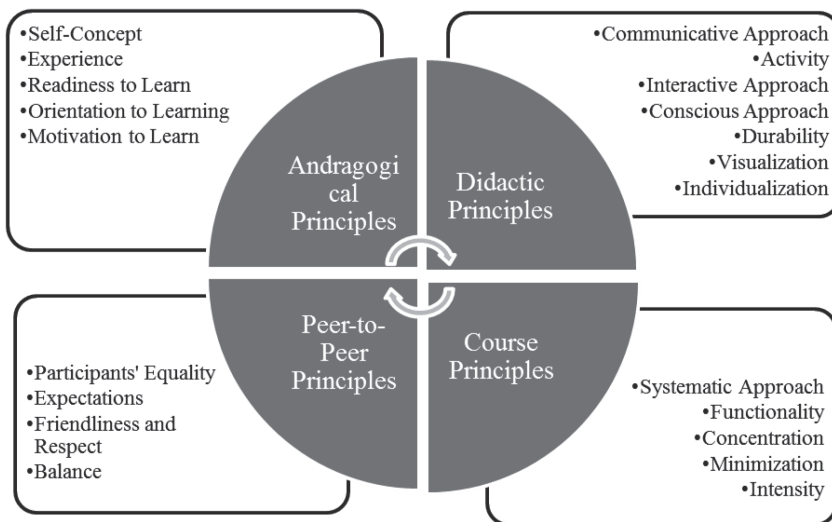
- Equality of participants (Pesce, 2015). All participants in the learning process have equal rights, and they are co-workers and collaborate in the learning process.
- Expectations (Roth 2007). Because the peer language trainer belongs to the same scientific community, he/she knows their problems and needs. That is why addressing the learners' expectations and satisfying them are much easier.
- Friendliness and respect (Pesce, 2015). Creating a friendly learning environment and respectful attitude to all participants stimulates the learning process. These two things become a guarantee of any joint activity.
- Balance (Adult ESL Classroom Strategies, 2011). Maintaining the right balance between modeling, explaining and practicing is an efficient way of combining practice and theory, making the learning process closer to the real life, and to the peer's needs.

As can be seen, some of the principles are the reflection of the andragogical ones. However, we classify them as a separate group to underline the unique character of this method of learning.

As for the **course** principles, they are determined by the requirements to any educational course. The most influential principles, in our opinion, involve:

- The systematic approach (Jun, 2012). Language is considered as an integral entity which consists of interconnected different-level elements which function as one unit;
- The functionality principle (Adult ESL Program). It means that the language material in the lessons fully meets the demands of the learners and in this way it is functional.
- The concentration principle (Kerns, Knight-Mendelson, 2006). The language material is grouped in separate modules. They contain resources for training all foreign language skills (listening, reading, writing, and speaking). The material is presented in portions, accumulated and then used with the subsequent extension.
- The minimization principle (REEP world). The lexical and grammar material presented to learners is thoroughly chosen according to different stages of learning ESL and learners' levels.
- The intensity principle (Jun, 2012). The necessary language material is supposed to be learnt intensively during 3 months. It implies involving a lot of learner and teacher activity, knowledge, effort, and attention.

All the thoughts presented above are graphically shown in **Figure 1**.



**Figure 1.** Complex of Principles in Peer-to-Peer ESL Learning  
 Source: designed by the author.



## **Discussion**

If one was to analyze the non-formal and informal opportunities where the Ukrainian researchers can gain ESL skills, they are rather traditional and can be found in any country:

- by themselves, using different available teaching and learning resources (Internet, reference books, text books, manuals, etc.);
- with a private teacher;
- in foreign language courses.

All of them have both advantages and disadvantages. They are not the subject of this study. At the same time, it should be noted that these learning opportunities do not suit the researchers' needs to the full. The reasons for that are: the specificity of this adult learner category – researchers, scientists, academics, scholars; their psychological and pedagogical peculiarities and the special demands for English which will be learnt or taught. Firstly, it is to be academic. Secondly, it has to be a research language with its clichés, grammar constructions, fixed expressions, strict structures of any scientific speech or paper.

The initiative of peer-to-peer ESL learning can really satisfy the needs of Ukrainian researchers.

## **Conclusions**

To conclude, it should be stressed that the first two groups of principles – andragogical and didactic – are typical of any organized learning process of adults. The two others – peer-to-peer and course – are characteristic of the described initiative. In general, only the integration of four distinguished groups of principles creates the necessary theoretical and methodological basis which can make the ESL learning by Ukrainian researchers effective and resulting.

Further studies on the current topic are, therefore, required to experimentally check its effectiveness. It would be also interesting to focus on learners' characteristics such as: gender, age, job experience, scientific interests, etc. The final result of this initiative can be the creation of an intensive ESL language course, which can be recommended to lecturers, researchers, and scientists at other educational and academic institutes of Ukraine.

### Acknowledgements

Our deep respect and sincere thankfulness to Larysa Lukianova, Director of the Pedagogical and Adult Education Institute of the National Academy of Educational Sciences of Ukraine for her initiative, help and enthusiasm in realizing and promoting it in Ukraine.

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