

Para Adultos

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The potential role of Trinidad and Tobago in the FTAA has undoubtedly opened up an interesting new market in this country—tuition in the Spanish language. It has also brought to life a new awareness of the role of foreign language proficiency in the business world.

In preparing to teach a foreign language (FL) to adults, a facilitator needs to remember that many of those adult students may have had their own experiences—positive and negative—of FL learning at the secondary school level or elsewhere. The impact of those experiences would affect the required content of the course and the approach of the facilitator.

From my experience of teaching Spanish to adults, the level of students' curiosity is high with regard to the first encounter with the *profesor/profesora*. To a large extent, this encounter is likely to set the tone for the rest of the course, as would be expected in any teaching/learning situation. With regard to the facilitator's role, the first session is an opportunity to break down barriers, put students at ease, excite their spirits, and motivate them through his or her own enthusiasm, confidence, empathy, skills, and knowledge.

In a successful first session, adult students may be in a state of shock or disbelief, especially those whose memory of the FL class in secondary school was a nightmare, or characterised by feelings of failure, incompetence, or discomfort. Many adults enter the FL classroom with great inhibition and anxiety, and even trepidation. Bearing in mind that adults who are currently learning Spanish in Trinidad are professionals and experts in their own fields, the *profesor* needs to recognise that such a learner is unaccustomed to feelings of doubt, ignorance, or inadequacy in a formal setting such as a classroom. As such, content and approach must be such that the dignity, regard, and authority to which the adult learner are accustomed, are not threatened.

Apart from his age, experience, and social status, the adult learner has much in common with any school-aged student because, ultimately, he is human. Consequently, a successful FL course for adults would tailor content and approach to provide activities and tasks that are non-threatening, relevant, highly contextualised, and that boost confidence. A consistently formal approach in a FL lesson may not be the best one. Adult learners, like their younger counterparts, do learn more when learning is fun and when there is healthy competition and even rewards! The formal stance of some adult students may be a defence mechanism, which impedes the individual's ability to integrate by losing inhibitions—an absolute necessity in any foreign language classroom.

Though some research contends that second language acquisition in children is more rapid, there exists the counter argument that adults actually learn languages more quickly in the early stages. What one has to consider is that adults learn differently from children. Whereas young children may benefit from rote learning and memorisation (although this in itself is disputable), adults have the benefit of higher-order linguistic processes. They have a wider experiential base from which to draw and to consolidate new concepts. They also have more highly developed cognitive systems and can therefore make higher-order associations and generalisations. They can also rely on long-term memory. Many adults educated in Trinidad and Tobago came through a system that encouraged writing as an integral tool for learning, and the adult learner may depend heavily on this skill. Additionally, the types of questions that adults ask may require more detail. Teaching the adult requires special attention to the learning environment, to affective factors, and to effective teaching methods. Professional and personal preparation is the key.