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Exploring Andragogic Teaching Methods Used for Adult Learners

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Abstract

Teaching adult learners presents unique challenges, as they bring diverse life experiences and prior knowledge to the classroom. Therefore, instructors must be well-versed in the fundamental principles of andragogy the theory of adult learning. This study explores the experiences of university teachers in teaching adult learners and examines classroom practices in adult education settings at the university level. A qualitative research design was employed to collect and analyze data. Six university-level teachers were interviewed, and two classroom observations were conducted for each participant. Data were analyzed using thematic analysis, which included transcription, coding, and thematization. The findings revealed that most teachers primarily relied on lecture-based methods and demonstrated limited awareness of andragogical principles. Common classroom activities included explanation, question-and-answer sessions, and dictation of notes. Observations indicated that andragogical principles were largely absent in instructional practices. While a few participants reported incorporating learners' prior experiences into discussions, other key andragogical elements were notably overlooked. Based on these findings, it is suggested that the integration of andragogical principles in university teaching could enhance the effectiveness of adult learning. Reducing teacher talk time and increasing activities that foster critical thinking, problem-solving, and individualized instruction are recommended to improve student performance and engagement

Keywords: andragogy, adult learner, lecture method, andragogic principles.

Introduction

In the context of Nepal, teaching English at the university level has become increasingly challenging. English is taught as a compulsory subject up to the bachelor's level and as a major subject at the graduate level. Over more than a decade of teaching, I have observed the performance of bachelor's-level students in English and found the situation to be particularly critical, especially within the Faculty of Education. Not only my observations but also reports from the University Grants Commission (UGC, 2023) indicate alarmingly poor performance of students in English. For instance, the pass rate in the Faculty of Education was reported to be less than 20 percent (UGC, 2023). My decade-long experience and the results of universities reveal that most students poorly perform in English subject. Official campus records corroborate these findings, showing that bachelor's-level students can perform better in other subjects, but struggle significantly with English (D. Sharma, personal communication, November 6, 2024). From my own experience and informal talk with students, it was shared that the teaching methods adopted in the university classes was not suitable as their age demands. They entertain engaging in problem-solving, creative and critical thinking types of activities rather than just listening the lectures of the teachers. Considering the perceptions of students, I also thought that there might be problems in our teaching methods, so that they perform poorly in English. It is suggested by the different scholars that adult learners need to be taught using andragogic principles. As a university faculty member, this persistent issue compels me to investigate the teachers' perceptive and classroom practices of university classes, so that we could explore the causes of students' failure in English. In my view, this concerning trend warrants urgent attention. A review of the relevant literature reveals multiple causes of failure in English.

The study by Saad and Usman (2014) identified the lack of proper teaching methods as a primary reason for students' failure. Similarly, Khan and Arab (2018) and Shahzada, Ghazi, and Khan (2012) highlighted factors such as the teacher's role in the classroom, teaching style, teacher qualifications, and classroom activities. These studies further emphasized that reliance on traditional teaching methods can render classes unengaging and ineffective for students. Aina et al. (2013) also pointed out that many students fail English due to difficulty understanding teachers' accents and adjusting to classroom dynamics. The pivotal role of teachers in fostering student achievement and creating a conducive learning environment is widely recognized (Schuitema et al., 2016). Teachers are encouraged to promote learner autonomy and provide a space where

students feel comfortable using the language (Ferlazzo, 2015). These studies underscore the importance of effective teaching strategies in improving student outcomes, prompting me to explore the teaching methods employed by university instructors. This study focuses on adult learners at the college level. Scholars such as Knowles (1973), Cozma (2015), Kapur (2015), Knowles et al. (2005), and McGrath (2009) have emphasized the need for differentiated teaching approaches for adults. According to Knowles (1973), adult learners are socially, biologically, and cognitively mature individuals who require tailored classroom interactions. Knowles et al. (2005) described adult learners as goal-oriented, autonomous, self-directed, and activity-focused, with extensive experience, established opinions, values, and beliefs.

Adult learners expect facilitation, respect, and opportunities for self-evaluation (Cozma, 2015; McGrath, 2009). They resist impositions from teachers, preferring to take responsibility for their learning while solving real-life problems in the classroom (Knowles et al., 2005). Teachers should utilize adult learners' experiences as a source of knowledge and encourage them to share their insights (Fenwick & Tennant, 2020). To foster participatory learning, teachers must design activity-oriented and learner-centered classrooms. Adult learners thrive in environments that include group discussions, debates, presentations, quizzes, role plays, problem-solving exercises, and case studies (Nesbit, et al., 2020). Teachers, as facilitators, should respect the values and opinions of adult learners, creating a respectful and inclusive learning environment.

This paper explores the principles of andragogy and their application in classroom practices by examining the perceptions of teachers regarding the teaching methodologies they employ when working with adult learners. It delves into how teachers design and implement their instructional strategies to align with the unique needs and characteristics of adult learners, such as their autonomy, prior experiences, readiness to learn, and motivation. The study emphasizes investigating the congruence between theoretical principles of andragogy and the practical methods observed in classrooms. By focusing on the classroom practices of adult learners, this paper aims to critically analyze how effectively these practices facilitate active engagement, critical thinking, and meaningful learning among adults. Through a combination of teacher interviews and classroom observations, the research seeks to uncover the extent to which teachers adopt learner-centered approaches, encourage collaborative learning, and create an inclusive environment that supports adult learners' diverse backgrounds and learning preferences. Ultimately, the paper aims to provide insights into how adult teaching methodologies can be

enhanced to foster more effective and impactful learning experiences for adult learners.

Methods and Materials

This study employed a qualitative research approach to gather data, utilizing both interviews and classroom observation guidelines as the primary research instruments. The sample included six teachers from three different colleges in Kanchanpur, Nepal. Six teachers were sampled using purposive sampling method considering the teaching experiences of teachers at the college level. Each teacher participated in an interview and was observed during two of their classes. The interviews were audio-recorded to ensure accuracy and depth in data collection. Following the fieldwork, each recorded interview was meticulously transcribed verbatim. This transcription process facilitated an in-depth analysis of the teachers' perspectives and experiences. During classroom observations, the researcher carefully documented every activity performed by the teachers as they interacted with adult learners. These detailed notes provided a comprehensive understanding of the instructional methods and classroom dynamics. To analyze the data, thematic analysis was employed. This process involved systematically identifying, analyzing, and reporting patterns (themes) within the data. The themes were derived from both the transcribed interviews and the detailed classroom observation notes. The findings from the interviews and classroom observations were then presented separately, offering a clear and distinct understanding of the insights gained from each method. Finally, conclusions were drawn by synthesizing the results from both data sources, providing a comprehensive perspective on the research findings.

Results and Discussion

The data collected were analyzed into two broad themes: teachers' perspectives on teaching methods and classroom portraits. These themes are discussed as follows:

Teachers' perspectives on teaching methods used in adult classes

This study involved conducting interviews with six university-level teachers in Nepal, whose responses were recorded for analysis. Using andragogy as the theoretical framework, the opinions of these educators were examined to adult education. Andragogy, which emphasizes the principles of teaching adult learners, served as the lens through which the findings were analyzed and discussed. The results of the study are organized and presented according to various emergent themes. For clarity and ease of interpretation, the participants have been anonymized and designated as T1 through T6.

Limited focus on communicative skills

Emphasis on grammar and rote learning often overshadows the development of practical speaking, listening, writing, and critical thinking skills needed for real-world applications. Based on the experiences of participants, some shared that they use translation methods while teaching adult learners. They also noted that they are compelled to translate English texts into Nepali due to the students' backgrounds. They further mentioned that the majority of the students in the Faculty of Education come from a Nepali-medium background, so teaching solely in English leads to comprehension issues. Consequently, they are compelled to use the translation method at the bachelor's level.

One of the teachers (T3) shared, *"Using the translation method is our compulsion because students do not understand if we speak English to English."* He further stated that it was a demand from the students; if teachers use English exclusively, students request explanations in Nepali. Another teacher (T5) stated that he involves students in different types of activities in the classroom, such as role play and group discussions. However, T2 argued that using communicative methods in the college, especially in the Faculty of Education, is a challenging task because most of the students have poor English backgrounds. He added, *"Even if we try to do such activities in the classroom, nobody becomes ready to take part in such activities."* The teachers expressed that due to the students' backgrounds, they are compelled to use the translation method. One teacher (T1) mentioned that he mainly uses the lecture method in the classroom. He explained, *"In my class, there are 65 students, so how is it possible to carry out such activities in the class? Therefore, I use the lecture method only."* He identified overcrowded classes as a motivating factor for choosing the teaching methods used in the classroom.

Misalignment with andragogical principles.

Traditional teacher-centered methods prevalent in Nepali classrooms may not cater to adult learners' need for autonomy, collaboration, and problem-solving. I wanted to know whether teachers were familiar with the principles of andragogy or not. In this case, most of the teachers said that they were unfamiliar with even the term "andragogy." One of the teachers [T4] said *It's quite a new word for me. I haven't heard this before.* Another teacher [T2] said, *I have heard the terms pedagogy and andragogy but don't know what they are and what the difference between them is.* From the above statements of the participants, it can be concluded that college teachers were unaware of the principles of andragogy. In such a situation, how could they apply the

andragogic principles in their class? Moreover, I tried to explore whether adult learners should be taught using different methods in the university or the same as young learners and most of the participants shared that there were no such variations in teaching methods for young and adult learners. One of the teachers [T6] said, *I do not think there is much variation in teaching methods except the use of language. I mean in lower classes we use both Nepali and English language to make students clear about the concept but at university, we just maximize English in the class and students take notes.* From this statement it can also be said that there was a mismatch between andragogic principles and university-level teaching. Andragogy suggests that university teachers should use andragogic techniques (problem-solving, autonomy, freedom, experience sharing, creative and critical thinking, etc.) for teaching adult learners (Knowles, 1973) but from the responses of teachers it was found that they do not use such activities in the classroom. If adult learners do not get opportunities to be engaged actively in classroom activities they do not enjoy the class. From this also it can be said that due to the mismatch between andragogic principles and university teaching methods, students did not get a chance to improve their English.

Inadequate learner-centered instruction.

Adequate instruction plays a vital role in students' performance. If teachers use appropriate teaching technique, then it can bring change in students learning strategies as well as students' performance (Oxford, 2002). In this study, it was found that teachers did not use standardized curricula and inflexible teaching styles based on learners' diverse backgrounds, learning styles, and interests, which led students toward disengagement and low motivation. One of the participants [T4] said, *"Students do not show their interest in studying and doing their assignments. They are not motivated towards their study."* This showed that students were less motivated towards their study which can be one of the causes of inadequate teaching methods. If students do not enjoy the classroom then they become demotivated. In a similar context, another participant [T2] shared that *teachers use lecture methods in the class and students have to just listen to their teacher. Students do not get a chance to interact in the class so they do not enjoy our classes.* From the T2's views, it can be said that students are the passive listeners in the class. They do not actively take part in classroom activities. If students do not enjoy the class, they cannot grasp the content. In a similar context, T5 said, *"The lecture method is dominant in our classes because students do not like to take part in classroom activities. So, we should change teaching techniques not only at the university level but also at the school level."* T5 believes that the lecture method was a dominant

method of teaching at university classes. From this statement, it can be interpreted that using the lecture method was their compulsion to make students understand the content. From the above responses, it is clear that there is a problem in our teachings. We just focus on the lecture method which makes students passive learners. Unless students actively participate in classroom activities, they cannot develop language proficiency as well as knowledge of course content. In conclusion, it can be said that the majority of the teachers at the bachelor level use the lecture method or translation methods for teaching English. They also said that using the Grammar Translation Method was not their willingness, but their compulsion, as well as the demand of the students. Very few teachers reported that they use communicative methods in their classes. Therefore, it can be said that the methods used in our classes are not appropriate to increase students' ability to learn course content and language proficiency.

Classroom portrayal of English teaching at the college level

I observed two /two classes of each teacher using the andragogic lenses. I recorded every activity that happened in the classroom in my notebook. I mainly observed their classes based on the teaching methods used by the teachers, students' participation, classroom activities, and use of andragogic principles.

Teaching methods used.

Teachers were found using lecturer methods most of the time, and students were the passive listeners in the classroom. Teachers were dictating notes after the explanation of each lesson. Students were not found actively participating in any kind of classroom activities; only question and answer activities were found as the main activity of the English classes, along with note dictation. I didn't find any teachers following the principles of andragogy for teaching adult learners. Most of the teachers shared in their interview that they mostly use the lecture method or grammar-translation method in their class, and in my observation also, I found the same thing. One day, one of the teachers [T4] was teaching speaking activities from the book, and he encouraged students to play the roles of doctor and patient for the speaking practice, but no students took part in the activities. Although they stood after the order of the teacher, they didn't speak even a single word, and finally, he left that topic and moved to the writing portion. This incident helped me to know the real grounds of the students' English at the bachelor level. From the findings of the observation, it can be said that most of the teachers follow the lecture method. Some of the teachers were found using translating methods while teaching texts from the book. During the observation,

most of the teachers translated the text into Nepali. In the class, they also maximized the Nepali language. From the observation, it can be said that university classes are lecture method dominant.

Students' participation and classroom activities

Student participation is widely recognized as a cornerstone of effective teaching, particularly in higher education, where the emphasis should go beyond the mere transmission of knowledge to fostering critical thinking, creativity, and collaborative problem-solving in students. Students' active engagement in the learning process helps them take ownership of their learning and it encourages them to be more serious about their study. In this context, student-centered activities such as group discussions, debates, peer teaching, presentations, problem-solving, and many more student-focused activities are the key components of effective teaching.

However, during my observation of university classrooms, it became evident that such opportunities for active participation were rare. The predominant reliance on traditional lecture-based methods often forced students to passive roles, where their primary task was to listen, take notes, and absorb information shared by the teacher. The classroom seemed quite silent while the teacher delivered the lecture. There was no interaction between the teacher and students, one-way transmission of content was prevalent in the class. This lack of interaction and engagement not only limited students' ability to voice their thoughts and ask questions but also created an environment where collaborative learning was scarcely encouraged. University students are believed to have experience in the ways of learning effectively and enjoy their participation and contribution in learning but during my class observation, I did not find any roles provided to the students. Teachers seemed busy giving lectures and explaining the content in detail and some of the students were busy taking notes while listening to lectures. Based on the observation protocol and my narratives on class observation, I have explicitly demonstrated the classroom scenario in the following themes.

Explanations

Explanation is the most common technique of teaching in large classes (Roelle, 2014). In our context, this method is also widespread. During the classroom observation of study participants, I found the explanation to be a dominant classroom activity. The majority of the teachers started their classes by reading the text from the book and became busy reading and explaining the texts to the students. In the middle of the class, time and again, they asked about

the words' meaning from the text to the students, and only one/two students responded to the teacher, while the rest of the students mostly remained silent throughout the class. Some students were busy noting some important points shared by the teachers, and some were listening to the teachers. I did not see any students actively involved in any activities in the class except listening to the teachers and rarely responding to the few questions asked by the teacher. Teachers did not seem to adopt any andragogic activities like problem-solving, case studies, role play, etc. in the class.

From the above data, it can be inferred that there was a lack of student participation in classroom and student-centered activities. There is a lack of creativity, problem-solving skills, critical thinking, collaborative work, and autonomy in the class, which demotivates adult learners towards their studies. This observed gap indicates the need for a pedagogical shift towards more student-centered approaches that can better align with the principles of adult learning and andragogy.

Answer question

Another activity in the classroom was answering questions. During the class, some of the teachers asked questions from the book and discussed them in class. The teacher read the questions from the book and asked students to give the answers, but very few students could answer the questions. The teacher discussed each question and explained them orally.

Note dictation

Similarly, another dominant activity of the class was note dictation. I found some of the teachers began their class by dictating the notes to the students. After that, they asked students to turn to the page of the book and started explaining the lesson. Teachers spend most of the time explaining the lesson dictating notes and answering questions from the lesson. Most of the teachers explained the lesson in Nepali and English, and the students listened attentively and tried to understand the text. Time and again teachers found asking questions to the students from the book, but very few responded to the questions.

From the above analysis, it can be said that most of the university classes are lecture-dominant. Mostly teacher-dominant classes were found during the observation. Regarding classroom activities, answer questions and note dictation were found frequently used in the classroom by the teachers. Note dictation was another activity that led students toward passive learners.

Looking at classroom practices through andragogic principles

Andragogy is a method of teaching adults, particularly in adult education. In this study, adult learners meant students at the bachelor level who had crossed the basic age criteria (18 years) to be adults in the context of Nepal. The advocate of andragogy, Malcolm Knowles, proposed five basic principles of teaching to adult learners: learners' need to know, self-concept of the learner, prior experience of the learner, readiness to learn, orientation to learning, and motivation for learning (Knowles, 1973). He believes teachers should adopt different teaching principles when teaching adult learners than children. As adult learners mature from different perspectives, they may also have different expectations of the teachers in the class. Therefore, in this study, I wanted to see whether teachers were using the principles of pedagogy or andragogy while teaching to adult learners. For this, an observation protocol was developed based on the andragogic principles for the observation of the class and analyzed the data. I analyzed the data basically on the five basic principles of andragogy.

Experience as a resource

This principle assumes that adult learners possess a reservoir of experience in various aspects of their lives (Knowles, 1973), so the teacher needs to utilize that experience in the classroom to make their learning more permanent and long-lasting. If learners are given chances to share their experiences related to the topic in the class, they become motivated and relate the content with their lives (Knowles et al., 2005). However, I did not find teachers using learners as a resource for a better understanding of the content for the students. In my observation, teachers did not give that chance to the students. Students were listening to the teachers, or there was no interaction in the classroom. To some extent, I could see this kind of activity in Nitisha Mam's class because she asked students' views on the issue or content in the class. However, the rest of the participants did not take the students' experience or their understanding of the topic.

Learners need to know

Based on the second principle, learners must know why and what they are learning. This means that learners should know the utility of the content in their lives (Knowles, 1973). If learners are well informed about using the content to solve real-life problems in the future, then they might take the content very seriously, and they can learn it fast (Knowles et al., 2005). During my observation, no participants were oriented toward the future use of the content. Students should have been informed about it at the beginning of the class, but the teacher did not share with students

how the content would be related to their real-life situation.

Self-concept of the learner

According to the third principle, adult learners are self-directed and autonomous. Adult learners do not enjoy impositions from teachers and others (Knowles et al., 2005). They just want facilitation from the teachers, to make their plans, and to be independent in every activity performed in the class. McGrath (2009) opines that learning is for the development of individual learners where the learner's needs are addressed, so teachers need to address the needs of learners and try to solve their needs in the class; teachers should understand their linguistic needs and try to facilitate them to get the needs fulfilled. As this principle states, learners should be independent and autonomous in the class, but in contrast to this principle, I found teachers playing the role of authoritative teachers. They presented themselves as the agents of knowledge transfer in the class. Students were found to depend on teachers for every kind of activity. This can be proved by the teachers' dictating notes most of the time. I found that most of the participants in my study provided notes to the students in the class. In contrast, this principle advocates for learner autonomy in adult classes. So, finally, students were not self-directed and autonomous in bachelor-level classes.

Learning-oriented learner

Another important principle for adult learners is that they should be learning-oriented learners (Knowles, 1973). This principle adopts the view that adult learners are always learning-oriented; they like to relate the present learning to real-life situations (Knowles et al. 2005). They want to be involved in problem-solving activities in the class and be more creative and critical in every situation. Suppose teachers engage them in more practical or life-oriented activities. In that case, they show interest in learning because they understand their life and want to adjust to different situations. According to McGrath (2009), adult learners want to relate every learning activity to their lives, so if teachers associate the content with their real lives, they become more interested in learning. In my study, I found Anand Sir integrating this principle into his classroom. He assigned students different problems and asked them to solve them in his class. He was engaging students in creative and practical types of activities in the classroom.

Similarly, Narad Sir also tried to activate students in the class by asking them questions repeatedly and engaging them in practical activities in the classroom. However, in Nitisha Mam and Riyansh Sir's classes, I did not find students doing creative, practical, or problem-oriented activities. Students were not engaged in problem-oriented activities in their classes. So, some of

the teachers tried to orient learners to doing creative and practical activities in their classes. In contrast, some were reluctant to do these activities in their classes.

Motivation for learning

Finally, motivation is an important drive to lubricate students' learning. Knowles et al. (2005) stated that adult learners are intrinsically motivated or self-motivated. If learners were informed about the positive effects of learning, they would become quite active in getting that knowledge. They want to learn those skills that they find useful and practical in their lives, so a teacher should inform them about the positive impact of the content or language skills in their lives. McGrath (2009) asserts that adults are motivated to learn when they know that there are multiple, complex, and highly personal gains from learning. It means adult learners want to take a risk in terms of gaining productive and fruitful knowledge for solving their real-life-related problems. In this situation, the teacher has to motivate learners by showing the positive effect of the skills they gain in their lives. In my study, I found no teachers doing these activities in their classes. They were not much interested in conducting such activities in the classroom.

The classes were observed by reference to the above andragogic principles, and the overall classroom activities were thematized into five main themes: initiation of the class, classroom activities and teaching methods, the role of teachers and students, and the use of andragogic principles. I have discussed each theme separately as follows.

The findings of this study indicate that, at the college level, English language instruction is predominantly delivered through the lecture method. Additionally, many teachers reported using the translation method in response to students' demands, which were largely influenced by their limited proficiency in English. Data obtained through both teacher interviews and classroom observations consistently revealed that teachers played a dominant role in the classroom, while students assumed a passive role, primarily as recipients of knowledge transmitted by the instructors.

A notable observation was that teachers lacked familiarity with the principles of andragogy and, consequently, did not incorporate these principles into their pedagogical practices. In contrast to the arguments presented by Fenwick and Tennant (2020), Nesbit, Leach, and Foley (2020), as well as Knowles (1973, 2005) and McGrath (2009), the participants in this study predominantly relied on conventional, teacher-centered methods that align more closely with pedagogical approaches rather than andragogical ones.

Knowles et al. (2005) and Cozna (2015) emphasize that adult learners benefit from practical, problem-based, and participatory classroom activities. However, the current study found that such activities—such as group work, role-play, debates, and case studies—were largely absent in bachelor-level English classes in the context of Nepalese universities. The teacher-centered approach observed in this study contradicts core andragogical principles, which advocate for learner autonomy and engagement in creative, critical thinking, and problem-solving tasks.

Furthermore, Ferlazzo (2015) underscores the importance of motivating adult learners through active involvement in diverse learning tasks. This motivational aspect was not evident in the classrooms observed during the study. Nevertheless, in partial alignment with Kapur (2015), who advocates for the integration of learners' experiences as a central element in teaching; a few teachers reported using students' prior knowledge as a starting point for classroom discussions. Despite this, broader and more consistent implementation of andragogical principles remains largely absent.

Conclusions and Implication

The findings of this study highlight significant gaps in the application of andragogic principles in adult English language classrooms. Despite the growing advocacy for learner-centered approaches in education, the study revealed that teachers predominantly rely on traditional, teacher-centered methods, such as grammar translation, explanation, and note dictation. This approach appears to be driven more by compulsion than interest, reflecting systemic constraints rather than pedagogical choice. Furthermore, classroom practices were found to be misaligned with key andragogic principles. Critical elements such as fostering learners' self-concept, addressing their intrinsic motivation, and utilizing their experiences as learning resources were largely absent. While "experience as a resource" was occasionally incorporated, the other principles such as the learners' need to know and problem-solving were neglected. These findings underscore the need for a paradigm shift in teaching methods for adult learners, moving away from traditional practices toward approaches that prioritize critical thinking, problem-solving, and individualized learning. For adult education to be truly effective, teachers must embrace andragogic principles and integrate them into their classroom practices. This transformation would not only enhance the communicative competence of learners but also align teaching practices with the unique needs and characteristics of adult learners.

Based on the findings, it is recommended that teachers undergo professional development

to integrate andragogic principles into their teaching practices, focusing on fostering learner autonomy, critical thinking, and problem-solving skills. Curriculum designers should prioritize communicative and learner-centered approaches, incorporating activities that leverage adult learners' experiences and intrinsic motivation. Educational institutions must provide adequate resources and policy support to facilitate this pedagogical shift. Additionally, collaborative teaching practices should be encouraged to share effective strategies. Further research is needed to explore the barriers preventing teachers from adopting andragogic principles and to evaluate the long-term impact of learner-centered methods on adult learners' academic and professional outcomes.

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