



## Adult learners' perceptions of working with awareness in the EFL classroom

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### Abstract

Language education for adults has traditionally proceeded from the assumption that the student is linguistically and communicatively aware, and furthermore, knows how to learn a language. Language teaching methodology and materials therefore concentrate upon the subject matter with no indication of the importance that awareness plays in either learning or communication. I first became conscious of this lack when I returned to the university to study a foreign language, and when I began to teach English as a foreign language in Mexico the issue became so pressing for me that I decided to undertake research to learn about other adult foreign language learners' perceptions of whether explicitly working with awareness in the classroom might be beneficial to the language learning process. The research was conducted in eleven English as a foreign language classes at two universities in Mexico, with the 'medium' being an introductory course I wrote specifically for the learners I was working with. The course was designed with a general-to-specific (or top-down) methodology which began with awareness training and included suggestions throughout for learning-to-learn strategies. Results from the qualitative research as to the adult learners' perceptions of these aspects of the course are discussed in this article, and clearly indicate that awareness training and such a teaching methodology help to fulfill genuine and pressing adult foreign language learner needs.

**Keywords:** awareness; foreign language teaching and learning; adult learners; classroom-based research.

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## Yabancı dil olarak İngilizce öğretilen sınıflarda yetişkinlerin bilinçli çalışmayı algılamaları

### Özet

Yetişkinler için dil eğitimi, öğrencinin dilsel ve iletişimsel bilinci olması ile birlikte bir dili nasıl öğrenmesini bilmesi varsayımdan geleneksel olarak ileri gelmiştir. Bu yüzden dil öğretim yöntemi ve araçları ne öğrenmede ne de iletişimde rol oynayan bilincin önemine dayanmaksızın asıl konu üzerinde yoğunlaşır. Bunun eksikliğini yabancı bir dil öğrenmek için üniversiteye döndüğümde ilk defa fark ettim. İngilizceyi Meksika'da yabancı bir dil olarak öğretmeye başladığımda bu konu benim için daha baskılayıcı bir hal aldı ki diğer yabancı dilleri öğrenen yetişkinlerin sınıf içindeki bilinçli çalışma algılayışları hakkında araştırma yapmaya karar verdim ve bunun yabancı dil öğrenme sürecinde faydalı olabileceğini düşündüm. Bu araştırma, Meksika da iki üniversitenin yabancı dil olarak İngilizce eğitim verdiği on bir sınıfta, birlikte çalıştığım öğrenenler için bizzat kendim hazırladığım bir giriş dersi ile uygulanmıştır. Bu ders, ayrımsama eğitimiyle başlayan ve öğrenmeyi-öğrenme stratejileri sürecinde tavsiyeler barından genelden özele sıralanmış bir dil öğretim yöntemiyle tasarlanmıştır. Bu makalede, yetişkin öğrenenlerin dersin bu yönlerini algılayışıyla ilgili nitelikli araştırmanın sonuçları ele alınmıştır. Ayrıca, ayrımsama eğitimi ve yukarıda bahsedilen öğretim yöntemi yabancı dil öğrenen yetişkinlerin ihtiyaçlarını tamamlamakta yardımcı olduğu belirtilmiştir.

**Anahtar Kelimeler:** bilinç, yabancı dil öğretimi ve öğrenimi, yetişkin öğrenciler, sınıf temelli araştırma

## **Introduction**

The spark for the research discussed in this article was struck when at a turning point in my adult life I resolved to learn Spanish, of which I knew not a word. In spite of the fearful axiom that it is almost impossible to learn another language as an adult I hoped I could use my maturity to advantage, and enrolled in Spanish as a foreign language classes at a university in the United States (US). The experience almost convinced me that the axiom was true.

From the beginning I found many factors of this experience to be uncomfortable, confusing and unproductive. Firstly, the professors inexplicably insisted on speaking the language I was there to learn, and expected me to respond in kind. I alternated between thinking a) I had gotten into the wrong classes and b) maybe I was too dim and/or old to learn. We started right off with the textbooks, which began with, "My name is \_\_\_\_\_. What is yours?", in Spanish of course, with no other type of introduction. I struggled to relate the unknown sounds I was hearing to what was in the book, which did have the advantage of allowing me to keep my head down so I would not to be called upon to speak. I worked at what I thought was necessary: memorizing rules (when I could figure them out), filling in blanks in exercises, listening to tapes and repeating phrases.

After four progressive semesters of intense study and making top grades I never had the feeling of learning the language, and decided that if I actually wanted to learn I would have to move to a place where it was spoken. I relocated to Mexico and began to learn rapidly and regained my self-confidence. I began to teach English as a foreign language (EFL), and was saddened to see that the teaching methodology and materials I was expected to employ were the same sort I had been subjected to as a learner. In the classes I taught I began to include an introduction of my own device, and eventually wrote an introductory EFL course which began with awareness training and focused on culture that I designed specifically for the students I was working with. I then decided that a formal study of learners' perceptions of the course was indicated, and undertook qualitative, classroom-based research using the course as the 'medium'.

Several concepts stood out in my analysis of the data I collected, and in this article I will discuss one that deals with adult learners' perceptions of working with awareness through overt discussions of its importance for language learning and communication. Other issues that emerged outstandingly in the analysis of the data I have discussed in other

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articles, such as the inclusion of the learner's first language (Brooks-Lewis 2009), beginning with the history of the language (Brooks-Lewis 2010), and another on focusing on culture which is due out soon. Other issues that arose, such as adult learners' perceptions of explicit teaching and of the native-speaker teacher, will be taken up in forthcoming articles.

### **A review of related literature**

The need for promoting awareness has been recognized for some time in language teaching theory, and many suggestions have been made to implement the practice in the classroom. These begin with the confrontation of expectations, as there has been "...an increasing acknowledgement of the role played by human perceptions and expectations in both learning and teaching." (Hilles and Sutton 2001:49). Knowing what to expect is especially necessary for adult learners; however, letting learners know what to expect when they enter a course is something that is rarely done in practice. I had never experienced or encountered a course nor seen a proposal for a language class that included such an explanation, and this was something that I addressed in the research.

An awareness factor in education is of learning itself, what is today sometimes called 'learning-to-learn'. This is often discussed in theory but is seldom explicitly addressed in the classroom. Cohen (2003) states that: "The most efficient way to heighten learner awareness is to provide strategy training—explicit instruction in how to apply language learning strategies—as part of the foreign language curriculum." However, he adds that "...no empirical evidence has yet been provided to determine a single best method for conducting strategy training...". While I do not claim to have found a 'single best method', evidence from my research suggests that at a minimum, simply discussing the matter and putting forward ideas is helpful.

Learner beliefs about learning must be confronted at the beginning of language courses when working with adults because: "Unrealistic learner beliefs about how much progress to expect, and how fast, function like 'time bombs' at the beginning of a language course because of the inevitable disappointment that is to follow." (Dörnyei 2001:126). For adults, pointing out that learning one's first language was not a quick or easy process is meaningful not only in illustrating that language learning is a process but that it is unreasonable to expect to learn another language quickly and easily. Many adults have such expectations, as Elaine Phillips (1999:126, original emphasis) reported having encountered

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in a study she had made in which “37% of the students believed it would take them 1 to 2 years to become fluent in another language spending 1 hour a day!” But a language is not learned in the classroom alone, and

...the development of a...person's motivation, skill and confidence in facing new language experience out of school comes to be of central importance...The full implications of such a paradigm shift have yet to be worked out and translated into action. (Council of Europe 2001:5)

This ‘paradigm shift’ should be the primary goal of teaching, with, for instance, the empowerment of the learner through explicitly working with learning awareness and purposefully inspiring the learner's confidence. Confidence is essential to foreign language learning because: “As communicator confidence increases, communicator motivation increases.” (Spitzberg 1999:378).

Preparing the adult language learner for entrance into the intellectual world of another language “...is not just a matter of making the language real for learners, it has also to activate the learning process.” (Widdowson 2003:105). Working with learning awareness is a manner of ‘teaching to think’, and it is reported from previous studies that “...the results of trying to teach thinking skills show that skills should be taught explicitly...” (Cromley 2000:14). Explicit discussion of learning awareness also gives the learner to understand the significance of self-directed learning and its importance in the life-long learning process that language learning requires. Helping the learner to recognize the necessity of assuming responsibility for learning is a manner of allowing the learner to assume control over the learning situation: “Since effort is something over which learners have control, this emphasis establishes their responsibility, reduces their feeling of helplessness, increases their tendency to persevere, and helps them to feel genuine pride of accomplishment.” (Wlodkowski, 1998: 104). Since self-directed learning is vital in learning another language, explicit insistence upon it in language teaching is therefore necessary can not only help to ‘activate the learning process’ but is yet another method of helping to build learners’ confidence.

Confidence-building through explicit teaching about learning is also instrumental in helping the learner confront language learning fears. Most adult learners have an instinctive fear of making mistakes and have a strong aversion for publicly demonstrating them. However, risk-taking is integral to language learning, and if this is made clear: “Part of the energy freed from striving after the unattainable might be directed into other aims: the understanding of human language and culture. (Byram 1989:18) Not everything about

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language, culture and communication can be 'taught', as Byram goes on to say: "Such aims cannot be defined in terms of performance and behavior observable in precise ways at precise times. They have to be defined in terms of enriching and of rising to conscious inspection learners' intuitive knowledge of language and cultures." (Ibid.) The insistence upon the awareness and application of prior knowledge is therefore essential when working with adult learners, and must be done explicitly. This is not only important to learning but is also a manner of promoting learner confidence. Because of traditional teaching methods, primarily the exclusion of the learners' L1 (maternal language) and C1 (maternal culture) in the classroom, adult learners are left with the impression that their prior knowledge (i.e. of their own L1 and C1, of communication, and of the target language and culture) is of no value in the classroom, and expect the teacher to tell them what to think. This issue must be explicitly discussed, because: "Few students use much of their prior knowledge intentionally, spontaneously, and actively...Learners may not be aware of the importance of the active use of prior knowledge." (Simons 1999:580). Even stating the obvious, that each person knows how to communicate and has had the experience of learning at least one language, can be of signal importance. Working with this concept in the research, for instance, one of the ideas I had for doing this in the foreign language classroom was with the constant comparison and contrast of the learners' language and culture to the target language and culture,.

Another factor fundamental to language learning is the awareness of the relativity of language and culture. The original basis of my research was the focus on culture in the EFL classroom, so let me give a brief overview of my perspective of culture in this context. There is no 'one' definition for culture, but the essence of the definition of culture in relevant literature involves the concepts that culture is "...all that is symbolic: the learned, ideational aspects of human society." (Jenks 1993:8); "the shared patterns of beliefs, customs and values that are historically, ideologically constituted" (Crawford and MacLaren 1996:133); and includes, in my opinion, the effects of environment. Culture offers a framework within which sense can be made of the world and gives the individual "...the criterion of perception." (Samovar and Porter 2000b:10). In interacting with others, culture is seen to be comprised of what an individual needs to know in order to be part of a social group, and is "...the product of self and other perceptions", and therefore is "an *interpersonal process of meaning construction*." (Kramsch 1998:133, original emphasis). These definitions are

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supplemented in my research with the point that “culture is not a power...it is a context.” (Geertz 1973:14).

As to the inclusion of culture and learning strategies in language teaching:

Clearly, it is impossible to tell the learner everything he or she needs to know about the target culture...Instead, we need to attune the learner to the possibility of difference, and seek to explore how ‘decentering’ from one’s own taken-for-granted world can be structured systematically in the classroom. This endeavor means going beyond the information gap and making people’s use of language a topic of classroom exploration. (Corbett 2003:24)

This is frequently called ‘intercultural’ language teaching and learning. Decentering and becoming aware of stereotypical thinking is particularly important in intercultural language learning, for one because:

Stereotypes operate on a different level to other kinds of knowledge: they simplify and they allow people to act quickly [but they] are there to be challenged, for this is the only way to develop an individual who is ready to discover the essence of “others” in members of other cultures and understand the complexity they embody. (Byram *et al.* 2001:29)

Relating directly to the above discussion of prior knowledge, the challenging of knowledge is a significant factor of teaching and learning, and is especially important in language education.

### **Research methods**

Because of my experiences both as an adult foreign language learner in the classroom and as a teacher in the foreign language classroom working with adults I felt intensely that there were issues in language education that needed to be improved upon. I made a list of issues that made me uncomfortable and carefully analyzed them, considering how they might be dealt with in ways that might be more enjoyable and productive for adult learners. I began to study the literature, and found that while much had been written about the theory of the issues, little had been reported about working with adults. I had written an introductory EFL course for the learners I was working with, and decided that a formal research study was called for. The research questions I addressed were:

- What are adult learners’ perceptions of beginning with an overview of the history and development of the target language?
- What are adult learners’ perceptions of learning about a particular target culture where the target language is spoken?



Brooks-Lewis, K. A. (2011). Adult learners' perceptions of working with awareness in the EFL classroom. *International Journal of Human Sciences* [Online], 8:1. Available: <http://www.insanbilimleri.com/en>

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- What are adult learners' perceptions of the inclusion of their maternal language and culture in foreign language learning?
- What are adult learners' perceptions of working with awareness of language, culture and learning in the foreign language classroom?
- What are adult learners' perceptions of explicit teaching in the foreign language classroom?

The research was qualitative-interpretative and classroom-based, undertaken in eleven EFL classrooms at two universities in central Mexico. Two hundred fifty-six learners participated, with ages ranging from 19 to 72 years. The course duration was approximately thirty classroom hours, during which the teaching began entirely in Spanish and moved slowly into English. While the course was originally intended for beginning learners, because of scheduling restrictions, learners of various levels participated. The learners were invited to participate in both the course and the research, and it was explained that at the end of the course a questionnaire would be administered. The idea of keeping a learning diary was then explained and the learners were asked to keep one (in their L1), and were told that an essay to be written in English based on their diaries would be required at the end of the course. Permission was requested and unanimously granted for me to take copies of these documents, and this was the data collected for the research. (For further details about the research see Brooks-Lewis 2007).

To give a full description of the course would be outside the scope of this article, which deals specifically with the results of the research referent to working with awareness. I will therefore succinctly describe the aspects of the course specifically related to working with awareness; a more detailed description of the course can be found in author 2007. The procedure of the course was general-to-specific, or top-down. The overall concept was to give the learners a panoramic view and understanding of the language, of the relativity of language, culture, and identity, and of language learning before delving into the details of the language and their practice. The process began with an introduction of the teacher, the course and the research, followed by explicit discussions regarding awareness, all of which was undertaken in the learners' L1. The introduction of the professor included an explanation of where she was from, what had brought her to Mexico (where the class was), her educational background, her continuing status as a language learner, and her research interests. The



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prospect of the research was explained, and then the process and content of the course was described. This description included the concept of first acquiring a panoramic view of language, communication, culture and learning and then working into the details. While learning diaries were to be a part of the data to be collected, the primary intention was their being a learning tool, so the concept was defined in detail.

The expectation and reasoning for the learners' participation in class was discussed, as was the need for the learners to understand that English could not be 'given', that personal responsibility must be taken for its learning, that learning a foreign language requires conscious thought and practice, and that it is neither a quick nor easy process. The idea that one learns another language through practice was introduced and would be reiterated frequently throughout the course. It was suggested that one could think of learning as building the muscles of the mind, and like building another muscles, requires serious, dedicated training.

Language was compared with music, with its attributes of tone, melody, timing, acoustic strengths, stresses, and silences. Attention was called to the fact that speech flows, as does music: one does not, in normal conversation, utter isolated words but produces an expressive stream of thought. Moreover, it was proposed that the language be thought of as an entity, one with which the learner would be forming a personal, intimate relationship with because if there is real interest, there is total commitment and even passion. In such a situation one wants to be with the person all the time, to learn everything possible about them, and to become confident and happy in their presence.

I began discussions of the necessity of using prior knowledge by asking the question "What is language?", and waiting until someone ventured an answer. I noted the fact that everyone had already learned one language and therefore obviously knew how to do it, and since everyone there knew how to read, write, speak, and to understand others speaking, thus one only need learn how to use these same talents with English. All of the learners had studied EFL for at least two years, as this is a requisite in the Mexican educational system, and the learners were asked to appreciate and use what they already knew about English.

It was again emphasized that learning another language was neither fast nor easy, and that no one can learn for anyone else. A teacher could explain forever, but until the learner began to question, practice and internalize the learning nothing would happen. I physically demonstrated how I could teach the movements to pronounce English but I could not move

Brooks-Lewis, K. A. (2011). Adult learners' perceptions of working with awareness in the EFL classroom. *International Journal of Human Sciences* [Online], 8:1. Available: <http://www.insanbilimleri.com/en>

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someone else's mouth to do it, how I could take someone's hand and move it along the paper to write but I could not take the words from someone's mind to put them down on paper, how I could place a book in front of someone but could not move their eyes and translate what was seen into their mind. I also explained that one language cannot be translated into another: it is the idea that is translated, not the exact words.

I recommended three books that are invaluable for the learning and use of English – a *Roget's Thesaurus*, an English dictionary, and a Spanish/English dictionary. However, I made it clear that before using any dictionary one should stretch the mind, the imagination and the memory as much as possible.

We then talked about how a language is much more than rules, formulas, signs and system – it is an essential of social life. To learn a language one must enter its 'feeling', to see life through its eyes, its reasoning, and must consciously practice noticing. Both to illustrate the skill of noticing and an important aspect of communication, I told stories about my learning Mexican body language. This then led into the discussion of preconceived ideas about other countries and people and the necessity of confronting them, and the principles of stereotypical thinking and examples were discussed.

A brief (hi)story of the English language and its development was then recounted, wherein it was pointed out that English was not *completely* different from Spanish, especially as both had been so highly influenced by Latin. It was explained that in the course the 'type' of English to be studied was American English as it was felt that this would be of most value for the learners, and a succinct history of the US and discussion of core concepts of the general culture followed.

An overview of the four basic language 'skills' was then introduced, highlighting the notion that we are so adept at the use of these skills our first language that we use them unconsciously. When we are learning another language we must purposefully retrain ourselves for the new language until one day we can put them on autopilot with that language also. Thereafter, detailed discussions of speaking, listening comprehension, reading, writing and vocabulary were undertaken. The final part of the course was devoted to the basics of English grammar.

## Learners' Perceptions

In the following I have taken citations from the data I collected about learners' perceptions of working with awareness in the EFL classroom that I found to be particularly outstanding. I offer my interpretations of these citations with the understanding that they are open for further interpretation. I have put these citations in italics and set them out in order to distinguish them from citations from other sources, and have translated the citations from the questionnaires and diaries from Spanish to English. As all of these citations come from author 2007 I have not repeated this information with each one, but have noted the type of data (questionnaire – Q, diary – D, and essay – E), followed by the data number.

One issue that emerged from the data was participants' noting that the course had a *beginning*. As outlined above, on the first day of class, after the introduction of the teacher, the content and process of the research and a description of course was given. As I had done this in what I considered to be a matter of course, I was surprised in my analyses of the data to read that these steps had been remarkable, as one learner makes plain:

*This introductory part was something special as it eliminated the traditional type of course I have been to. It got rid of the pressure that seems to be part of an activity like this...including my insecurity, by knowing a little about the course itself. (D50)*

Another learner noted that this was different from his or her previous experience of EFL teaching:

*When I heard the proposal of the course my expectations grew as it created an atmosphere of confidence and security to act in class. My preoccupations, tension and all those things that bothered my mind disappeared. I had a clear feeling of an alternative to the teaching and learning of English. (D103)*

More about learner expectations will be discussed below, but what struck me was this learner's perception that building learner confidence could start with something as simple as discussing the course at its beginning. Perhaps because this is such a basic idea it has been traditionally overlooked.

Another aspect about having a beginning in the course that emerges from the data is participants' perceptions of the general-to-specific approach to language teaching. Several learner-participants remarked on this process of beginning with a view of the whole, and one learner's statement on how becoming aware of language particularly came to my attention:

*To learn a language you must know that this is enriched by many things, like body language, customs, history, and traditions and it is good to know because if someone focuses their attention on these details they can make use of them to learn the language more quickly. (E117)*

Brooks-Lewis, K. A. (2011). Adult learners' perceptions of working with awareness in the EFL classroom. *International Journal of Human Sciences* [Online], 8:1. Available: <http://www.insanbilimleri.com/en>

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One factor of this general-to-specific approach and beginning by working with awareness was the explicit discussion of culture and its relationship to language and intercultural communication. Two of the more candid commentaries about this process were:

*The things that I really enjoyed most were when the teacher told us about the history of the language and the culture and customs of the American people. The teacher said that if you wanted to know a language you need to feel it and love it, and I totally agree with her, and I think that the best way to fall in love with a language is knowing as much as possible about the language, about the people that speak the language and their customs. (E17)*

*Personally, I liked this form of working, learning about things that I never thought of before. We spoke about such common, obvious, natural things that have, however, passed unnoticed. I have learned things about the reality of everyday life and they are interesting because it is very good to have the curiosity to explore and get to know the way of life, the customs, in a word, the culture of the language we want to learn. (D55, original emphasis)*

Another concept that is usually ignored in language teaching is overtly discussing learning-to-learn and self-directed learning, along with the necessity of commitment and taking personal responsibility that are required for learning a foreign language, and offering suggestions as to how one might begin to go about such processes. Remembering that all of the participants had studied EFL for at least two years, it is remarkable that one wrote:

*Another thing was that all along the course was that the teacher...gave us advice to learn English. These are important things that I had never learned in other classes. (E33)*

Yet another surprise was that the talk about reference books for learning and using English appeared to be new information:

*Few professors tell us so clearly what books we need in our library, and with reference to languages, this is the first time I have been told. (D51)*

As outlined above, I asked the learner-participants to keep a learning diary. I saw in my analysis of the data that this was considered by some to be a manner of self-directed learning, and someone wrote that they would continue the practice:

*Well my dear Diary, I will leave you. Until the next time, because I want to tell you that not only are you a part of this course, I have felt very good with you and will continue to tell you my English learning experiences. (D53)*

Another participant indicated in the essay she or he wrote that keeping a learning diary had been perceived as being a manner of reinforcing learning:

Brooks-Lewis, K. A. (2011). Adult learners' perceptions of working with awareness in the EFL classroom. *International Journal of Human Sciences* [Online], 8:1. Available: <http://www.insanbilimleri.com/en>

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*Once I had the chance to go through my diary of the course, I noticed that it represented an enormous amount of knowledge and from this moment that information is going to be engraved on my mind. (E28)*

It was obvious from many of the commentaries that the procedure of teaching about language learning was not only unusual in the EFL classroom but that it added an extra dimension to the experience. This can be seen in one person's description of a 'typical English class in Mexico':

*I thought about my other classes but I cannot remember anything important...All the time, I thought English was for famous and intelligent people. I felt awful about learning this language because with the other teachers I could not study happily and I did not understand why to study...because they only "teach" a typical English class in Mexico: LISTEN AND REPEAT and it was very boring. I need to see, listen, touch and love the new language...Now I am going to practice and study very hard. I need to learn for ME. (E41, original emphasis)*

What also stands out here is that 1) this person had assessed her or his EFL learning experience, and 2) had acquired a different perspective of not only how to learn the language but of the reason for doing so. This and other reflections made it apparent that having talked about learning-to-learn had made an impression. One learner remarked that she or he had learned that there are different ways of learning:

*I learned that there is a great difference between learning and memorizing. (Q140)*

As another participant pointed out, he or she had discovered that explicitly learning about learning offers tools which facilitate language learning:

*I liked the part about learning to learn because most teachers just concentrate on teaching grammar and what we have seen facilitates learning and gives us more tools to learn better. (Q126)*

Another learner reported that coming to the awareness of learning helped him or her to achieve a clearer idea of language learning:

*I liked learning about learning because it gave us a wider panorama of learning the language. (Q139)*

Someone else described learning about learning as an interesting incentive for learning the language:

*Learning about learning was super interesting for me because it gives us the desire to learn and know more about the other language. (Q180)*

Yet another person listed his or her understanding of the key ingredients necessary to learning, and how this was significant to EFL learning:

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*What has really motivated me to learn English is...to be conscious that learning a language does not happen by magic but because you need it: more than anything you must know your own language, you must make the effort, you must have patience, open the mind and force it if necessary. We must make our desire to learn English be a challenge. (D53)*

Another remarked upon discussing learning expectations, which resulted in the learner's reportedly having become aware that although learning English is not easy, nothing worth doing is:

*The assessor started with a motivational talk about teaching and learning a foreign language. I liked the idea that in order to learn English (and I say whatever else one wants to learn), one must have a "passion" to do it, because that way one must make any sacrifice to succeed (doing a series of activities outside of class, studying and practicing a lot). This way you can see and evaluate the little or lot of progress you have made. (D1, original indices)*

This learner goes to some length in describing his or her learning experience, and appears to have internalized the idea of learning-to-learn. I was particularly impressed with the learner's perception of the importance of self-evaluation.

In working with the reading aspect of the language 'skills' one copy of an article in English was passed from one learner to another, each reading a paragraph. This brought out an issue that arose with frequency in the records: the learners' fear of making mistakes. One learner explained that:

*The reading practice was interesting, mostly because we spoke in English and this helped me to get rid of a little of my fear and the sensation of being ridiculous. I noted that everyone in the classroom was scared to read in English for fear of being the object of ridicule. I like the attitude of the assessor for not correcting us in a harsh manner. This gives us a little security, although we know that we are not doing it well, but we know we can do it better. Today I could read in English! (D56)*

Although it was noted that 'everyone in the classroom was scared', it was remarkable that not one person ever abstained from the practice in any of the classrooms during the research.

Adults are particularly sensitive to making mistakes, and I felt this should be explicitly addressed. I told the learners that making mistakes was part of the learning process, that the only way to refrain from making mistakes was to do nothing, that we make mistakes when speaking our own language, and that when someone laughs at mistakes to remember that they are laughing at the mistake, not at the person. I also explained that our mistakes can be viewed as the gems of our learning process. One participant wrote about his or her understanding of the fear of making mistakes and learning-to-learn:

Brooks-Lewis, K. A. (2011). Adult learners' perceptions of working with awareness in the EFL classroom. *International Journal of Human Sciences* [Online], 8:1. Available: <http://www.insanbilimleri.com/en>

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*Even people who are speaking their own language do not do it correctly and now I say that it is the same if I try to speak English without fear of making mistakes in my pronunciation. If I commit an error it is like tripping. If I trip I step back a bit to take the right road. (D87)*

This learner, as I interpret what he or she wrote, had come to recognize the need to overcome the fear of making mistakes and that of building the confidence to make them. Another learner remarked on the notion that language learning is a process in which mistakes are an inherent and necessary factor:

*I learned that making mistakes is not bad, but just the opposite; this is the best way to learn. (E105)*

I had illustrated this concept of the importance and unavoidability of mistakes in learning by freely exposing my own mistakes in learning Spanish. I had hoped that this would help to build confidence, and afterwards learned, not only from the data but from both the groups' and individual reactions, that this practice had been of benefit. The following learner's comment describes how she or he perceived this sharing of language learning experience:

*The teacher talked to us about her errors with Spanish and this motivated me to participate without fear of making mistakes because no one is perfect and our mistakes help us to learn more. (D113)*

Firsthand insights into the process of someone else learning another language was mentioned by another learner:

*I am afraid of making mistakes. There is something that I have learned in this class about making mistakes; it is obvious that practicing and speaking or asking during the class is the best way of preparing oneself. For me it is so important that you tell us your own experiences learning another language because it makes me feel more comfortable knowing that it is normal to make mistakes. (E14)*

Coming to the realization of the necessity for practice was probably the most remarked upon aspect for establishing a personal culture of self-directed learning. One learner's understanding of this was:

*What was important here was that I have noted that maybe I can assimilate everything but at the moment I need to use it, it will be difficult for me. Because of this it is important that we train and exercise our minds in a conscious manner with all this information until it comes to be, as the teacher says, part of our being. (D53)*

Learning how to go about taking charge of one's own learning is a notion that frequently arises in the data, and someone else wrote:



Brooks-Lewis, K. A. (2011). Adult learners' perceptions of working with awareness in the EFL classroom. *International Journal of Human Sciences* [Online], 8:1. Available: <http://www.insanbilimlari.com/en>

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*I understand now that learning to learn means that the student must be more active and reflective and must take charge of his or her own learning and it is a great proposal! (Q129)*

For this person the idea of taking responsibility for learning seemed to be something original, a 'great proposal', which for me was an unexpected remark coming from a university student. Another participant wrote on the subject that:

*I think that the necessity of hard work and desire has been made clear in knowing that learning English is a continuous, progressive, individual effort (nothing easy or immediate). (D1, original indices)*

This also seems to me to be a confirmation of Phillips' finding noted above that adult learners often have the false expectations that learning a foreign language should be quick and easy, which is shown in another learner-participant's reporting of preconceived notions:

*I thought that learning English had to be fast, and when I saw that others learned more quickly than I did, I preferred to make pretexts for not learning it. (D87)*

Something else that many participants were conscious of was that there was no book for the course. I had purposefully not made copies of what I had written for the learners because I wanted them to practice focusing their attention. This was seen as something else 'new', and 'strange' as one learner put it:

*Specifically to start the course talking about American culture was excellent. I admit it was a little strange, because we did not use books. I think it is important to know what there is behind the language we are studying (in this case, North American culture). Also, all this knowledge gives us another way of understanding American English...Most of the time students think that going to good schools or reading a lot of English books is enough for learning the language, but we end up being theoretical students with a square criterion of English. (E31, original indices)*

I wouldn't want anyone to have a 'square criterion' of English, would you? My aspiration has been that concepts of the research that learners thought valuable could be incorporated in foreign language teaching texts, as a participant suggested:

*I liked the learning to learn part because there are some things that you can't learn in the books, more than anything I think that we must commit ourselves to seriously learning and take into account all the things that we do when we speak Spanish that will help us learn English. (Q158)*

Not everyone liked working without a 'book' and did not see the value of learning about anything that was not in one. An example is in what this participant wrote:

*In the beginning I thought it was a good way to remember all the rules and grammar, but recently I feel like we are wasting a lot of time on these topics and we need to start with the book. (E27)*

Brooks-Lewis, K. A. (2011). Adult learners' perceptions of working with awareness in the EFL classroom. *International Journal of Human Sciences* [Online], 8:1. Available: <http://www.insanbilimlari.com/en>

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Besides not using a book, the process and content of the course in the classrooms in the research was quite different from that normally encountered in the EFL classroom. One difference was that learners were not *required* to speak in English in the classrooms, although they were *encouraged* to do so. One person who was concerned about the teaching process wrote:

*I am worried about when we will start to use the books and speak in English ourselves. (D187)*

Perhaps this person felt that taking personal initiative was not proper or possibly he or she could not imagine doing such a thing. Another person who wrote about not understanding that one could actually study without a book wrote:

*Personally, I have liked the class and the introduction, but I am a little anxious to start studying. (D107)*

The course that was the 'medium' for the research was presented at the beginning of the semester, and there was no test administered. The course grade for the semester was based on tests over what was covered from the required textbook after the research was completed. In my attempt to understand these participants' discomfort, I am left with the question of whether they felt that the study of the topics was 'wasting a lot of time' and their concern about 'getting to the book' were due only to their worry about their semester grade. This question calls for further research in which the course is presented on its own, and I would suggest that this would preferably be done with no grade requirement.

## **Conclusion**

The term 'awareness training' is prevalently repeated in language teaching circles and in EFL literature; however, the indication of the research I undertook is that the notion is either absent in practice or is undertaken in such an indirect manner that adult learners are not aware of it and therefore do not benefit from it. The implications are that *explicitly* working with awareness is necessary when working with adults and must be incorporated into teaching methodology from the beginning and continue throughout the course of study.

Such a beginning is necessary because, as I think anyone would agree, the beginning of anything sets the stage and tone for any endeavor, and continued reinforcement of new concepts promotes internalization of learning. I therefore find it extraordinary that recognition of the importance of awareness training as a beginning for the processes of

Brooks-Lewis, K. A. (2011). Adult learners' perceptions of working with awareness in the EFL classroom. *International Journal of Human Sciences* [Online], 8:1. Available: <http://www.insanbilimleri.com/en>

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language teaching and learning is virtually nonexistent in foreign language teaching methodology. Apparently, the assumption is that diving directly into the target language is the only way to go about things, but in this manner the adult learner is forced to instantaneously fall into step in unknown conditions and territory. This places the learner in a situation of having to somehow understand someone speaking (even to a disembodied voice on a recorder) and to read the language he or she is there to learn, with no regard as to whether he or she is ready or prepared to do so. This leaves the learner with the feeling, as I had as an adult foreign language learner in the classroom, of walking into the second act of a three act play. This is counterproductive to learning and devastating for one's self-confidence.

Results of the research demonstrate the adult learner needs of having a *beginning* for foreign language learning, the first step being the courtesy of introducing the teacher and her or his plan for the course. However, the indication given by the participants in this research is that even these elemental steps were novel, at least in EFL classrooms in Mexico. This is regrettable, as learners noted that such an introduction helped them to deal with the insecurity of entering a new classroom, and furthermore, gave them confidence for learning.

The general-to-specific or top-down process was also an innovative concept in EFL teaching methodology for the participants. Learning about the history of the language and about a specific culture where the target language is spoken was reported as having helped promoted interest in the language. Such teaching practice was seen to further help in building confidence and to involve the learner not only intellectually but emotionally with the language. This was said to have made both the classroom learning experience and the language non-threatening and enjoyable, and thus encouraged meaningful intercultural language learning.

The teacher's sharing of her experiences (including embarrassing moments) in learning another language was noted to be an important factor of the teaching process. This was perceived to have aided learners to face their fear of not only the language but that of making mistakes. The concept of explicitly working with awareness from the beginning was apparently much appreciated: the advice for learning, the suggestion of reference books needed not only to learn but to use the language, the significance of keeping a learning diary. Suggestions for learning and practice were reportedly thought of as 'tools' for learning the language outside of the traditional grammar teaching method, and being helped to become

Brooks-Lewis, K. A. (2011). Adult learners' perceptions of working with awareness in the EFL classroom. *International Journal of Human Sciences* [Online], 8:1. Available: <http://www.insanbilimleri.com/en>

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aware of learning defined the difference between learning and memorizing. This, in my opinion, is a momentous observation of self-growth that indubitably recommends such teaching practice. These indications make it evident that explicit promotion of awareness in foreign language teaching is an adult learner need and is a crucial key in a learner-centered teaching methodology.

Overall, the implications of this research as to learners' perceptions of a teaching practice that 'began from the beginning' with an introduction to the teacher and the course, the following of a general-to-specific methodology based on intercultural language teaching, and explicitly working with awareness are that the procedures promote the desire to learn and the commitment to do so. I can imagine few other educational goals as significant as these.

I would close with what one of the learner-participants wrote about the sense that he or she had taken from the course, which, as is noted in another learner's comments above, is a *passion* for learning the language. I think the introspection displayed here portrays a conscious awareness and appreciation in a most eloquent manner. (I would point out that this data is from an essay, and was therefore *written in English!*)

*I'm going to talk about a special "woman"... She doesn't speak, but I understand all she says. She doesn't have any eyes, so she can't see me but I can see her. She doesn't love me, I am sure of that, but I love her so much that I will spend all of my money, all my time and courage to know her. I know too that she won't ever hug me. She can't speak but she says all. She is mysterious but I want to know her very well...*

*I must tell you that she is beautiful. She is interesting. She is passionate. It is funny, but she is on my mind and in my mouth all the time. Are you thinking that I kiss her all the time? No, but I would like to... I'd like to tell her all my passion and love for her, but I know she can't hear my words. In spite of that, I love her.*

*Surely you will ask me: "Who is she?...You love her so much and you've never seen or touched her, how is that?"*

*And I answer: "It is possible. I don't know how, but it is so."...*

*And you say: "Where was she born?"*

*And I answer you: "She was born in England. I did not know that, but it is so."*

*You follow: "Then she is English."*

*Then I say: "Not necessarily, she has no specific country."*

Brooks-Lewis, K. A. (2011). Adult learners' perceptions of working with awareness in the EFL classroom. *International Journal of Human Sciences* [Online], 8:1. Available: <http://www.insanbilimleri.com/en>

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*You say: "How old is she?"*

*I say: "She is many hundreds of years old."*

*You cry: "What? Are you kidding? Surely you are crazy."*

*I answer: "Yes, I lost my mind. She made me lose my mind..."*

*Then you, surely, guess: "He drank a lot of wine." And you would tell me:  
"Then she is like a goddess."*

*"No she isn't like a goddess, and she isn't a ghost either. In fact, she isn't a  
human being."*

*"No? Hey, I've got it! She is an alien!"*

*"No, you are wrong."*

*"No? If she isn't a goddess, a ghost, a human being or an alien, then who is  
she?"*

*"Well, I'll introduce you to my lover! Her name is "English".*

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