

# The emotional challenges of adult learners of English as a second language: A teacher's reflection on a student's temper tantrum

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This essay will explore how negative emotions of adult ESL learners can lead to educational challenges, and ultimately decrease the quality of their autonomy in their personal lives. By reflecting on and contextualizing a personal experience with an emotional student, I will analyze examples of emotional barriers and discuss how teachers can strive to understand this specific population of learners through awareness of Knowles et al.'s (2015) second andragogical principle, "a deep psychological need to be seen by others and treated by others as being capable of self-direction" (p. 44).

Knowles et al. (2015) note an unfortunately high rate of adults who drop out of learning environments. There are several psychological dynamics at play that can impact this decision, whether the learner is consciously aware of them or not. Specifically, an adult is a unique type of student whose needs and requirements for the relationship between themselves and a teacher, namely a dynamic of recognized independence and autonomy, differ from those of children (p. 44).

The dropout risk for learners within adult education is an important issue to address within Canada due to the growing number of incoming immigrants. Statistics Canada reports that over one million immigrants arrived between 2011–2016, predominantly to English speaking cities such as Toronto and Vancouver (Statistics Canada, 2016b). The percentage of immigrants for whom English is the first language has decreased significantly over time, and currently, approximately half a million newcomers are unable to hold a basic conversation in English (Statistics Canada, 2016a). This poses serious limitations on their own independence and autonomy because of the need to depend on others to achieve personal tasks. The rising rates of immigrants in Canada are a call to action to reduce the threat of student dropout in adult education, ensure high quality learning environments, and to illustrate a clear understanding of their unique educational needs for teachers, curriculum designers, and policy makers.



## Learner profile: Adult ESL learners

In an adult ESL classroom, one will find a gathering of individuals whose unique lives have intersected. The group is typically an example of diversity and difference. Many classrooms have a student population that can range by country of origin, culture, gender, sexual orientation, demographics, socioeconomic status, level of education and literacy, political views, and personal interests. The ages can range from 18–80, and sometimes even older. The primary differences between the learners are the stories and reasons why each has enrolled to learn English. Some could be immigrants, refugees of war, business professionals, or curious self-directed learners on temporary student visas. And while these learners vary in significant ways, they commonly share three characteristics. First is the goal of achieving “communicative competence” (Brown, as cited in Richards & Renandya, 2012, p. 13); this means that adult learners are able to independently achieve their needs in authentic and “unrehearsed contexts in the real world” like grocery shopping or seeing a doctor without having to depend on a more fluent English speaker. Secondly, adult ESL learners can experience a barrier to their learning due to emotional factors concerning the “language ego” (Brown, as cited in Richards & Renandya, 2002, p. 12); these learners experience anxiety in the form of “fragility, defensiveness, and a raising of inhibitions” due to the formation of a “second identity” while speaking the new language within the new culture (Brown, as cited in Richards & Renandya, 2002, p. 12). The third characteristic is encompassed in Knowles et al.’s (2015) second andragogical principle: “a deep psychological need to be seen by others and treated by others as being capable of self-direction” (p. 44). This means that making their own informed choices and achieving independent goals are integral parts of how these learners perceive adulthood. While this andragogical principle commonly refers to general adult learners, it applies to ESL learners as well because of their desire for autonomy as found in the journey towards communicative competence. These three characteristics of an adult ESL learner ultimately connect to the way emotions are experienced and can manifest in the classroom in positive or negative ways. If a teacher is informed specifically about the third characteristic, personal and learning challenges of students can hopefully be alleviated.

### A personal note

Throughout my career as an ESL instructor, I have had the privilege of working with hundreds of international adult students. Several students were extremely memorable, and I often warmly think about them. However, one particularly unforgettable student was *Joao*, who unfortunately exhibited a series of dramatic emotional outbursts, resulting in my hesitation and eventual refusal to continue as his teacher. I have often pondered about his curious behavior such as what might have been going on in his mind and who exactly he was. While I do not know with certainty the answers to any of these questions, I wish to utilize



this essay as a tool to speculate upon this emotional, confusing, and troubling “critical incident” as a teacher (Flanagan, as cited in Cranton, 1992, p. 158). I strive to use this essay as a learning opportunity to explore a scenario which continues to bother me and examine it through a critical lens of theoretical frameworks.

## **Joao**

Joao was a Portuguese-speaking male from Brazil and approximately age 65. He arrived late on his first day, and upon entering the classroom took a brief pause and glanced over at me with an expressionless face. I did not acknowledge his tardiness, and he was encouraged to find a seat. He chose one in the back corner of the classroom and folded his arms across his chest. The class had already completed its introductions, and I asked if he would tell us his name, which he did begrudgingly. It is common for ESL students to use their phones as digital dictionaries; however, Joao adamantly refused to, stating he had come to learn English, and not how to use his cellphone. I located a Portuguese/English paperback dictionary in the staff room, but Joao continued to protest the use of any aids. He insisted that the teacher should tell him exactly what everything means, and that using a dictionary would be useless. He refused to work with other students in small groups and complained that I was not teaching him anything. He frequently interrupted me, asking me to speak slower, while checking with neighbouring students if they could understand me. He began to mimic my voice, and I explained that he was being disrespectful. This resulted in him glaring, attempts at intimidation, and further escalating verbal outbursts. I wondered if he could be unstable or dangerous. I only knew that his name was Joao and that he was from Brazil. I gave the class some work to do and exited the classroom to communicate to my manager that I felt unsafe. I requested for Joao to work with a different teacher, and the next day he was placed in a different class.

## **Analysis**

The story about my experience with Joao evokes questioning such as why he presented the described behaviour, and what were possible motivating factors that influenced his thoughts and emotions. The following subsections analyze why Joao’s perceptions and emotions may have manifested and how they can be contextualized within the theoretical lens of Knowles et al.’s (2015) second andragogical principle.

## **Self-concept and its construction of what an ‘adult’ is**

Deep within an adult’s psyche exists the construct of who they are, and their perception of their place in the world. For a learner, the self-concept is personal, meaningful, and all-encompassing “[...] including our beliefs about our personality traits, physical characteristics, abilities, values, goals, and roles, as well as the knowledge that we exist as individuals” (Jhangiani & Tarry, 2014, p. 113). Knowles et al. (2015) identify the “learners’ self-concept” (p. 44) as a particularly crucial component to



an adult's learning process. Symbolically, it holds the knowledge and meaning of what an *adult* is, coupled with the life experiences that have contributed to the construction of one's reality. In a classroom of adult learners, components of each student's self-concept will be specific to their own individual lives, and a teacher may ultimately be unable to realize the intentions and motivations of each learner. Herein lies the space for potential conflicts and misunderstandings: Every student wishes to learn English, but each has arrived with different life stories.

## Self-directedness at clash with perceived authority figure

Knowles et al. (2015) state, “[adults] develop a deep psychological need to be seen by others and treated by others as being capable of self-direction. They resent and resist situations in which they feel others are imposing their wills on them” (p. 44). This means that adult learners can experience varying emotions if they perceive (realistically or not) that the teacher is attempting to impose control. Dirkx (2008) recognizes residual feelings or “baggage” (p. 8) from past negative and possibly traumatic experiences in educational settings. A teacher could represent an archetypal figure that symbolizes shame because of a past encounter with someone who cast unfair authority and control. When Joao initially saw me as *the teacher*, it did not matter who I was. I was not *Heather*, I was *Teacher*—the possible construction of something negative, threatening, scary, penalizing, or something else that I could never understand, simply because the construction belonged only to him. In mere moments, his arriving late for class may have produced a trigger, which caused a narrative to play within his mind, all the while due to the “conditioning” (Knowles et al., 2015, p. 44) of his past as a learner, such as in childhood. The arguing was possibly indicative of “a conflict” between a subconscious expectation of a childlike dependency, and Joao's adult “psychological need to be self-directing” (Knowles et al., 2015, p. 44). By mimicking me, his mentality seemingly equated to, *I know you are the teacher, but I am an adult and that means that I don't have to listen to you. I have my own money and I can grab a taxi and leave here anytime I feel like, and maybe never come back. And you can't do a single thing about that.*

## Dependency in the language ego and communicative competence

Knowles et al. (2015) state that adult learners “resent and resist situations in which they feel others are imposing their wills on them” (p. 44). This creates an extra challenge for the adult learner who has chosen to learn a second language outside of their home country. In not speaking the language, understanding the new culture, or knowing the route home, every experience and encounter is a risk to their inherently adult psychological need for independence and autonomy. While they were initially self-directed in making the decision to study English, the dynamic crumbles once their choices become limited due to a new language.



*The Language Ego* (Brown, as cited in Richards & Renandya, 2002, p. 12) is a term that identifies the struggles that shape a second identity for an adult learner. A new person develops, for better or for worse when living adult life anew in an unfamiliar places, language, and cultural norms. The transition and adaptation period of relocating and experiencing a new version of oneself can be profoundly emotional, particularly when the *second self* has experienced confusion and fear in situations where societal norms are unknown. An ESL learner might mourn their *first self*, while realizing that for various logistical reasons they cannot continue to be that version in either country.

If one cannot speak the language, a dependency on others can occur for daily tasks. This dynamic ultimately would cause a clash against the adult learner's desire to be viewed as independent, and is the outcome of minimal "communicative competence" (Brown, as cited in Richards & Renandya, 2002, p. 13). I do not know what Joao's commute to school was like, or if he had successfully located groceries. Perhaps he was already sliding deeper into dependency on others. Or perhaps Joao regressed, as Knowles et al. (2015) describe: "The minute adults walk into an activity labeled 'education,' 'training,' or something synonymous, they hark back to their conditioning in their previous school experience, put on their dunce hats of dependency, fold their arms, sit back, and say 'teach me'" (p. 44). For example, when Joao refused to use the paperback dictionary, perhaps he regressed to a time in his life when he believed that a teacher was all-knowing. Maybe he believed he had entered an optionless dynamic that "emphasizes [the] teacher talking to students, rather than listening to them" (Feinberg, 1999, p. 22). Strikingly like Knowles et al.'s (2015) description, Joao with his arms crossed was adamant that the teacher had all the answers, highlighting his reversion to a time in his life, likely childhood, when he was in a role of "required dependency" in a classroom (Knowles et al., 2015, p. 44).

## When change does not occur within oneself

Modern classrooms have changed with the increase of technological integration, ergonomics, and social constructivism. Students might collaborate at tables instead of individually sitting at rows of desks, and classes are held during evenings. Those childhood classmates are now grown adults with diverse and independent lives, and the teacher might not necessarily be the oldest person in the classroom. Dirx (2008) suggests that the environment for an adult learner can cause an emotional reaction. These emotions can become heightened by the changes that an adult student notices in a learning environment. Applefield et al. (2001) state: "Paradigm shifts bring new perspectives, new conceptualizations and new ways of thinking about a topic, large or small" (p. 35). They further note that paradigm shifts in the field of education have occurred, especially as teaching practices and designed instruction have expanded to constructivism. This means that an adult who is reexperiencing learning particularly "after a long hiatus from school" (Taylor,



2008, p. 18) might feel surprised, if not shocked, upon entering the new learning environment. If once familiar places like classrooms have experienced transformations in ways an adult learner has not, their “frame of reference” is shaken (Taylor, 2008, p. 17). For example, while Joao came across as aggressive and patronizing, it is possible that he experienced an emotional overreaction to the layout of the classroom. Could it have been mind-boggling to see the desks and chairs situated along the perimeter of the classroom, in a half square shape? Perhaps Joao was accustomed to sitting in rowed desks, and he attempted to replicate the rigidity of a more familiar physical space by choosing to sit in the corner as far away as possible from the teacher.

Joao’s refusal to use his cellphone as a dictionary also indicated the possible result of a paradigm shift that had not yet impacted him as an adult learner. Profound changes in technology and their integration within educational use have occurred over time. It is possible that adult learners will find the use of it in a classroom to be jarring, especially so if they are unfamiliar with the benefits of its use. Franklin (1990) looks at technology as a “mindset” which can greatly interfere with the adult learner’s construction of the usages of technology (p. 3). While Joao demonstrated a stubborn personality trait when he refused to use his dictionary as a cellphone, perhaps his mindset about technology prevented him from willingly considering if a cell phone could truly be used as a dictionary.

What, though, made his reactions so different from the other learners within the same classroom space? Perhaps this question concerning Joao is one that cannot truly be answered, as Brookfield (2009) writes about the blockages and hardships that cause adults to be unable to “escape their own autobiographies” (p. 2620). Each adult learner brings their life stories, positive or negative, into a classroom.

## Discussion

Brookfield (1990) describes “hitting bottom” when one recognizes that “things can’t get any worse than this” and feels ready to “give up” in response (Cranton, 1992, p. 160). While Kelly (as cited in Cranton, 1992, p. 161) believes that one’s experiences result in uniquely personal constructions of reality, I continue to validate my feelings of *threatened* and *unsafe*. I was afraid of Joao, not because of the conflict itself, but because he was larger and taller than me, and it did not seem as if the rest of the class was willing to defend me (and perhaps their English was not strong enough to understand the nuances). Contextually, I was newly pregnant, and the teaching position was not well paid. I felt powerless and dependent on others due to feeling nauseous, tired, and having low energy. Maybe my own childhood cultural influences of mythical figures had “morphed” Joao into the *Big Bad Wolf* who was going to *blow my house down* (Dirkx, 2008, p. 12). I wonder if I might qualify, too, for Knowles et al.’s (2015) “deep psychological need to be seen by others and treated by others as being capable of self-direction” (p. 44). Could there have been aspects in



my leaving the classroom of wanting to “flee” (p. 44) the situation, because of my perception that my own autonomy was being challenged? As I attempt to transform and change myself in hopes of personal growth, I will openly propose this question, irrespective if I am willing to admit (or not) to the answer: Was I wrong that day?

I did not feel driven to take steps to try to understand Joao and work through the conflict. Joao was removed from my class, we did not speak again, and I was relieved that he was no longer my student. I do not regret bringing the situation to my manager, and I suppose he could have refused the student’s transfer or asked for an English/Portuguese-speaking staff member to help intervene and encourage the student to apologize. I suspect that Joao did not have closure, and it is unclear if his behaviour repeated the following day with his new teacher or even in other aspects of his personal life. Without any closure, Joao lost out on a learning opportunity to discover how his behaviour could be impacting his learning experiences. In conflicting situations with a learner, Cranton (1992) recommends promptly having a private and direct discussion (p. 183). A meeting instead with myself and an English/Portuguese-speaking staff member could have led Joao and I to better understand each other. Either way, it is possible that Joao would not have wanted to discuss anything. Dirkx (2008) states: “Helping learners understand and make sense of these emotion-laden experiences within the context of the curriculum represents one of the most important and most challenging tasks for adult educators” (p. 9). Yet, perhaps Joao was truly a “problem person” as Cranton (1992, p. 182) states, and that “the educator must not view it as a personal failure [...]” She further adds that “there are learners who are dealing with personal issues which cause them to exhibit inappropriate behaviour in the group” (p. 183). With that knowledge, a teacher can choose to look past conflict, and develop strategies through seeking advice from other staff members, or by participating in professional development attempts.

Unless Joao was intentionally vindictive, I imagine that his over-reaction that day was the result of his emotionally negative construction of what a learning environment and a teacher symbolize. While the teacher of the adult learner may be well versed in the practice of andragogical concepts, their knowledge and technique could still remain undetectable to the adult learner due to their preconceived constructions. As a result, “a teacher may precipitate affect-laden memories of earlier instructors or mentors or of one’s parents”, and “[they] may be the unwitting targets of such feelings” (Dirkx, 2008, p. 10). Sadly, a teacher who is not versed in theories of adult education might take situations of conflict personally and “may react angrily at what they perceive is an attack on them” (Dirkx, 2008, p. 10). This outcome could appear as a repeated pattern of asking additional students to leave over the course of the teaching career, ultimately perpetuating the phenomenon of adults dropping out of educational settings. Adult ESL students who experience challenges in learning situations and decide to leave, may be further driven into dependency and



lack of autonomy as the result of strain on the language ego, decreasing their communicative competence, and ultimately their ability to integrate into greater society. As a result of my subsequent learning about andragogical principles, I could have interpreted Joao differently, and we both could have experienced a different outcome.

## Conclusion

This essay has identified how adult ESL students experience learning, and how the impact of negative emotions can impact the learning experience, not only for themselves but for the teacher. Teacher knowledge of the second andragogical principle can aid in understanding the challenges that adult ESL learners experience. In lowering the rate of misunderstandings due to emotionality in a learning environment, perhaps the risk of adult ESL learners choosing to leave learning situations will be reduced, and communicative competence will be better reached.

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## Author Bio



Heather Slepchik Zeligman, MEd, was born in Toronto, and currently lives in Atlanta with her husband and children. She entered the field of ESL as a second career, and sees it as her best professional decision. Her research interests include adult education, emotionality within adult educational environments, the interplay of teacher self-regulation and student co-regulation, and GED student success. Her hobbies are researching the genealogy of her family, watching documentaries, and trying new foods.