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# Poor relation or cutting edge?

## Language teaching in adult education in Switzerland

*In mancher Hinsicht ist der Erwachsenenbildungssektor im Fremdsprachenbereich fortschrittlich. Die unterschiedlichen Bedürfnisse und die Freiwilligkeit, mit der Erwachsene Sprachen lernen, zwingen die Anbieter dazu, die Lernenden ins Zentrum zu stellen und ihre Ziele transparent und überprüfbar zu gestalten. Lehrpersonen müssen offen und flexibel auf die Bedürfnisse eingehen können. Der Weg zum Kunden ist kurz, der Wettbewerb intensiv, und finanzielle Kriterien spielen bei der Qualitätskontrolle eine grössere Rolle als im öffentlichen Schulsektor. Oft sind die Praktiker des Sprachunterrichts nahe bei der Arbeitswelt. Die ErwachsenenbildnerInnen streben danach, sich beruflich zu entwickeln und weiter zu qualifizieren. In Zukunft sind klarere Laufbahnstrukturen für Sprachlehrpersonen in der Erwachsenenbildung absehbar. Es ist nicht anzunehmen, dass solcherart qualifizierte Lehrpersonen durch angeblich revolutionäre computerbasierte Lernkanäle abgelöst werden. Sprachenlehrpersonen im Erwachsenenbildungsbereich sind also nicht die armen Verwandten, sondern die Avantgarde des Berufsstandes. (Red.)*

Beauty is in the eye of the beholder, and so is the value and professional status of language teaching in adult education in Switzerland. Views on the contribution made to the field by those engaged in language teaching to adults diverge greatly according to the perspective taken. Much received opinion gravitates towards considering language teaching in adult education as the poor relation, the unqualified, unregulated and unimportant end of the language teaching profession where private institutions dominate an opaque market. On the other hand, an increasing number of practitioners in all fields of education appreciate the innovative, international and informed professionalism to be found

in this flexible out-of-school sector of education.

### Characteristics of language teaching in adult education

In this short overview of language teaching in adult education I shall be assuming that we are talking about adult education as that sector of education which addresses all those beyond school leaving age who are not engaged in tertiary or higher education. This sector of education is characterised by the following key factors which all have a direct influence on curriculum design, modes of delivery and teacher behaviour:

Characteristic	Consequence
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>Language learners in adult education commence their courses with a very broad variety of backgrounds, motivations and objectives. They may enter adult education, for example, directly following a period of formal education or after a long break.</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>Curricula in adult education tend to be learner centred, open to and often steered by learners' diverse learning experience and expectations.</li> </ul>
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>In response to diversity, language courses in adult education are aimed at all levels, at a variety of learner types and offer learners a number of possible objectives.</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>The scope and range of course types in adult education are enormous. Teachers are required to be extremely flexible and focused on their learners' needs and objectives.</li> </ul>
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>Adult education interfaces with all other sectors of education.</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>Practitioners in adult education take account of and have to find ways of communicating with all other sectors of education.</li> </ul>
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>Learners participate voluntarily in adult education. As a rule, learners consciously choose between a number of possibilities before settling for one particular course to follow.</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>The aims and methods of language courses in adult education have to be formulated in an understandable and transparent way.</li> </ul>

<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• The majority of learners in this sector pay for their language courses themselves.</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Concepts such as “learning contracts” and “learning success” have an immediate and monetary relevance in adult education.</li> </ul>
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• A further important number of participants are paid to attend courses by their employers.</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Aims, contents and methods of language courses in adult education are often openly discussed and negotiated with clients.</li> </ul>
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Language courses and teachers in this sector are generally free of state regulations.</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Quality control and assurance are usually self-regulatory. Language teachers in adult education often self-direct their own development.</li> </ul>

### Success and its possible roots

Participation in adult education in Switzerland (in which language learning takes the lion’s share) is amongst the highest worldwide. Recent statistics estimate that over one in fifteen adults have attended a language course over the last year. This success might be explained by a number of hypotheses: the perceived economic value of language competence (language learning as an investment with a high return), the culture of multilingualism in Switzerland (competence in more than one language as part of a “Swiss identity”), the “failure” of language teaching in other educational sectors (the relative decline of English in adult education in the face of increased successful English teaching in other sectors might illustrate the reverse effect of this hypothesis) and finally, one hypothesis which appears clearly self-explanatory is the steady increase in immigration over the past years (and hence, for example, the boom in the learning of German in the German-speaking part of Switzerland). A number of other factors explain the dynamism and innovation which characterise this field. Language teaching in adult education in Switzerland is exposed to powerful market forces. Competition in the field is intense: programmes, prices and promotion play central roles. Quality of service plays an equally important role. Meas-

ures of quality, and benchmarks are established and transparent: each school can be measured by its success in providing satisfying and successful learning experiences (reputation) and by its achievement of results in public examinations (success rate). Evaluation of learning success is often carried out not by the teacher who evaluates what he or she has taught but by a series of international examination bodies using objective measures of language competence. A further factor providing impulses to practitioners in adult education is the proximity to and collaboration with the world of work. This constant communication with other sectors of the economy results in adult educationalists concentrating on and searching for effective and efficient formulae for identifying and achieving precise language learning goals.

Finally, I would like to underline the increasing and noticeable professionalism amongst teachers in the field of languages in adult education. Administrators, testers, teacher-trainers, school managers, directors of studies and materials authors are all recognised professionals involved in organising and delivering the curriculum. But what about the teachers working in the adult sector? Are they still the unqualified, inexperienced amateurs they are often made out to be? The last decade has witnessed an in-

creased professionalism in organising and delivering language teaching programmes in adult education. In no way lagging behind this improvement has been a marked growth in the number of teacher development projects, courses and initiatives. Many of these developments have centred on newly proposed qualification structures for teachers in adult education such as EUROLTA, SVEB I or any of the other internationally recognised language teacher qualifications. On the other hand, the development and implementation of the Common European Framework (CEF) and the European Language Portfolio (ELP) have provided the basis for a new wave of teacher development. In view of the almost immediate implementation of these innovations in the field of adult education, teacher development projects have put language teachers in this sector at the very vanguard of language teaching, working with concepts and instruments which others are just discovering.

### What the future holds

The future concerns and directions of practitioners in language teaching in adult education will be dictated by those demanding its services. However, a number of trends are already discernible, as witnessed by other papers in this journal.

- Increasing professionalism calls for clearer career structures and concomitant qualifications. The coming years will not see an increase in the regulation of teachers’ qualifications but rather a deeper understanding of levels of language teaching competence and speciality. This clearer understanding will be reflected in the continued professional development of language teachers in adult education.
- The intensive implementation of concepts in the CEF and the ELP and the development of appropriate

tools (E.g. self assessment grids, language learning materials, tests, etc.) will continue to provide adult education with the means to deliver tailor-made responses to the changing needs of individuals and groups.

- The broadening of our understanding of language learning to explicitly embrace the development of cultural competence, will augment the range and scope of what we can offer our learners.
- Noisy claims that information and

communication technologies (ICT) are a major influence on language teaching and catalyst for change in adult education will not be silenced. However, many of the promises of revolutionary approaches in which learners will learn alone through ICT channels and without a teacher will be replaced by a more sober realisation that teachers can profit from the use of ICT in their preparation and in their design of tasks for their learners. Language teach-

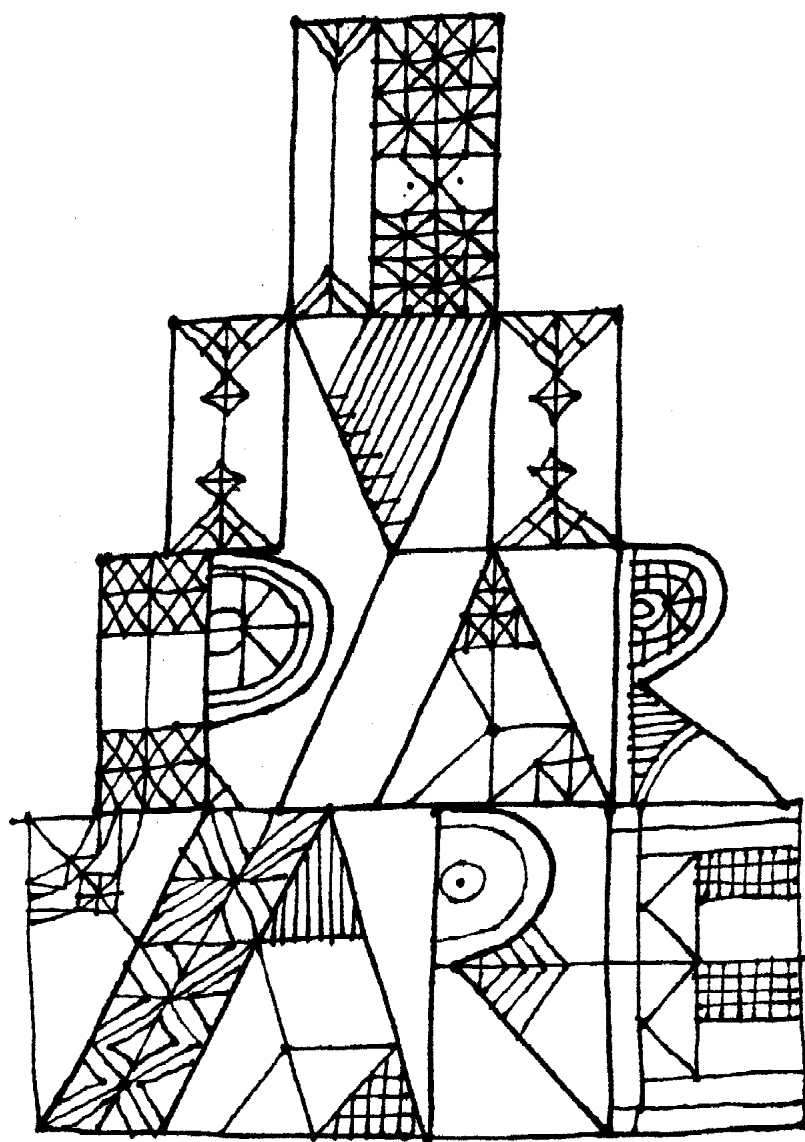
ers are already using the possibilities of the internet as a resource base and a means of communication with their learners. This use of the new technologies will become more sophisticated but will not lead to a greater dependency on ICT as a lead carrier for language learning.

### Poor relation?

Developments in language teaching in adult education cannot be overlooked. They may not be as systematic and planned on such a large scale as in other educational sectors. They do however highlight the professionalism of this sector and especially its teachers. Those not involved in adult education would do well to take a closer look, and this number of *Babylonia* will offer just such an opportunity. Far from being the poor relation, language teaching in adult education is truly at the cutting edge of the profession.

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is Head of Languages at the Coordination Office of the Club Schools in Zurich. After teaching English in Portugal, Mexico, England and Switzerland he took his MA in Applied Linguistics at the University of Lancaster. He has been involved in a number of national and international projects including the development of the Common European Framework and EUROLTA. In his present position he is involved in curriculum design, materials development and quality assurance in adult education.



*Imparare ad apprendere*