



**ADULT LEARNERS' CHARACTERISTICS:
TEACHERS' PERCEPTION AND CORRESPONDING
INSTRUCTIONAL STRATEGIES - A CASE IN
A POLITICAL ACADEMY IN VIETNAM**

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Abstract:

Gaining an insightful understanding of what types of characteristics adult learners are and what instructional strategies would be appropriate for them in order to help foster their learning, this quantitative study, in a context of a political academy in Vietnam, was employed to achieve such aims. A survey questionnaire was used to collect data from 46 politics lecturers. The findings showed that the teacher participants appreciated their adult learners' understanding of why they must learn further (M=4.33) and rich living experiences (M=4.30). Besides, the lecturers were highly perceived to be in charge of encouraging their adult learners to keep involved in their learning process (M=4.54). The study also provided its readers with several implications for fostering their understanding of adult learners, their characteristics, and their needs as well.

Keywords: adult learners, characteristics, corresponding instructional strategies, a case study, Vietnam

1. Introduction

Life-long learning requires all learners to learn continually, no matter who the learners are, youngsters or adults. However, teaching youngsters and teaching adult learners are too much distinct. For instance, different from the youngsters who mostly are affected by expected learning outcomes, adult learners are affected by several other factors, such as filled personality structure, the impact of previous learning, life experiences, current needs, interests, expectations, transport, finance, health, social and recreational roles,

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social relationships, extensive family, work responsibilities and more (Cercone, 2008; Knowles et al., 2014). According to Mane and Snelling (2011), teaching is effective when learners can be the best versions of themselves. Therefore, it is necessary to understand adult learners' characteristics to maximize their strengths. Additionally, understanding adult learners' characteristics will be beneficial for their teachers to use the most complementary instructional strategies. As a result, this current study was employed to explore adult learners' characteristics and teachers' teaching strategies used to instruct their adult learners in the Mekong region in Vietnam, in which studies in this field are still limited.

2. Literature Review

2.1 Adult as Learners

Similar to the study by Lieb and Goodlad (2005), this study also used the framework developed by Malcolm Knowles, who identified the characteristics of adult learners. Remarkably, six characteristics of adult learners that every instructor working with them needs to know include: (1) *adults are autonomous and self-directed*; (2) *adults have accumulated a foundation of life experiences and knowledge*; (3) *adults are goal-oriented*; (4) *adults are relevancy-oriented*; (5) *adults are practical*; (6) *adults need to be shown respect*.

- Adult learners are autonomous and self-directed. They have a great desire to direct themselves. To teach adult learners, teachers have to involve them in their learning process actively. Teachers need to be aware of their role as a facilitator most of the time. Notably, teachers need to understand their adult learners' perspectives about the discussing topics and allow them to work on different projects to help them reflect on their interests. By doing that, the learners could increase their awareness of responsibility for their particular roles in the project and develop their leadership skills. Furthermore, teachers have to ensure what they should do to act as facilitators to supply their learners with factors and guide them to activate their knowledge in the projects. Another fundamental factor encouraging adult learners to engage in the class activities is whether they can value the contributions of the lessons to their work or not. Consequently, their teachers have to show how the class is helpful for the learners' goals.
- Adult learners have accumulated a strong foundation of life experiences and knowledge. These experiences and knowledge might include work-related issues, family responsibilities, and prior learning experiences. In order to foster their learning, a connection between their learning and previous experiences/knowledge must be well-established. One of the helpful ways to do that is to connect the experiences/knowledge to the discussion topics. As a result, the learners have an excellent opportunity to reflect on their previous experiences/knowledge and share their perspectives in the discussions.
- Adult learners are goal-oriented. Before enrolling in a particular course, they often consider what goals they want to achieve. Consequently, it could be beneficial for

them if they knew the contents of the course beforehand. Teachers have to clarify how the course could help them attain their goals. Besides, it is encouraged to have an orientation day before the course starts to clarify the learners' goals and the course objectives.

- Adult learners would not learn if they did not know the reason for learning something. The lessons or the course must be relevant to their current jobs or provide them with a specific value in their life. In order to meet the learners' expectations, teachers have to understand why their adult learners enroll in the course. As a result, the teachers can help their learners maximize their learning effectiveness.
- Adult learners are practical, so they often focus on the aspects of a lesson to see whether the lessons are helpful or not for their work. Even though the lessons are well-prepared and likely to be interesting, the adult learners would find them useless if they did not apply to their jobs. Therefore, teachers have to deliver the lessons explicitly to ensure their learners' understanding of the values of the lessons for their work.
- Adult learners often highly expect to receive others' respect. They want others to recognize their values or the values of their existing knowledge. Sometimes they will feel hurtful if their instructor's treatment is not equal or their voice is not allowed to raise.

2.2 Instructional Strategies for Adult Learners

Lieb and Goodlad (2005) pointed out four main strategies useful for instructors who want to meet their adult learners' needs: motivation, reinforcement, retention, and transference-focused strategies.

a. Motivation-focused Strategies

If the participant does not recognize the need for the information (or has been offended or intimidated), all of the instructor's efforts to assist the participant to learn will be in vain. The instructor must establish rapport with participants and prepare them for learning; this provides motivation. Instructors can motivate students via several means:

- Set a feeling or tone for the lesson. Instructors should establish a friendly, open atmosphere that shows the participants they will help them learn.
- Set an appropriate level of concern. The level of tension must be adjusted to meet the level of importance of the objective. If the material has a high level of importance, a higher level of tension/stress should be established in the class. However, people learn best under low to moderate stress; it becomes a barrier to learning if the stress is too high.
- Set an appropriate level of difficulty. The degree of difficulty should be set high enough to challenge participants but not so high that they become frustrated by information overload. The instruction should predict and reward participation, culminating in success.

In addition, participants need specific knowledge of their learning results (feedback). Feedback must be specific, not general. Participants must also see a reward for learning. The reward does not necessarily have to be monetary; it can be simply a demonstration of benefits to be realized from learning the material. Finally, the participant must be interested in the subject. Interest is directly related to reward. Adults must see the benefit of learning to motivate themselves to learn the subject.

b. Reinforcement-focused Strategies

Reinforcement is an essential part of the teaching/learning process; through it, instructors encourage correct modes of behavior and performance.

- Positive reinforcement is generally used by instructors who are teaching participants new skills. As the name implies, positive reinforcement is "good" and reinforces "good" (or positive) behavior.
- Negative reinforcement is typically used by instructors teaching a new skill or new information. It helps try to change modes of behavior. The result of negative reinforcement is extinction -- that is, the instructor uses negative reinforcement until the "bad" behavior disappears or it becomes extinct.

When instructors try to change behaviors (old practices), they should apply both positive and negative reinforcement. Reinforcement should be part of the teaching-learning process to ensure correct behavior. Instructors need to use it frequently and regularly early in the process to help the students retain what they have learned. Then, they should use reinforcement only to maintain consistent, positive behavior.

c. Retention-focused Strategies

Students must retain information from classes in order to benefit from the learning. The instructors' jobs are not finished until they have assisted the learner in retaining the information. For participants to retain the information taught, they must see a meaning or purpose for that information. They must also understand and be able to interpret and apply the information. This understanding includes their ability to assign the correct degree of importance to the material. The amount of retention will be directly affected by authentic learning. If the participants did not initially learn the material well, they would not retain it well either. Retention by the participants is directly affected by their amount of practice during the learning. Instructors should emphasize retention and application. After the students demonstrate correct (desired) performance, they should be urged to practice to maintain the desired performance. Distributed practice is similar in effect to intermittent reinforcement.

d. Transference-focused Strategies

Transfer of learning is the result of training - it is the ability to use the information taught in the course but a new setting. As with reinforcement, there are two types of transfer: positive and negative.

- Positive transference, like positive reinforcement, occurs when the participants use the behavior taught in the course.
- Negative transference, again like negative reinforcement, occurs when the participants do not do what they are told not to do. This results in a positive (desired) outcome.

Transference is most likely to occur in the following situations:

- Association - participants can associate the new information with something they already know.
- Similarity - the information is similar to the material that participants already know; it revisits a logical framework or pattern.
- Degree of original learning – the participant's degree of original learning was high.
- Critical attribute element - the information learned contains incredibly beneficial (critical) elements on the job.

3. Methodology

3.1 Design

This current quantitative study was designed as a survey to investigate lecturers' perceptions of adult learners' characteristics and their corresponding instructional strategies by means of a questionnaire. The study was conducted in the context of a political academy in Vietnam.

3.2 Participants

The participants are 46 politics lecturers, including 25 females and 21 males. According to participants' ages, only one lecturer was in the age of 20s, 25 lecturers the age of 30s, 15 lecturers were from 40 to 49 years old, and five others older than 50. In terms of working experience, 22 lecturers have worked for more than 15 years; 17 lecturers have experienced working with adult learners for more than six years and less than 15 years; otherwise, seven others have taught adult learners for less than five years.

Those 46 participants are lecturers who offer courses in the certificate program in advanced politics developed for in-service government officials who were planned to be promoted to higher political positions at their workplaces. The participants teach different courses for the program, including Marxist-Leninist Philosophy, Ho Chi Minh Ideology, the History of the Vietnamese Communist Party, Political Economics, Socialism, Leadership and Management Skills, and so on.

3.3 Instrument

The questionnaire is designed with 21 items, using a five-point Likert scale to gain the participants' responses, from strongly disagree to strongly agree. The research team self-developed the items based on the literature review presented above. The questionnaire has two clusters, including adult learners' characteristics (7 items) and teachers'

corresponding instructional strategies (14 items). The questionnaire was sent to the participants via Google Form due to the COVID 19 pandemic. The questionnaire was written in Vietnamese since the participants are not English teachers. After that, the research team invited two experienced translators to translate the Vietnamese version to the English one. Both were then double-checked and compared to each other to ensure the validity of the survey questionnaire.

3.4 Data Collection and Analysis

The data collection process took about four weeks to provide the teacher participants with efficient time to respond to the survey entirely. The data were then analyzed by SPSS 20.0 according to the following procedure. First, the reliability of the questionnaire was checked by the use of a Scale test. The test results showed that the survey results were reliable enough for further analysis ($\alpha=.91$). Then, the research team employed two Descriptive Statistics tests on the two clusters of the questionnaire. Later on, the results were manifested in Tables 1 and 2 of the following section.

4. Results and Discussions

4.1 Adult Learners' Characteristics

A Descriptive Statistics test was run on the first cluster of the questionnaire to measure teachers' perceptions of their adult learners' characteristics. Table 1 displays the test results.

Table 1: Teachers' perceptions of adult learners' characteristics (N=46)

Characteristics	Min	Max	Mean	SD
1. Having high degree of self-control.	1.00	5.00	3.78	.96
2. Having good learning self-orientation.	1.00	5.00	3.50	.94
3. Having rich foundation of living experience.	1.00	5.00	4.30	.89
4. Having strong background in work, personal responsibility, and education.	1.00	5.00	3.89	.90
5. Having clear learning objectives.	1.00	5.00	3.83	.88
6. Having good rationale for learning.	1.00	5.00	4.33	.82
7. Having excellent assessment of learning content.	1.00	5.00	4.09	.84

According to the test results, among all characteristics mentioned in this current study, the teacher participants perceived their adult learners as having a clear learning rationale since the item "Having good rationale for learning" obtained the highest mean score (M=4.33). On the other hand, it seemed convincing that the teachers did not think their adult learners were well-oriented because the item "Having good learning self-orientation" got the lowest mean score (M=3.50). Another noticeable characteristic of adult learners that the teachers highly agreed on is their rich living experience (M=4.30). It is understandable to conclude that adult learners take advantage when talking about their living experiences. The older people are the more living experience (Garrison, 1991).

Interestingly, adult learners' understanding of their learning reasons was perceived as higher than their living experience. Backtracking to the literature on the reasons why adult learners desire to go back to school and learn, they do not only want to improve their knowledge, but they also have their purposes such as promotions, meeting social requirements, increasing salary, etc. (Cercone, 2008; Knowles et al., 2014). Understanding why adult learners want to be back to school can help their instructors keep up the learners' learning motivation. However, according to the survey, adult learners' self-learning orientation seemed to be not as well as expected. In other words, they lacked the ability to plan for their learning. It highlights the role of instructors who have to maintain the learners' learning motivation and help them know how to learn effectively (Shi, 2017). Therefore, it arises a need to understand what adult learners need.

4.2 Teachers' Self-report of Their Corresponding Instructional Strategies

A Descriptive Statistics test was employed to check the teachers' perceptions of their use of instructional strategies for teaching adult learners. Table 2 shows the test results.

Table 2: Teachers' self-report of their use of instructional strategies for teaching adult learners (N=46)

Needs	Min	Max	Mean	SD
8. Actively encourage adult learners to learn.	1.00	5.00	4.54	.75
9. Play the role of a facilitator of the learning process instead of just giving lectures.	1.00	5.00	4.43	.86
10. Develop self-understanding of what adults think about the topics.	1.00	5.00	4.20	.89
11. Enhance self-understanding of adult learners' interests.	2.00	5.00	3.72	.86
12. Create opportunities for adult learners to take responsibility for themselves through presentations.	1.00	5.00	4.30	.76
13. Provide opportunities for adults to increase self-responsibility through group leadership.	1.00	5.00	4.11	.90
14. Be willing to help adults achieve their goals Whatsoever.	2.00	5.00	4.28	.72
15. Establish conditions for linking adult learners' existing knowledge with the lesson topic.	1.00	5.00	4.48	.78
16. Increase adults' self-understanding of the value of their background knowledge.	1.00	5.00	4.39	.77
17. Increase learners' self-understanding of the value of the learning subjects towards their learning goals in general.	1.00	5.00	4.48	.78
18. Offer good pre-course orientation.	1.00	5.00	3.98	1.09
19. Foster self-understanding of adult learners' learning goals.	1.00	5.00	3.76	.90
20. Give opportunities for adult learners to decide what learning tasks (project assignments) they want to undertake to fit their individual learning goals.	1.00	5.00	4.33	.82
21. Better adults' self-understanding of how a specific lesson is useful to them in work.	1.00	5.00	4.17	.93

Based on the test results, the teacher participants perceived that adult learners significantly need their instructor's active encouragement to involve them in the learning process because the highest mean score belonged to the item "Actively encourage adult learners to learn" (M=4.54). Otherwise, the participants did not highly perceive adult learners' interests as a need they should worry about. As a supporting point for the above conclusion, the item "Enhance self-understanding of adult learners' interests" got the lowest mean score (M=3.72). Often, adult learners do not significantly desire to go back to school and study. Therefore, it is not surprising to say adult learners usually lack motivation for learning (Kim, 2009). Consequently, teachers or instructors need to understand that and find ways to involve their adult learners in learning and coming to class. Although high awareness of learners' interests can help teachers enhance their learners' motivation, in the case of the Vietnamese context, especially in this current case, teachers often follow the syllabus (Baldauf, 1985). Therefore, most teachers use syllabus-based orientation, and there is no space for Vietnamese political teachers to design their lessons to match their learners' interests.

Instead of investigating things they cannot help with much, the teachers tried to link their adult learners' background knowledge to the lessons. As evidence, the item "Establish conditions for linking adult learners' existing knowledge with the lesson topic" was highly perceived as a need that instructors working with adult learners should pay attention to (M=4.48). It cannot be denied that adult learners' existing knowledge is significantly rich (Garrison, 1991). Therefore, if the knowledge were applicable and linkable to the lesson or discussion, the lesson would be more effective. Not only the connection between adult learners' existing knowledge and the discussion topics was highly perceived as a need that teachers should clearly understand, but finding the ways to help adult learners increase their awareness of the subject values to their final goals is also crucial. The item discussing the abovementioned idea, "Increase self-understanding of the value of the learning subjects towards their learning goals in general," obtained a high mean score (M=4.48). As mentioned, a vital issue when working with adult learners is how to maintain their learning motivation. Accordingly, it will not happen when the learners lack an understanding of the subject and its values. Teachers, therefore, are encouraged to show practical values of the subject to the learners' goals in general.

However, the teacher participants seemed to not pay much attention to their adult learners' learning goals because the mean score of the item "Foster self-understanding of adult learners' learning goals" was just moderate (M=3.76). It is not difficult to explain because adult learners who have a chance to learn political programs in Vietnam often have a particular political role in the community. Most learners aim to learn to prepare for their promotion (Rueda, 2006). Therefore, to the teacher participants, their adult learners' learning goals were not something new to them. As a consequence, learning more about it is somehow unurgent.

5. Conclusion and Implications

The study found that the lecturer participants perceived their adult learners as having good reasons for learning and having rich living experiences. However, according to the lecturers' self-report, adult learners' self-learning orientation was low. Also, the participants were highly aware of what they should do to foster their adult learners' learning, such as their active encouragement, the establishment of a good learning condition for linking learners' background knowledge with the discussion topics or increasing learners' positive attitudes towards the subject values.

Based on the findings of this study, there is a need to increase adult learners' self-learning orientation or learner autonomy. Personal attributes and skills are associated with learners' learning autonomy. Therefore, teachers are encouraged to find out the ways to increase adult learners' personal attributes such as self-confidence, self-efficacy, motivation to learn, the ability to set personal learning objectives, or the desire to achieve those goals. Additionally, the role of teaching and learning programs is crucial as well. Notably, learning programs must be designed to help adult learners meet their goals or expectations that are useful for their jobs.

The query on maximizing the values of adult learners' living experiences is also vital. It somehow directly connects with the learners' self-efficacy. The learners would find themselves helpful to the class if they could contribute to the lessons with their background knowledge. Therefore, those teachers who work with adult learners need to identify the genres or the fields their learners are skillful at to assign them appropriate tasks or roles in the class formulation. Furthermore, in the pre-course events, adult learners' needs should be surveyed carefully to help instructors readjust their teaching plans. Not only do the survey results help enhance the instructors' teaching performance, but they also establish a strong connection between the instructors and their learners at the very beginning of the course.

6. Limitations and Recommendations

This study was conducted quantitatively and used just a questionnaire to collect data. Therefore, the findings did not gain an in-depth understanding of how teachers perceived their adult learners such as the reasons leading to their current perception. Accordingly, further research is recommended to use a variety of instruments such as interviews or observations to collect insightful data. Besides, the sample size of this current study is not large enough to generalize the findings. Consequently, researchers interested in this field should recruit more participants from different regions. Additionally, factors affecting adult learners' learning should be considered a potential area for further exploration.

Conflict of Interest Statement

The authors declare no conflicts of interest.

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