



Four Myths and Truths About Adult English Language Learning

with

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Agenda

- Objectives
- Who are we?
- Warm-Up
- The 4 Myths (and busting those myths!)
- Summary
- Q & A



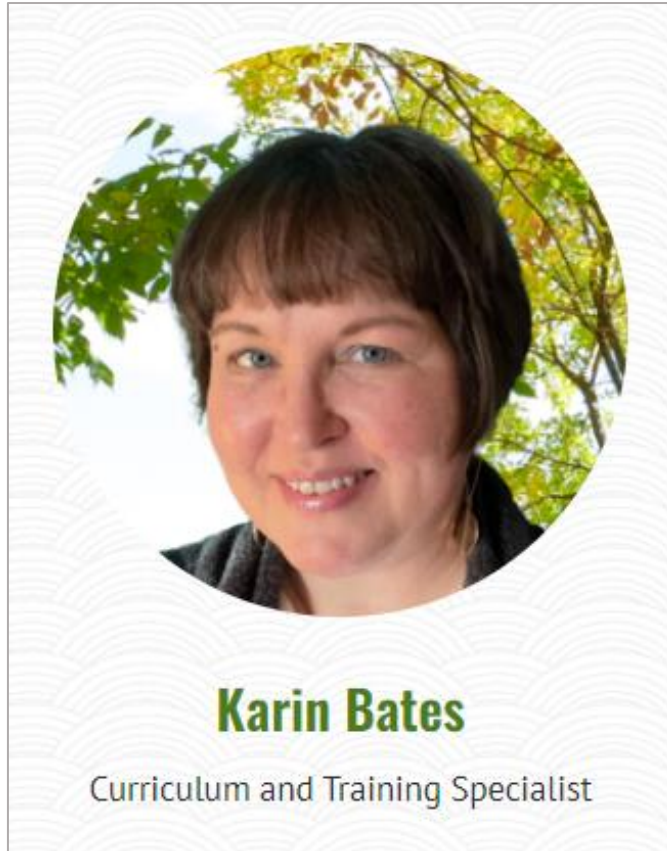
Objectives



By the end of this presentation, you will be able to:

1. Identify four common misconceptions about adult language learning
2. Recognize the unique advantages adults have when learning another language
3. Approach teaching with more confidence and enthusiasm
4. Construct optimal teaching and learning experiences
5. Dispel misconceptions about adult language learning and improve teacher onboarding and training

Who am I and how am I qualified?



- Started tutoring MLLs in the late 80s
- Taught in P.R. China 1990-1991
- Graduated with an M.A. in Curriculum & Instruction for TESOL in 1995, CU Denver
- Received Colorado Dept. of Ed. Adult Basic Education Authorization, 2019
- Have worked in every aspect from TEFL to public school settings, IEPs and business English: Kindergarteners to adults in their upper 70s
- Most recently, before joining Intercambio, worked at an immigrant and refugee center for five years



Mission

To bring English learners and community volunteers together in language classes and gatherings to build skills, confidence, and life-changing connections.

The Intercambio Way[®]

Creating spaces for relationship-based learning which values all participants' experiences and builds a more equitable future.



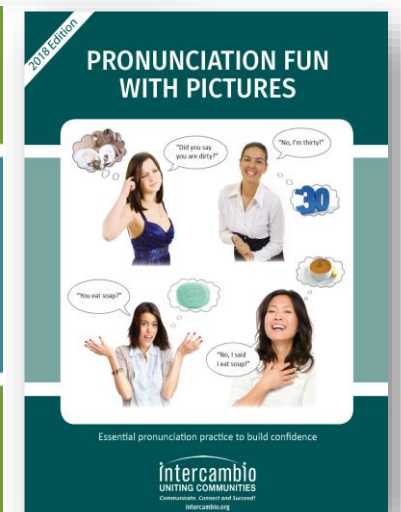
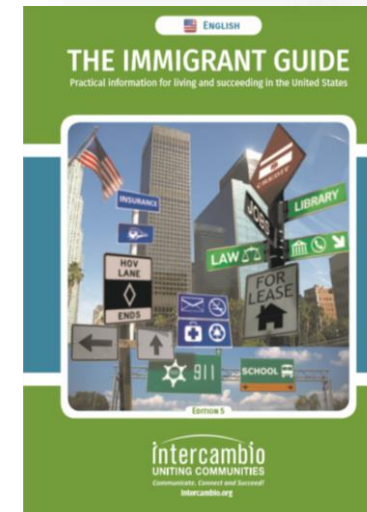
Intercambio: Teaching English, Connecting People

<https://youtu.be/LtSBJ-uQteA>



Intercambio Provides:

- Affordable **curriculum** that can be successfully taught by volunteers
- **Support** for starting or running a volunteer-based program
- Opportunities for **connection and collaboration** with other ESOL organizations



Learning Another Language...



First, let's warm up.
Talk with a partner.
Answer these questions.

- Have you ever learned another language? Which one(s)?
- Did you learn as a child or an adult?
- What made learning the language easy for you?
- What made learning the language hard?
- If you haven't learned another language, what has kept you from doing so?



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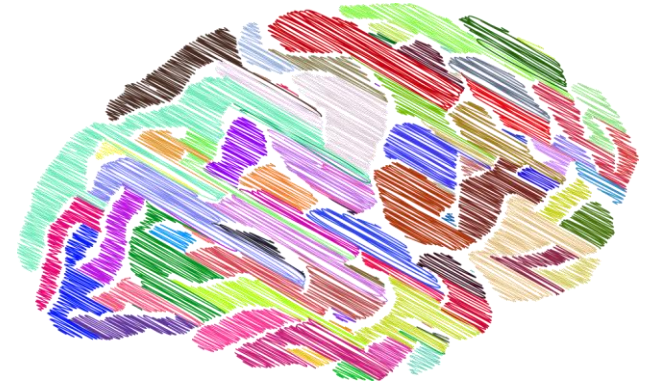


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Debrief

- Have you ever learned another language? Which one(s)?
- Did you learn as a child or an adult?
- What made learning the language easy for you?
- What made learning the language hard?
- If you haven't learned another language, what kept you from doing so?





A poll ...

<https://www.menti.com/alm3g7yaafd7>





The poll items are all misconceptions.

Let's look at all the misconceptions and think about them for a moment.

What makes them “myths”?

- Myth #1 Adults can't learn languages as well as children.
- Myth #2 The sooner adults start speaking, the more they learn.
- Myth #3 The more time adults spend in class, the more they learn.
- Myth #4 Adults need language explanations in their first language to learn another language.



Myth 1:

Adults can't learn languages as well as children.



Comparing childhood and adult language learning is like comparing...



Photo by [Anastasiya Romanova](#) on [Unsplash](#)

apples and oranges...



Photo by [ibuki Tsubo](#) on [Unsplash](#)

carrots and cabbage...



Photo by [Kristina Delp](#) on [Unsplash](#)

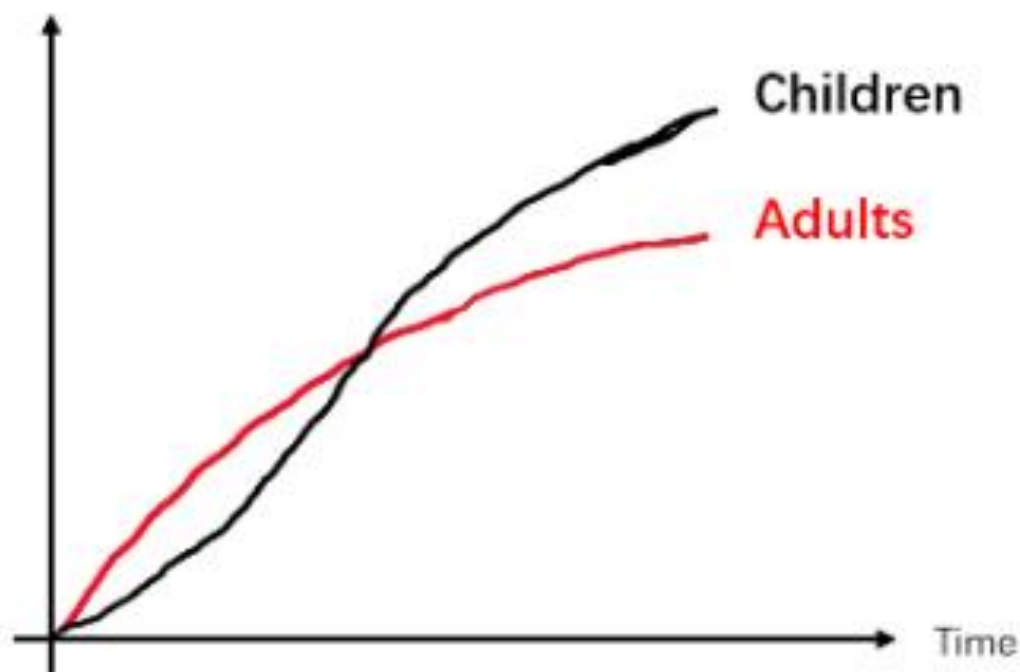


Photo by [Stijn te Strake](#) on [Unsplash](#)

horses and cows...

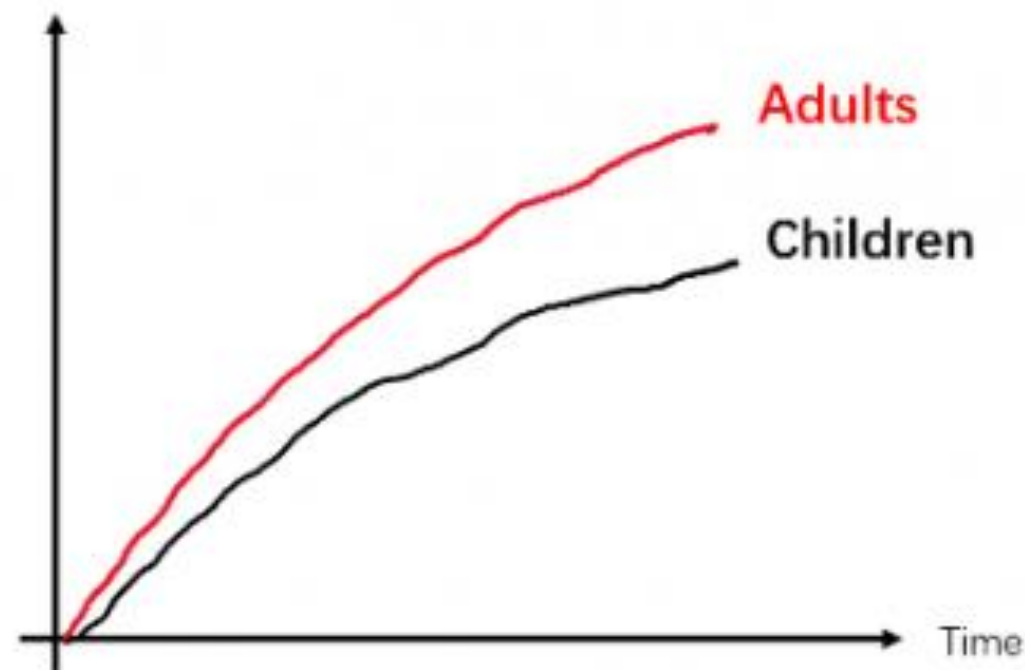
It's similar... but with significant differences.

Language Development



Adult-Child language
development rate in
language immersion
context

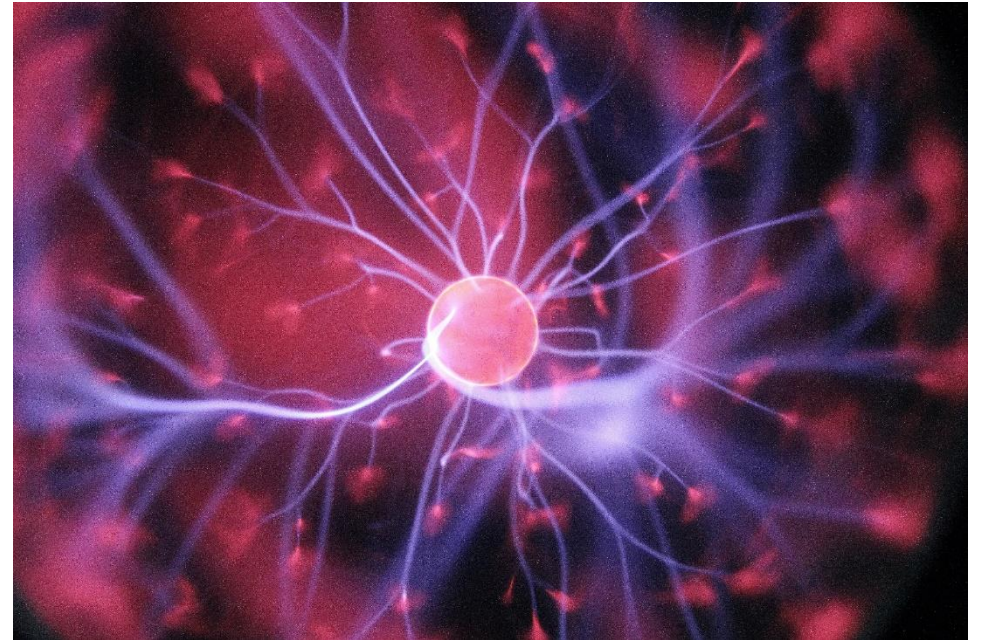
Language Development



Adult-Child language
development rate in
foreign language
context

Truth #1

- In the past, it was thought that adults could not achieve high proficiency in a language like children can, but studies show **adult brains are also "plastic,"** meaning they can change and learn, too, by forming new connections.



Truth #2

- Children **acquire** their first language and have more time and opportunity to reach native-like proficiency.

HOWEVER ...

- Studies suggest that **adults can learn a language more quickly and to a higher level** than children.

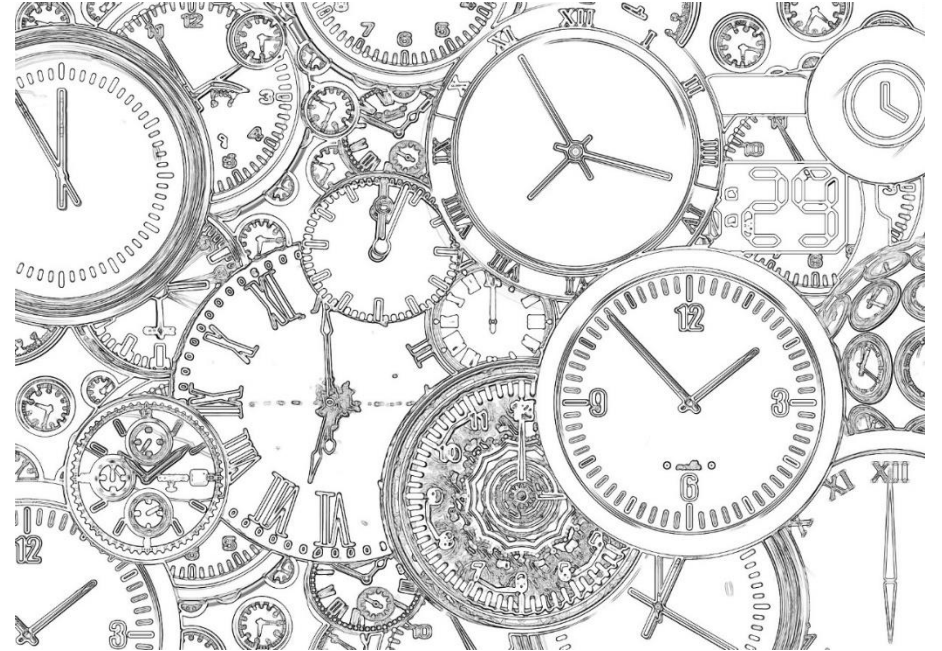


Image by [Gerd Altmann](#) from [Pixabay](#)

Truth #3

Adults have several advantages over children when learning another language:

- more **knowledge and experience**: Adults can use this knowledge and experience to connect and “hang” new information (like hanging a hat on an existing hook).
- more **maturity, motivation/"grit", and engagement**
- more **patience, longer attention spans, and better focus**

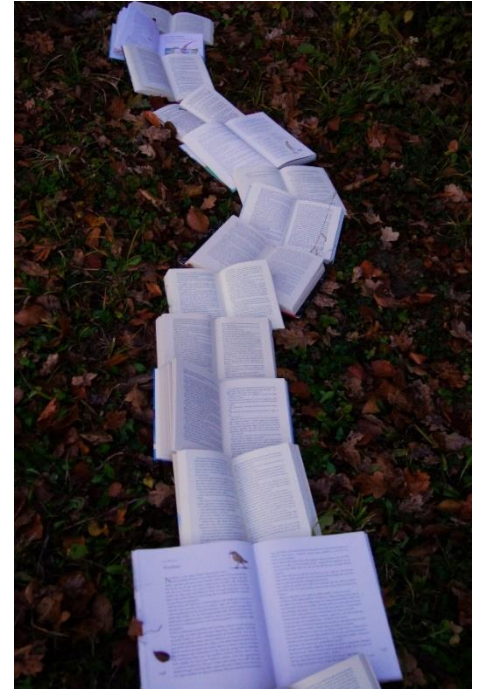


Photo by [Laura Kapfer](#) on [Unsplash](#)

Conditions for Learning

- Adults need **deliberate and intentional** learning: they need to have **active experiences and frequent repetition**.
- Adults need to be **alert**: the brain needs to be awake to learn.
- Adults need **regular breaks** when learning, every 60-90 minutes.
- Adults need the **confidence and belief that change can happen** for the brain to be able to learn.

Teaching Implications

- Reinforcement/recycling in lessons is *absolutely* necessary.
- Games and active learning activities help the brain to be alert and *make things enjoyable!*
- Make sure to take breaks!
- Encourage adult students and share with them stories of successful learners so they believe they can learn, too. (Grit, Growth Mindset)

What are some things you do to keep students motivated, alert, and encouraged? What are your favorite ways to keep students engaged?

REFLECTION #1

Take some time to reflect on the conditions for learning and teaching implications for Part 1.

- In your classroom, do you give opportunities for frequent repetition and recycling?*
- How active are the learning experiences in your classroom?*
- Do you take breaks every hour to 90 minutes?*
- How do you inspire confidence in your students?*



Myth 2:

**The sooner adults start speaking,
the more they learn.**



"You can lead a horse to water, but you can't make it drink."



• *NOTE: Obviously, our students are not horses. But the idiom expresses that we can't force adults.*

• *Sometimes instructors think that adult students MUST start speaking right away in order to learn English.*

Why would this not be the case?

Let's experience for ourselves.



LATIHAN KOSA KATA

B

Lengkapkan senarai bahan yang diperlukan Nora untuk membuat biskut coklat. Gunakan perkataan di dalam kotak.



Nora's Chocolate Chip Cookies

Bahan-Bahan

- ☐ 2 batang (1) _____
- ☐ 3/4 (2) _____ gula putih
- ☐ (3) _____ cawan gula perang
- ☐ 2 biji telur
- ☐ 2 (4) _____ vanilla
- ☐ 2 1/4 cawan tepung
- ☐ 1 sudu kecil (5) _____
- ☐ 1/2 (6) _____ garam
- ☐ 2 cawan cip coklat

sudu teh
3/4
cawan
mentega
serbuk
penaik
tsp

Here it is in English...

VOCABULARY PRACTICE

B Complete the list of ingredients Nora needs to make chocolate chip cookies. Use the words in the box.



Nora's Chocolate Chip Cookies

Ingredients

- ☐ 2 sticks of (1) butter
- ☐ $\frac{3}{4}$ (2) _____ of white sugar
- ☐ (3) _____ cup of brown sugar
- ☐ 2 eggs
- ☐ 2 (4) _____ of vanilla
- ☐ 2 $\frac{1}{4}$ cups of flour
- ☐ 1 tsp of (5) _____
- ☐ $\frac{1}{2}$ (6) _____ of salt
- ☐ 2 cups of chocolate chips

teaspoon

$\frac{3}{4}$

cup

butter

baking soda

tsp

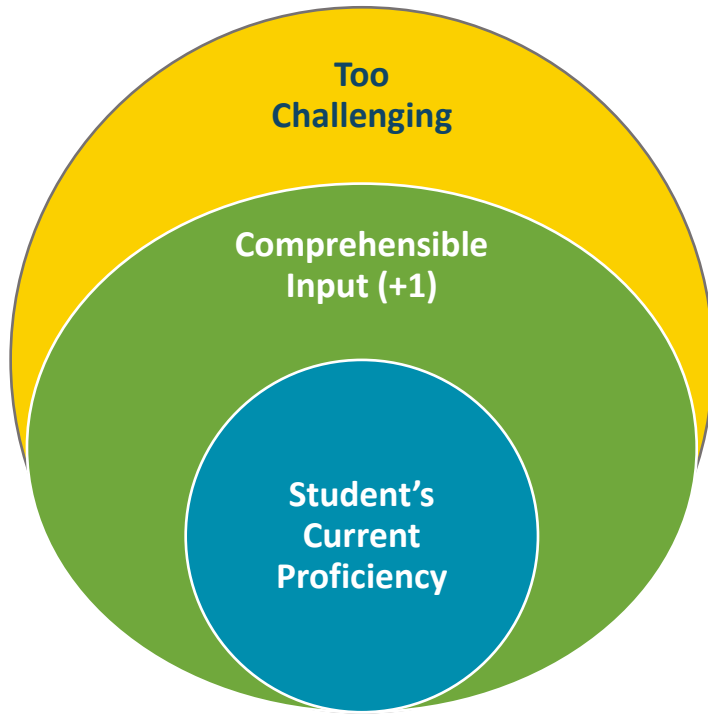
Truth #1

- There is something called a “silent period” that new language learners experience. They are **absorbing information** about the new language.



Truth #2

- “**Comprehensible input**” leads to **confidence** and eventually leads to acquisition and production.



*“Compelling input is a term Stephen Krashen (2011) uses to describe **input so interesting** that the language learner forgets that it is a different language. **The learner is relaxed, engaged, and focused on meaning.**”*

Source: p. 51 *Boosting Achievement: Reaching Students with Interrupted or Minimal Education*. Carol Salva with Anna Matis. Irving, TX: Seidlitz Education, 2017.

Truth #2 – shown another way

- If input is not comprehensible (understandable), it leads to *anxiety*. But if it is comprehensible, with just a little more complexity (+1), it leads to confidence and then good output (language production).



Truth #3 – There are many ways that learners can get meaningful practice with the language before speaking it:

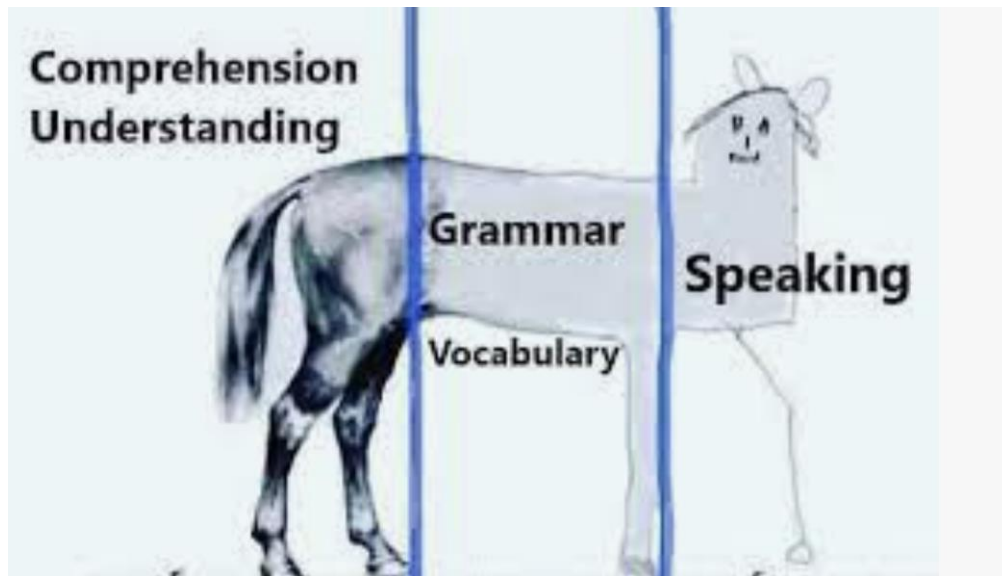


Image from: <https://spanishplans.org/ci-works/>

- **Responding to commands** (or games like "Simon Says")
- Watching **TV or movies** in the language with captions in the language
- Manipulating **real objects**
- Listening to someone speak while they are showing **photos** of what they are talking about
- Watching someone **draw** or refer to a **timeline** while they are speaking
- Listening to **songs** while **reading the lyrics**
- **Reading** a transcript while listening

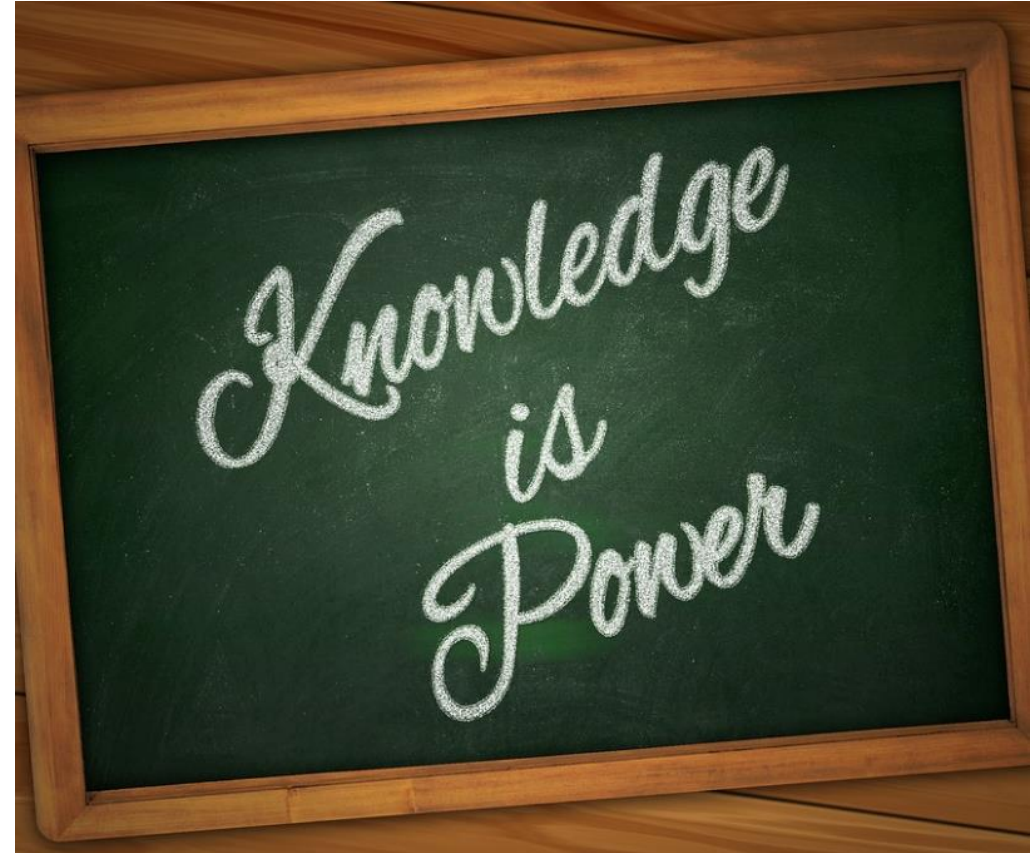
Conditions for Learning

- Adults need to be **comfortable and relaxed**, with just a *little bit* of positive stress for the brain to learn. An example of this is light competition in language learning games.
- If adults have *too much anxiety*, it blocks learning.
- If adults are **pressured** to speak before they are ready, *it raises anxiety* and inhibits learning.



Teaching Implications

- Make sure to do **pre-learning activities**, such as previewing a picture, pre-teaching vocabulary, asking about what students *already know*.
- **Teachers should read instructions**, not students, unless the students have been in the class for a while and know the vocabulary around textbook directions.
- Teachers should utilize “**wait time**.”
- Students can begin speaking **when they are ready**.



What does a “ready” student look like?

Student Readiness

Individuals are different – readiness will look different for different people – but here are some indications:

- repeating without being prompted
- raising their hands
- making eye contact with the teacher
- smiling
- other?



Create the conditions for learning to occur.

- foster respect, dignity, humanity
- give encouragement
- use gentle humor
- create predictability (e.g., use an agenda, establish routines)
- provide safety (e.g., it's okay to make mistakes)
- set classroom expectations (with learners' help → self-efficacy)
- make the lesson relevant to the learner(s)
- create positive experiences
- *anything else?*

REFLECTION #2

Look at the list of conditions for learning to occur.

- *What things do you do currently to create the conditions for learning?*
- *What are some of the things you would like to work on or incorporate further into the classroom experience?*



**The key is to lower anxiety, build
confidence, and nurture community.**

This allows for learning.

Confidence and Connections are key.

Confidence and Connections™ Curriculum

- The curriculum we developed at Intercambio is called *Confidence and Connections™* because we know those are the key ingredients to adult learning.



From what we know so far, which picture do you think best represents language learning in adults?



riding a roller coaster



hiking in the woods



doing a puzzle



launching a rocket



baking a pie



slogging through the mud



Myth #3:

The more time adults spend in class, the more they learn.








How do you climb a mountain? One step at a time.

- *Sometimes we think more is better, but really for adult learning, frequency of lessons is more important than duration.*



Truth #1

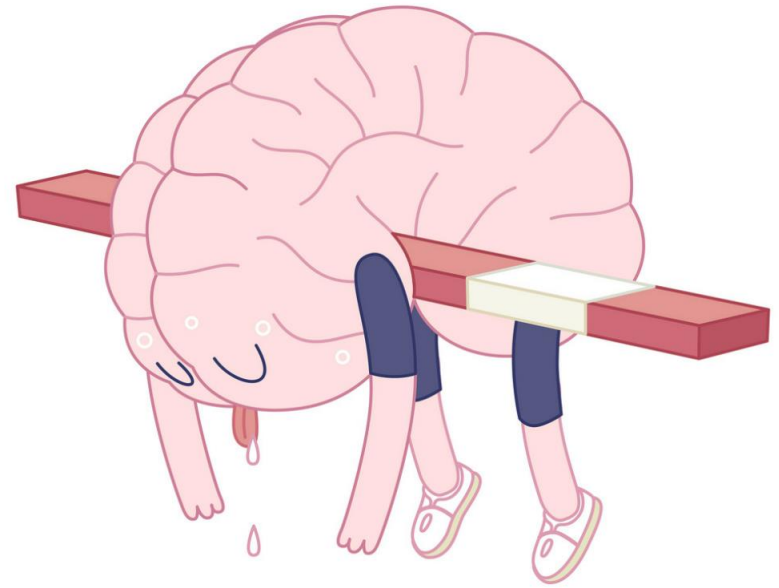
- Frequency is more important than total time spent.

Sunday	Monday	Tuesday	Wednesday	Thursday	Friday	Saturday
		Class 8:30-10 AM		Class 8:30-10 AM		

- For example, it's better to have two 1.5-hour classes than one 3-hour class per week.
- Between classes, encourage **high-interest** contact with the language.

Truth #2

- Longer classes can lead to **brain fatigue**. It's preferable for learners to have **shorter, more frequent contact** with the language (and listening – receptive activities in general – counts).
- As mentioned previously: **TAKE BREAKS**. The brain needs recovery time every 60-90 minutes. (This is true for teachers, too!)



Conditions for Learning

To keep the brain alert, active, and focused:

- Adults need *active learning* (adult brains cannot really learn passively; they need engagement)
- Adults need *novelty, repetition, clear associations with previous material, and emotional connection/relevance* to the material (language learning)
- They need to do the above things with *frequency, in short cycles.*

Teaching Implications

- Adults respond well to **short completion cycles**. Examples of this:
 - studying in blocks of 8-10 weeks instead of 16+ weeks
 - finishing the whole textbook
- Giving **short homework assignments** keeps students connected with the language in the times they are not in class.
- Making class sessions **active, relevant, connected**, and with **recycling/repetition** keeps things fresh and focused for adult brains (games, task-based learning, project-based learning, building classroom community, etc.).

Confidence and Connections™ Curriculum

- In the *Confidence and Connections™* books, there is a homework assignment at the end of every lesson (*one lesson per class session*).

HOMEWORK		Lesson 11 • First, You Preheat the Oven
M Match the questions and answers.		
1. <u>a</u> What do you do first?	a. First, gather all the ingredients.	
2. _____ What do you do next?	b. Then, you add salt and pour out the water.	
3. _____ What do you do after that?	c. After that, you put the noodles in the boiling water.	
4. _____ Then, what do you do?	d. Finally, you pour on your favorite sauce and enjoy!	
5. _____ What is the last thing you do?	e. Next, you boil the water.	



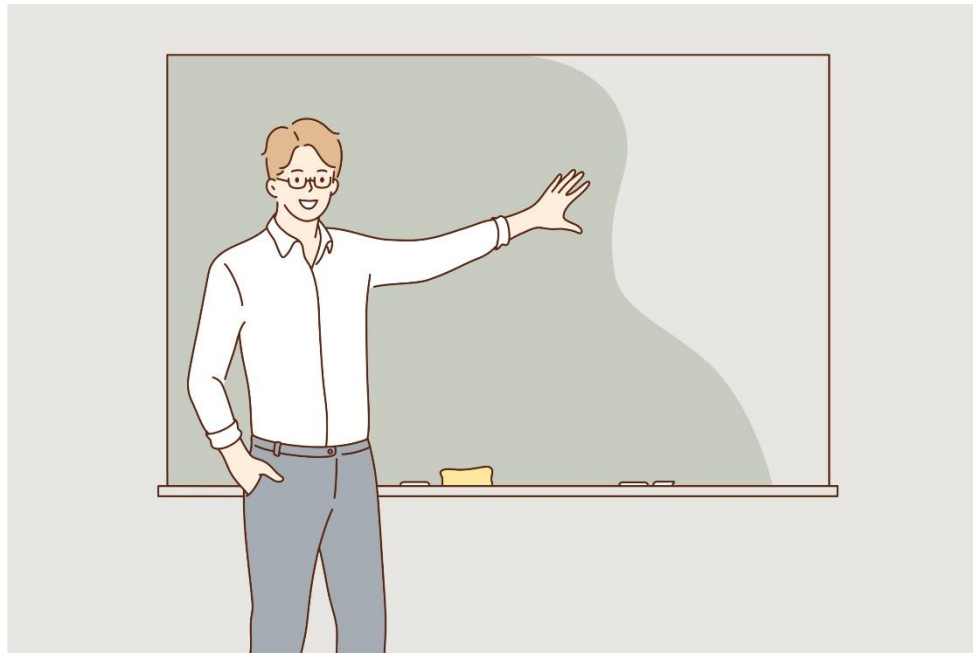
JOURNAL PROMPT

Write about your favorite thing to cook or eat. How do you make it?



Myth #4:

Adults learning another language need explanations in their first language.

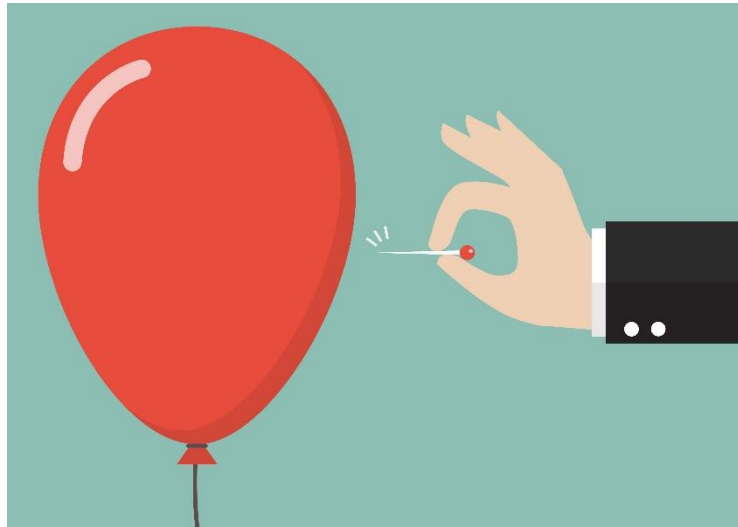


The misconception is that you can't teach another language with that language.

People think students need explanations in their native language.

Students think they need it, too.

Let's bust that myth.



[image from Shutterstock](#)

Gestures go a long way (along with other methods).

• *Body language researcher Albert Mehrabian discovered communication is:*

- *55% non-verbal*
- *38% vocal (tone of voice/expression)*
- *7% words*



<https://online.utpb.edu/about-us/articles/communication/how-much-of-communication-is-nonverbal/>

Truth #1

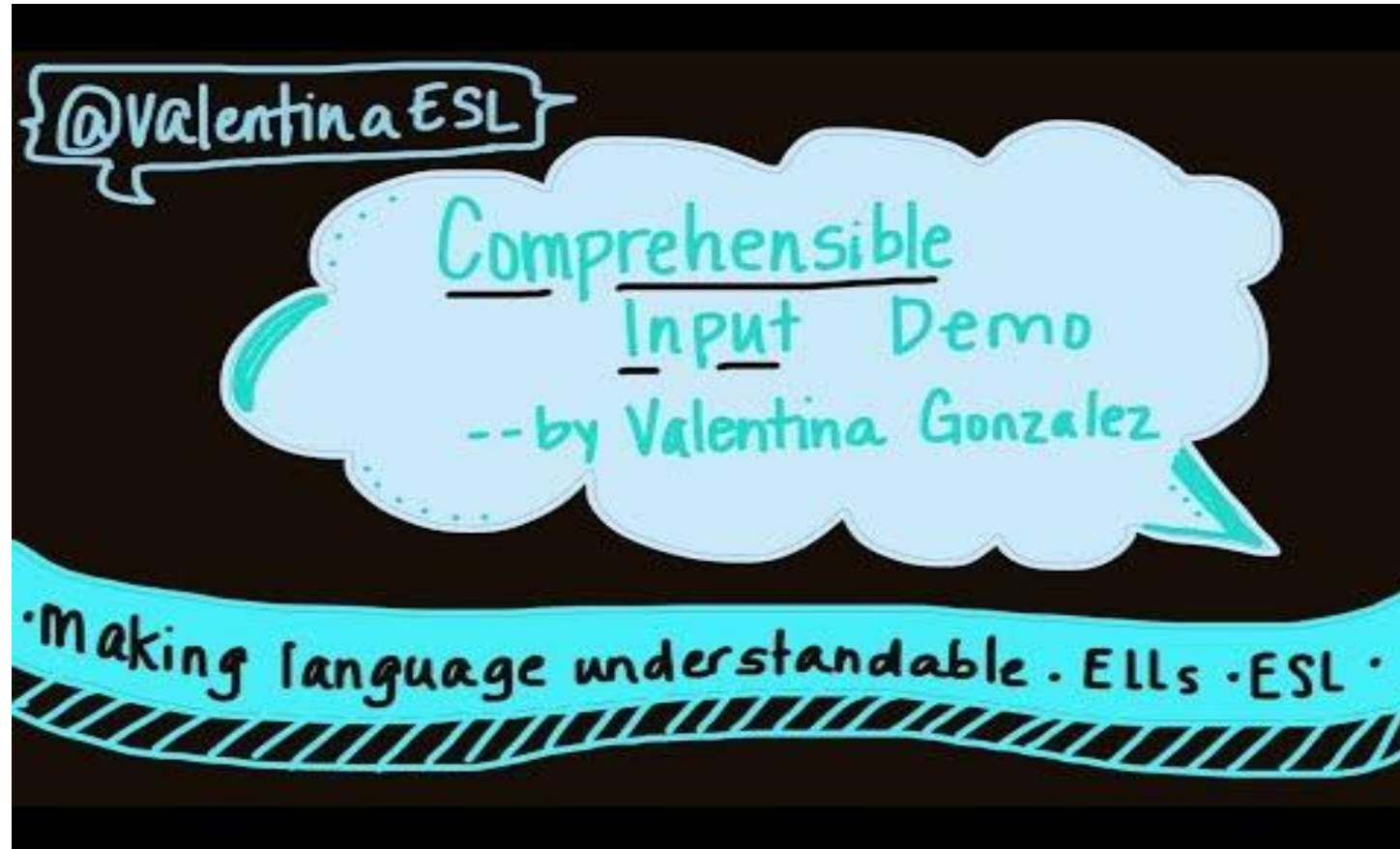
- What is communication? “We’ll define communication as the purposeful interpretation and/or expression of meaning.”

*The interpretation and expression of meaning can come from other means than verbal or written input and output: **physical, visual, intonational expressions** communicate as well.*

Truth #2

- The key to teaching in a language that is not the native language of the learners is *comprehensible input*.
- Let's watch a demonstration of *comprehensible input*.

What is comprehensible input?



Entire video on YouTube: <https://youtu.be/x7c429g-cu8>

Truth #3

- There is a big difference between *learning* a language and *acquiring* a language.
- Let's look at a metaphor...

Watching cooking shows on television...



<https://www.wbur.org/news/2021/10/13/chef-julia-child-documentary-review>

vs.

Getting in the kitchen and cooking!



Photo by [Jimmy Dean](#) on [Unsplash](#)

For a more detailed explanation, go to the last slide in this presentation.

Conditions for Learning

- Adults need comprehensible input.
- Adults need a low-stress environment (an environment that is *encouraging* and one that *builds confidence while reducing fear and anxiety*).
- Adults need time and opportunities to express themselves through interaction with the language.



Teaching Implications

- To be able to communicate, students need vocabulary and grammar, but beyond this, they need to **practice through opportunities to use the language**.
- Use methods like Total Physical Response (using physical movement to *link meaning* to words) to communicate meaning. Use gestures, facial expressions, body movement, realia (real objects), and pictures to create **comprehensible input**.
- Make **frequent checks** to see if adult learners are comprehending. Look for evidence of comprehension.
- There's nothing wrong with using Google Translate in certain circumstances. *Can you think of examples?*



Two Keys

- Our minds are hard-wired to **find meaning and patterns**, learners start to see these through lots of examples and “noticing.”
- Instructors are **facilitators and motivators**, not “imparters of knowledge.”

Confidence and Connections™ Curriculum

- In the *Confidence and Connections*® books, the lessons **build up** from vocabulary and grammar foundations to discussions in the *Culture Tip* and *Connect With Conversation*.



CULTURE TIP

If you make a dish and take it to a party or someone's home, it's common for people to ask how you made it. They may even ask you to send them the recipe or teach them to make it! Cooking together in English is a good way to practice and to learn more about new foods. Do you like to learn how to make new foods? Where do you get your recipes?



60 Student Book 3 RIGHT



CONNECT WITH CONVERSATION

Get to know a partner. Talk about:

- your favorite foods and how you make them
- if you like to cook and why or why not
- things you know how to make

REFLECTION #3

- *How do you ensure the content you cover in class is comprehensible?*
- *Do you assign homework? Why or why not?*
- *Do you allow your adult students to be “puzzle solvers” and notice?*
- *Do you ensure your learners have a lot of time to practice using English in class?*



Key Takeaways



- Adults can learn another language and have several **advantages** in their favor.
- Adult learning happens through **frequent, active, meaningful, low-stress** experiences.
- Frequent learning experiences in **short cycles** is best for adult learners.
- Language acquisition is more than just knowing vocabulary and grammar, and **comprehensible input** is key.



Take Action!

- What is **one thing you will implement** from this workshop?
- What do you need to **make it happen**?



For a PDF copy of this presentation,
please fill out the form.

<https://www.jotform.com/tables/221086211271141>

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“What is the difference between learning a language and acquiring a language? ... Language learning involves studying and memorizing the vocabulary and grammar of a target language. ... Language acquisition involves receiving copious amounts of comprehensible input with low stress opportunities for output in a target language. The only way for students to achieve high levels of fluency in English or any target language is in receiving sufficient amounts of oral and written input, coupled with opportunities to express themselves orally and/or in writing in authentic contexts. It is not possible to achieve proficiency by studying vocabulary and grammar alone. ... Time should be focused on providing many opportunities for oral and written interaction rather than intensely focusing on vocabulary lists and finer points of grammar.”

Emphasis added. Salva, C. and Matis, A. (2017). Boosting Achievement: Reaching Students with Interrupted or Minimal Education. Irving, TX: Seidlitz Education. p. 51