

Adult Language Learning in the Institute of Technology Sector in the Republic of Ireland

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Abstract : A recent study of third level institutions in Ireland reveals that both age and aptitude can be overcome by teaching methodologies to motivate second language learners. This PhD investigation gathered quantitative and qualitative data from 14 Institutes of Technology over a three years period from 2011 to 2014. The fundamental research question was to establish the impact of institutional language policy on attitudes towards language learning. However, other related issues around second language acquisition arose in the course of the investigation. Data were collected from both lecturers and students, allowing interesting points of comparison to emerge from both datasets. Negative perceptions among lecturers regarding language provision were often associated with the view that language learning belongs to primary and secondary level and has no place in third level education. This perception was offset by substantial data showing positive attitudes towards adult language learning. Lenneberg's Critical Age Theory postulated that the optimum age for learning a second language is before puberty. More recently, scholars have challenged this theory in their studies, revealing that mature learners can and do succeed at learning languages. With regard to aptitude, a preoccupation among lecturers regarding poor literacy skills among students emerged and was often associated with resistance to second language acquisition. This was offset by a preponderance of qualitative data from students highlighting the crucial role which teaching approaches play in the learning process. Interestingly, the data collected regarding learning disabilities reveals that, given the appropriate learning environments, individuals can be motivated to acquire second languages, and indeed succeed at learning them. These findings are in keeping with other recent studies regarding attitudes towards second language learning among students with learning disabilities. Both sets of findings reinforce the case for language policies in the Institute of Technology (IoTs). Supportive and positive learning environments can be created in third level institutions to motivate adult learners, thereby overcoming perceived obstacles relating to age and aptitude.

Keywords : age, aptitude, second language acquisition, teaching methodologies

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