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Adopting the Montessori Methodology in Teaching Languages to Adult Students- Transnational Approach

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Abstract. Teaching adults unlike educating children, is a difficult area, owing to the learners' educational and social background, compounded by their expectations and assumed goals. Bearing in mind that learning and teaching strategies may not be equally effective with all learners, it is advisable to propose such a mode of teaching that would accommodate especially those adults who face difficulties with gaining knowledge, due to factors outside the strictly educational sphere. This is where, Maria Montessori's pedagogy steps in with a proposal addressed at those persons who have so far failed to succeed in learning a foreign language in a traditional way. Her pedagogy has inspired teachers and educators all over the world and consequently, had a profound effect on the structure and quality of teaching until today. Although it has mainly dealt with educating children and young people until the age of 18, there have been attempts to apply her methodology to adult teaching. The author of this article will look at the ways her philosophy can be adopted in teaching adults, however to get a better perception of the nature of her ideas, some attention has to be drawn to what drove Maria Montessori to devoting her professional life to education.

Keywords: Montessori pedagogy · Teaching · Principles · Manual

1 Maria Montessori and Her Pedagogical Philosophy

In order to understand the educational philosophy of Maria Montessori, one has to realize that it is not really educational methodology but rather an approach or attitude. It is regarded as a philosophy towards life, characterized by a specific way of considering what life is about and what it means to be human and how life should be led to promote optimal development. Since "this philosophy is not lived as part of mainstream society," adults who wish to introduce this way of life, should find ways to sustain and reinforce their own development. Maria Montessori explained this attitude as the "spiritual preparation of the adult" to make the children develop the aspects and qualities, such as empathy, sympathy, loyalty, fairness, consideration, helpfulness, all of which the teacher, as the guide, should possess [8].

1.1 Maria Montessori - The Beginnings

Maria Montessori (1870–1952) was the first woman physician in Italy who set her heart on improving the situation of the poor and subnormal children, disadvantaged both by their physical condition and the social circumstances. Having won the doctor's degree, she started working at the hospital, at the same time engaging in her private practice. As part of her research work at the psychiatric clinic of the University of Rome, in 1897 she joined the staff as a voluntary assistant visiting the Rome asylums for the insane, with the view to selecting the suitable patients for treatment at the psychiatric clinic of the University. It was at the asylum that she met the retarded children, who were locked up and neglected, with no one taking care of their educational and emotional needs. While observing them, she noticed that the children, described as "idiots", responded to the stimulation, which proved her observation that their minds were not useless but just unused [7].

While working with those children she became acquainted with the works of two renowned men, Jean-Marc-Gaspard Itard and his disciple, Edouard Seguin, whose findings profoundly influenced her own research, which led her to say "that mental deficiency presented chiefly a pedagogical, rather than mainly a medical, problem" [14]. Hence those children should be helped with the use of special educational methods at school, rather than kept in hospitals. That finding made her turn her attention to the study of education. In the years 1897–98, she committed herself to studying pedagogy, reading all available works on educational theory of the past two hundred years, which resulted in Maria forming her own theory of education. She was greatly influenced by Friedrich Froebel, the German schoolmaster who came up with the idea of the kindergarten, the philosophy of which was later popularized in other countries. Similarly to Montessori, Froebel had developed the idea that early childhood education should be realized in a specially prepared environment, the kindergarten, or the "child's garden" [5]. The concept of a specially prepared surrounding became the icon of her philosophy in guiding children through the whole period of education.

In her next iconic project, called the Children's House (Casa dei Bambini) Montessori continued this approach perceiving this as the way to educate the children by giving them a lot of freedom in exploring the environment [10]. The whole teaching process was realized in the properly arranged environment and with the use of the carefully selected and organized materials [5].

1.2 Maria Montessori International Approach

Soon Maria Montessori and her method attracted international attention. In America, where in 1913 there were already more than one hundred schools, the proponents of her educational philosophy founded the national organization, the Montessori Educational Association, with the view to promoting the method. Although her method was received enthusiastically by many, Montessori faced a critical attack from a group of some leading progressive educators associated with John Dewey's instrumental philosophy.

In his book, *The Montessori System Examined* (1914), William Kilpatrick dismissed Montessori techniques as outdated, stating that she "still holds to the discarded

doctrine of formal or general discipline". Kilpatrick saw the deficiencies in Montessori methodology in the fact that "she does not provide situations for more adequate social cooperation," and as a contrast to such approach he would "put the children into such a socially conditioned environment that they will of themselves spontaneously unite into larger or smaller groups to work out their life impulses as these exist on the childish plane" [9].

That opinion had a significant influence on dissolving the enthusiasm for the Montessori methodology and the author herself, which meant that by 1918 there were only occasional references to her in the journals. Yet, five years after her death (1952) her educational methodology experienced renaissance in America again [7]. Nowadays, it is highly recognized worldwide, resulting in thousands of schools and educational institutions adopting the principles that have become the hallmark of Montessori's educational philosophy.

2 The Transnational Character of Montessori Pedagogy in Adult Education

2.1 The Montessori Principles

Maria Montessori's philosophy was immensely instrumental in the today's conception of pedagogy, not only catering for children but increasingly entering the field of adult education. There are numerous examples of how her educational method can be applied in dealing with senior students or the mentally retarded ones. Much has been said and written how the Montessori pedagogy has influenced young children as well as young people and adults all over the world with regard to their emotional and intellectual development. People who reach out to gain success in business and other disciplines requiring autonomy and independence in making well-thought choices in most cases have come from the Montessori school environment. That sort of experience had prepared them to face the world and its challenges with an open mind, relying on their decisions in all their endeavours. All of this arises from the fact that having been taught with the Montessori methodology behind, they, like all the children, had gone "through the same process of development everywhere, regardless of the place or climate" [5]. Hence, the Montessori method assumes the transnational and transcultural character, as its use can be conditioned by the cultural context, yet it is not dependent on it, nor is it determined by it. Still, different cultural settings may have a slight influence on the way tuition is conducted, which means that the method itself can be applied in any country and culture owing to the universal character of the human and child nature.

This very aspect of the universal character of Maria Montessori methodology means that educators in many countries across the world still consider her pedagogical approach as the one that shaped teaching not only children but their parents as well who appreciate the beneficial aspects of the type of schooling that children receive in the Montessori institutions.

According to Dr. Kłoskowski, one of the aspects, instrumental in facilitating children's and adults' education is again the properly prepared environment. This need has been recognized in many communities, where training centres have been founded

with the view to providing educational programs for the adult population. Those programs, based on Montessori methodology would be instrumental in making the students employable or getting a possibility of obtaining a better job through the rehabilitation service [6].

Other examples included the studies conducted on a group of patients with dementia, in which the Montessori-based activities were applied. On completion of the course, it was demonstrated that the patients were more actively engaged in individual and small group activities. This has led the trainers to the conclusion that the Montessori techniques have positive psychosocial effects and the patients with dementia can successfully continue learning when they are proposed with stimulating activities, adapted to their cognitive capacity and complemented by external compensatory support, such as task break down [9].

What makes the Montessori approach so successful is the fact that it rests on the premises stated below:

- Self-confidence and self-esteem;
- A sense of achievement and self-worth;
- A sense of responsibility for themselves and their actions;
- Independence and adaptability;
- Cooperation with others and a sense of community;
- Respect for the rights and a sense of community;
- Initiative and self-motivation;
- Concentration and persistence in completing the task.

All of these, though primarily associated with children's education, can be observed in any situation when learning is involved. The Montessori methodology is designed in such a way that it explores the students' desire to learn and their ability to develop their own competence. The curriculum allows them to experience and enjoy the process of learning, and consequently developing the sense of achievement and self-esteem [2].

Maria Montessori said, "[M]y vision of the future is of the individual passing from one stage of independence to a higher, by means of their own activity, through their own effort of will, which constitutes the inner evolution of the individual" [12]. Although this statement was made with reference to children and their developmental path, yet right now its meaning is applied to young adults and adults as well since the meaning is universal and even the latter ones draw on in approaching various tasks in their lives.

Naturally, many of the aspects characteristic of the Montessori approach can be applied to adult education. Although, as it has already been indicated, there exist institutions devoted to teaching senior learners, yet these cases refer to a specific model of a learner, namely the one affected with dementia. However, up to date, no organized education, entirely Montessori-related has been proposed with reference to language learning. Does it mean then that this methodology cannot be successfully implemented into the adult learning curriculum?

The answer is not that simple. Although there is general enthusiasm for the Montessori methodology, it is mainly associated with children's learning. Parents and teachers tend to view this approach through the cognitive and emotional development of their children. What is so characteristic of the Montessori approach is the genuine

interest and enthusiasm of the children themselves, while they are learning. However, an adult learner is a much more difficult and demanding recipient of the learning process, which makes it quite challenging for the teacher to propose such a model of teaching that would accommodate the student, leaving him satisfied and content.

The Montessori philosophy is addressed to educate students in the most successful way in order to allow them to live in a fulfilling and satisfying way. This can be achieved by stimulating their development through subtle guidance, which leaves ample space for individual evolvement at one's own time and pace. One of the most fundamental aspects of this philosophy is the teacher's assistance, yet avoiding imposing himself. Allowing the student to do something on his/her own produces an enormous sense of achievement, while the self-correcting materials limit the teacher's interference to a minimum, which enhances the learning process since the material learned in this way will be remembered better [13].

Naturally, all these aspects can be transferred to adult teaching/learning. Even repetition in the form of producing model sentences or short dialogues, when performed in the playful atmosphere can be successfully incorporated into adult education. Moreover, when the element of competition is excluded from the lessons and replaced with cooperation and team work, the effects will be clearly visible, making learning more attractive and effective [2].

3 International Education and the Montessori Approach

3.1 Montessori and the Issue of Global Citizenship

The universal character of Montessori pedagogy means that it can be adapted to various educational spheres, of which teaching foreign languages assumes the prime position. Still, it must be emphasized that Maria Montessori did not design a specific methodology for teaching and learning foreign languages but the approach to educating learners promotes easier acquisition of the material based on its understanding owing to the relaxed and student oriented way of teaching where learners are treated with respect and given a large space to learn at their own pace in the friendly atmosphere and environment promoting and enhancing progress [11].

Since human success cannot be divorced from the knowledge of foreign languages offering the learners access to a better future through a personal and educational development, being able to communicate with people across the world, using the target language as a means of communication can be attributed to Maria Montessori's idea of development.

Learning foreign languages in a global context, making it transnational allows students across the world get to know it better and by getting in touch with other people, owing to the ability to communicate in other languages offers them a chance of enriching their lives, develop a sense of understanding and appreciation of other cultures in the multiethnic, multilingual and multicultural world. In this way the target language becomes the vehicle to explore what the world offers. This attitude seems most relevant nowadays when the European job market is open to all people,

considering the fact that it is the knowledge of foreign languages that makes the learners eligible for taking advantage of the professional opportunities.

The Montessori methodology offers a chance to approach education in a more open and relaxed way, thus allowing them to use their intellectual potential as they are not bound by the constraints of the traditional schooling. Unfortunately, in many cases the latter way of approaching learning foreign languages is still employed, which does not guarantee obtaining accuracy and expertise, and consequently a success in the future. Hence the Montessori teaching offers unquestionable benefits as confronted with the traditional education since it takes into consideration the needs of an adult student regardless of the country and culture where the education is realized.

This is when the Montessori approach to education can be compared with the international programmes of which the International Baccalaureate can be most closely associated with promoting values identified with global citizenship with the view to preparing students for new challenges when faced with the increasingly global world. As it has already been mentioned with reference to the qualities represented by the graduates of Montessori schools, these persons are prepared for a number of issues that globalization brings, hence educational programmes worldwide should focus on promoting attitudes that reflect tolerance, respect, knowledge and understanding of other nations as well as the ability to work with the people coming from various, most diverse cultures and communicate with them successfully. The idea of international education is concerned with educating the global citizens of tomorrow [1] and although there is no international curriculum specifically designed in the course of the developing methodology based on Maria Montessori philosophy, there is no doubt that it is this philosophy allowing humans to develop without the constraints of the traditional education by offering the learner a lot of autonomy in learning and the choice of ways to do it [2].

The already mentioned IBO (International Baccalaureate Organization) was founded in Geneva, Switzerland, with an initial mission to prepare the internationally mobile student for university education who as a knowledgeable and inquiring citizen would strive to create a better and more peaceful world through intercultural understanding and respect. This is why the international education writes very well into the idea and philosophy of Maria Montessori who already had talked about education for peace when in 1932 she made a powerful speech at the Geneva Convention [1] clearly seeing the necessity to prepare young people for the future education and working towards developing cooperation on an international level, in this way responding to the need of global citizenship, yet to come.

3.2 Adult Learners and the Montessori Approach

The issue of the specially prepared environment in the Montessori pedagogy has often been pointed out to as the direct reason behind the success that the people taught with this methodology have enjoyed. Indeed, without going into a detailed list of the differences between the Montessori approach and the sometimes, less effective, traditional one, we learn that when students are given more freedom and initiative in learning, the results are much more promising.

This is where the Montessori methodology comes forward. What is interesting is the fact that a teacher does not have to be deemed as the Montessori educator to introduce some principles and methods pertaining to this methodology. What is more, many teachers in a number of countries engaged in traditional forms of education have already been adopting some of the principles, without even realizing that. Still, certain elements of this philosophy, owing to their specific nature, cannot be adopted in organized classes, such as the school or university, controlled and bound by the constraints and standards imposed by the educational authorities.

Consequently, the element of individual planning of the classes and organizing learning in the way most suitable for the students can be experienced only in small groups outside the teaching institutions or in one-to-one classes [2]. This type of organized education will probably be favoured by adult learners who, as opposed to young students, will be hampered by many aspects, often resulting from their age or other conditions, adversely affecting their success in learning languages. Some of these problems may be directly connected with all sorts of fears that adult students may experience. Since adult learners are very often extremely sensitive, regarding their performance within the group, those fears may severely impede their learning.

These particular anxieties seen as a universal and transnational issue hindering students' progress were addressed in a manual which was created within the framework of the international project, the MMLT - Montessori Methodology in Language Training project, funded by the Lifelong Learning Programme of the European Commission, 530963-LLP-1-2012-1-GR-KA2-KA2MP - KA2 Multilateral Projects. It offers the teachers teaching languages to adults some hints how to do it in a more effective way and thus help adult learners overcome these obstacles [3, 4].

Following surveys and discussions with both the teachers and adult students 10 main causes of stress sustained by these learners were identified. These included:

- Fear of teacher's expectations;
- Need of immediate results;
- Difficulties in memorization (caused by personal and/or psychological deficiency);
- Need of knowledge of grammar structure before starting speaking a foreign language;
- Fear of making mistakes;
- Peer pressure (from class mates);
- Time pressure due to scheduled programs;
- Sense of loyalty towards own native language and culture;
- Difficulty in using the target language avoiding literal translation;
- Lack of self-confidence.

Recognition of the above problems, both by the teachers and the students themselves across the world is part of the success since the appropriate attitude of both parties will result in better constructed and conducted classes, where students' expectations and capacities are better acknowledged and satisfied.

Low foreign language command or its lack is nowadays the factor which in many situations can exclude adult learners from the mainstream community, not allowing them to fully use the work opportunities. Hence, considering all the unquestionable

merits of the Montessori methodology, this philosophy may be considered as the best way to accommodate many problems that adult learners experience.

Since the Montessori principles are known for their universality adults from various countries and walks of life can benefit from them and many aspects which made this approach well-known worldwide can be easily adapted to the adult way of setting about learning and what is more, the adults' vision of what they expect of linguistic education.

4 Conclusion

For a number of years, the Montessori philosophy has been successfully used in teaching children and adolescents. However, high school and academic teachers, who use some elements of this method unwittingly, demonstrate a rather limited knowledge regarding this approach.

Being appreciated and used in many countries and yet, at the same time demonstrating a specific character, the Montessori methodology cannot be introduced into all types of schools for adult learners, but it can be realized in many different institutions where teaching would not be subject to external rules and standardization. What Maria Montessori insisted on in her philosophy, was the element of individualization and independent learning, which permeates the whole learning process. Hence, setting oneself a goal and consequently working towards accomplishing it is a key to a success.

Many graduates from the Montessori schools where teaching languages was conducted in line with the principles promoting and allowing a wider and more comprehensive approach to human and intellectual development, emphasize that the Montessori environment and the atmosphere of tuition has had a crucial impact on their life and career from the transnational perspective and in the international context.

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