The classroom integration of adult ESL learners’ needs, wants, and learning preferences: A preliminary study into the perceptions of teachers in regional Australia

The aim of this preliminary study was to understand how English as a second language (ESL) teachers integrate adult learners’ needs, wants, and learning preferences in the ESL classroom. Within a qualitative methodological approach, four teachers participated in a series of focus groups, and a mini-interview was conducted with one to explore an individual lesson plan in detail. Transcripts were coded in three successively higher order analyses, yielding seven super-ordinate categories: (a) establishment of needs, wants, learning preferences, (b) integration of needs, wants, and learning preferences, (c) evaluation of what and who is taught and what is learnt, (d) teachers’ goals within classrooms, (e) classroom dynamics, (f) emotional support for students, and (g) students’ estimation of their own abilities. The teachers appear to use a four phase process through which learners’ needs are accommodated: establishment, integration, and evaluation of learning requirements, and alteration of course or activity. A key finding in addition to the four phase process was, however, the importance of managing dynamics within the classroom as a further consideration in integrating learners’ requirements, for which two separate models were developed. Although this was a preliminary study of only four ESL teachers in a regional centre, results provide empirical support for the different ways that learners’ individual needs, wants, and learning preferences are considered by teachers in a diverse classroom. Despite the fact that previous authors have emphasized the importance of taking into account learners’ individual needs, to our knowledge, this is the first study to explore teachers’ views of how they do this.