

## BUILDING UP NONVIOLENT COMMUNICATION \

IN ADULTS LEARNING ENGLISH AS A SECOND LANGUAGE<sup>1</sup>

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**Resumen.** La adquisición de un segundo idioma conlleva varios factores que dificultan el proceso de aprendizaje en adultos. Algunos de éstos son variables psicológicas tales como la ansiedad, la falta de motivación y la baja autoestima, las cuales afectan el aprendizaje causando temor y creando frustración en los estudiantes adultos. Esta realidad desalienta la capacidad de participación activa en el ambiente de la clase, dando lugar a emociones negativas que crean conflictos en el entorno que les rodea y en su propio aprendizaje. Este trabajo analiza el uso de la comunicación no violenta con el fin de exponer los beneficios de ésta práctica en el aprendizaje de adultos con respecto a sus habilidades en la adquisición de un segundo idioma. El educador ayuda a los estudiantes a transformar el conflicto en empatía y a construir autocompasión y tolerancia con los demás, aumentando así su desempeño en clase. Este trabajo pretende extender una invitación para los docentes de un segundo idioma a poner la comunicación no violenta en práctica dentro del aula, con el fin de satisfacer las necesidades de estudiantes adultos y así desarrollar conciencia para un cambio social y académico.

**Palabras clave:** educación, comunicación compasiva, aprendizaje cooperativo, principios del aprendizaje adulto.

**Abstract:** Adult second language acquisition conveys several factors that hinder the effective learning process. Some of these factors are psychological variables such as anxiety, lack of motivation and a low self-confidence, which affect the ability to learn, lowering the affective filter and creating frustration in adults. This reality discourages the capacity of adults to engage actively into the learning environment, leading to negative emotions which create conflict in the environment that surrounds them and in their own learning. In this paper, participants will be able to analyze the use of Nonviolent Communication (NVC) for high and positive impact learning in adults. Moreover, the practice of NVC will be explained in order to assess its benefits in adults learning skills in second language acquisition through a different perspective in which the educator helps learners transform conflict into empathy and compassion with one-self and with others, increasing productivity in the English classroom. Through cooperative learning techniques designed specifically for teaching NVC to language educators, the lecture pretends to open up the invitation to put NVC in concrete action, for

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meeting needs of adult students learning a target language, and for developing awareness for social and academic change.

**Keywords:** education, compassionate communication, cooperative learning, adult principles.

## 1 Introduction

Today, it is not easy to keep anger under control. Violence in all its forms is an ongoing problem, even in the so-called developed world. Yet many people are willing to accept violence as a way of solving problems. In contrast, school violence is often in the headlines. As a matter of fact, in July 2010, Costa Rica was shocked when a 17 year-old student of a private high school shot the school principal to death. According to local newspapers' reports, the cause of this act of violence was the student's revenge towards the disciplinary actions the principal had taken against him (Hurtado, 2010: s.p.).

In answer to this tragedy, the government asked for stronger security measures in schools. However, is this really the way to cope with violent tendencies? Hence, Rosenberg proposes a better way of dealing with differences of opinion and violent tendencies through an approach called Nonviolent Communication (NVC). Because of this, the main objective of this paper consists of helping teachers and students foster communication, learn how to listen to others, observe and express feelings, fulfill needs, and in turn respond with confidence and respect. Additionally, NVC aims to find a way to communicate without the use of conflicts. It is useful for problem solving while connecting with others living in a way that is conscious of the benefits of learning in a safe environment.

## 2 Defining nonviolent communication (NVC)

This paper is based on the model of Nonviolent Communication (NVC) developed by Marshall Rosenberg, PhD in his work *Nonviolent Communication: A language of Life* where he defines NVC as “a way of communicating that leads us to give from the heart” (Rosenberg, 2003: 3). This is a communication technique that teaches how to transform the thinking, language, and moralistic judgments to decrease conflicts, improve cooperation, learn how to hear the needs and feelings of others, foster self-awareness, connection and compassion for each other, and maximize the potential of each student by means of empathy. Both when expressing ourselves and listening with empathy to others, NVC helps us to focus attention on the process for communication and welfare of people (Rosenberg, 2003: 6).

Along this paper two essential principles will be acknowledged. The first one is that all humans share some basic needs such as social contact, respect, food, water, shelter, and love among others. Thus, everyone would agree that we all need to fulfill those needs. However, those needs should be met consistently with our life values. In doing so, we must be moved to act in a way that satisfies our life. The second principle is that we should find ways to connect everyone's

needs. It means that we should show compassion and empathy towards people's needs, feelings and requests.

### 3 Paradigm shift

On the line of what Rosenberg has said, the use of NVC does not assume that receivers will be willing to act as compassionately as we do, but it pretends to inspire them through time to do so. In Rosenberg words "to reach at a mutual desire to give from the heart" (Rosenberg, 2003: 6).

The four components ought to be met are observations, feelings, needs and requests. First of all, actions that we like or do not like are observed. Secondly, those actions are linked to a feeling. In other words, you express your emotions or sensations about what you have observed. After that, we have to identify which needs are provoked by those emotions we have just felt. Finally, we demand people to do what we consider could enhance our life. For instance, when we notice that we are working very hard, we feel tired because we have the need to rest. Respectively, we ask our boss for a break.

There are two symbols used in Nonviolent Communication represented by two animals: a giraffe and a jackal. The giraffe has two special features: its long neck to reach the highest branches and its big heart that weighs around 13.4 kilos. For that reason, the heart has to work hard to pump fluids to the neck. Due to the fact that Nonviolent Communication is about connecting on a heart, the giraffe exemplifies how intense compassion should be addressed to fulfill human needs. On the other hand, the jackal represents the language of demands. We speak jackal when we tell others what is wrong or when we label people. This animal has the same basic needs than the giraffe, but the ways it acts and speaks exasperate or discomfort others (Marantz and Kilian, 2005: 20).

Nowadays, it is easier to find a higher number of adults trying to learn English for academic and career success; however it is hard and emotionally challenging, and several times frustrating for grown-ups to acquire a second language. Due to this fact, it is significant to instruct adults in developing self-confidence and lowering anxiety. According to Stephen Krashen, second language acquisition researcher in *The Input Hypothesis: Issues and Implications*, he refers to the way we acquire a language by understanding messages through five hypotheses. For the purpose of this paper, we will refer to the Affective Filter Hypothesis, which is defined as "a mental block that prevents acquirers from fully utilizing the comprehensible input they receive for language acquisition" (Kraschen, 1982: 3). This block is caused by affective factors or variables such as high anxiety, low self-esteem, and low motivation. Therefore, adults acquire a second language when they are not worried about making mistakes or being judged, they learn well when they are involved in the message which means that if they feel comfortable enough, their affective filters are low.

Second language attainment in terms of age differences has shown that children are generally faster than adults because younger learners acquire more comprehensible input since their affective filters are low and children are not concerned with failure (Kraschen, 1982:12). Nevertheless, adults can obtain comprehensible input in different ways, they have the advantage

of bringing background knowledge which can help them share experiences and analyze information in order to communicate with others. Based on this information, what is necessary is the reflection on how to help adults lower their affective filters in order to be more successful in learning a second language by means NVC.

In regards to the Affective Filter Hypothesis, Krashen states in his book *Principles and Practice in Second Language Acquisition* that “our pedagogical goals should not only include supplying comprehensible input, but also creating a situation that encourages a low filter” (Kraschen, 1982: 32). As language teachers, we are responsible for creating a comfortable classroom atmosphere where students can be genuinely encouraged and challenged to achieve their best, promoting participation in a comfortable environment that pretends to lower affective variables and not being worried about the linguistic aspects of learning and the probability of failure at any point. “The input hypothesis and the concept of the Affective Filter define the language teacher in a new way. The effective language teacher is someone who can provide input and help make it comprehensible in a low anxiety situation” (Kraschen, 1982: 32).

As a result, adults will respond positively in a pleasant and sociable condition, so that teachers should help enrich understanding of the subject in a friendly environment in their classrooms.

Among the principles of language learning and teaching, the study of personality factors that contribute to developing self-confidence and lower anxiety has been well examined by professor and researcher H. Douglas Brown in his book *Principles of Language Learning and Teaching* where he states that the affective domain, even if it is hard to define, refers to the emotional side of humans and how we behave and develop a variety of personality factors, feelings and emotions, and that considering how we feel and why we act in one way or another or why we react, think and give significance to what surrounds us is extremely essential in understanding theories of second language acquisition (Brown, 1994:136).

Analyzing the importance of factors which influence in second language acquisition is appropriate to support the reasons why NVC is suitable in teaching adults. It would be inappropriate to say that a second language is attained through comprehensible input without taking into account the importance of considering the learner’s personality factors and their role in language production in order to reach success in second language acquisition. To begin with, some of the personality factors described by Brown are self-esteem, inhibition, risk-taking, anxiety, empathy, extroversion and motivation. Students whose self-esteem is improved have a positive response towards learning. “Self-esteem is probably the most pervasive aspect of any human behavior. It could easily be claimed that no successful cognitive or affective activity can be carried out without some degree of self-esteem, self-confidence, knowledge of yourself, and belief in your own capabilities for that activity” (Brown, 1994:136).

Moreover, it would be important to make awareness in teachers about the concept of inhibition to help learners fall down the walls of defense that are often built to protect themselves from their weaknesses. The implications of factors such as risk-taking, anxiety, empathy and extroversion are also important to avoid aspects like the fear of making foolish mistakes, feeling frustration and lacking communication, tolerance and inner strength which hinder learning. As a

final point, motivation is the factor that is typically explained to reach success in the process of teaching and learning. Brown affirms that no matter if the learners are motivated intrinsically or extrinsically, they will meet their needs positively if they are actually motivated to learn (Brown, 1994:153).

In order to understand NVC as a new paradigm shift in adult's learning a second language, the study of pedagogical practices may guide teachers in considering methodologies and approaches that lead instruction into a belief or position concerned with methods that highlight both, the teacher and student's roles and behavior. Teachers should design objectives and material contextualized for creating a comfortable classroom environment in which the personality factors of their adult learners described above facilitate the lowering of their affective filter and ease the process of acquiring a second language.

#### 4 Adult Learning Principles

Marshal Rosenberg developed NVC as a way to help people express more compassion in human relationships. He conducted a study about language used by those whose lives are full of love and show compassion. From his study, Rosenberg concluded that creating a peaceful world requires to eliminate language that contributes to violence. This statement helps people meet their own needs and positively contribute to meeting the needs of others. This approach recognizes that human beings act out of wanting to meet positive needs. At every moment we have choices about how we relate to others and awareness is crucial in choosing how we relate to others and ourselves (Rosenberg, 2003:1) Thus, NVC is used to build effective relationships in the classroom. For example, imagine a student who is always causing trouble for the other students. A non violent request may be: Would you please stop making fun of us? We feel exasperated when you do that. It might take a hundred requests a day, but he may eventually get the message and would avoid that behavior.

On the other hand, Malcolm Knowles describes adult learning as a process of self-directed inquiry, which means that students would work together to share strengths and also weaker skills. In order to create an environment in which learning can take place, four things are necessary. First, students need to feel safe, but also challenged. Second, everyone should have a chance to contribute. Third, all tasks must be noticeably defined through clear instructions. Finally, teachers have to elicit experiences and skills of their students in order to actively engage them (Rosenberg, 2003:4).

Teachers have the duty to help adults identify their needs in order to guide their own learning experience. Teachers should be interested in learning more about how an adult learns and processes information, so that we can better communicate with each other and we may more effectively set up the optimum learning environment. Thus, he proposes nine principles of adult learning that pretend to foster a learning climate of trust, activate involvement, and responsibility where learners' goals and expectations are achieved. These principles joined to the NVC approach are listed below as a way to support adults learning and encourage compassion in the classroom plus a component that we would add to the list as a tenth principle.

#### 4.1 *Adults are experienced and knowledgeable*

Adults have such an abundance of knowledge and experience, so they should have the chance to express their concerns, opinions, and experiences to nourish learning. As a result, teachers need to be aware that sometimes we do not have all the answers, but they can take advantage of the strengths learners can contribute to the classroom by allowing adult-learners to have a say in the learning process. Educators should be willing to listen and open opportunities for dialogue in order to activate students' background knowledge every time they are introduced to new content. Thus, part of NVC is to express our needs and listen to others in order to assist understanding (Rosenberg, 2003: 6).

#### 4.2 *Adults bring their own connotations and established points of view*

People who are clear about their needs are not likely to judge others' beliefs and opinions. They are more likely to allow debate and share ideas. Likewise, teachers have the responsibility to moderate and promote empathy, respect, cooperation and learning. According to Rosenberg, empathy can be defined as "a respectful understanding of what others are experiencing" (Rosenberg, 2003:104). Thus, the NVC process allows others to express themselves freely. On the other hand, we should listen attentively to identify their needs and feelings in order to come up with solutions.

#### 4.3 *Adults have different learning styles and learn at a different pace*

To meet the needs of all students, teachers have to use specific examples, different strategies (visual, auditory, tactile, and kinesthetic) and concrete models to make abstractions and generalizations clear. Additionally, since learners process at their own pace we should enable students to work from controlled and supported tasks to independent production. Finally, when the teacher knows what skills and concepts students possess all classes can be planned within a student's range of challenge. Rosenberg states that comparisons are classified as judgments; as a consequence, we think in terms of what is wrong with the way people behave, act or talk (Rosenberg, 2003:18). Additionally, if teachers avoid comparisons in the classroom all achievements and improvements can be celebrated cooperatively.

#### 4.4 *Adults relate new knowledge by making associations*

It is well known that comprehension can increase by means of activating prior knowledge. It is a natural process that mature people do, relate new information to something we already know. As well, time spent creating safety and trust, meeting individual needs, and improving communication skills actually creates a compassionate learning community where learning can easily grow. Additionally, students are more sensitive to the needs of others, and empathy increases between teachers and students as well as between peers (Hart and Kindle, 2004: 28).

#### 4.5 *Adults need breaks to increase their attention span*

It is very difficult to stay focused on studies when you have been doing the same task for a long period of time. For that reason, it is important to plan on taking breaks and make sure each

student can actively participate. Teachers have to assign clear roles to each student, so that they can constantly get involved in discussions, sharing and comparing their ideas and understanding in class. Marantz and Kilian mention that it is helpful to differentiate between a demand and a request, in doing so teachers should maintain a gentle attentiveness of their learners' needs due to the fact that when their needs are not met learning can be hindered (Marantz and Kilian, 2005: 183).

#### 4.6 *Adults are satisfied by being praised*

When adults find themselves learning in a safe environment they are open to ask and participate more. Adult learners would not work in class if they felt exposed since they were afraid of making mistakes or being ridiculed. Here, we need to recall the first component of NVC that is observation. Teachers must create observable friendly and welcoming settings highlighting the fact that all inquiries and comments are treated with respect. Adult learners need to see how their teachers treat them as grow-up individuals who deserve to be listened. Their self-esteem and ego are at risk if the teacher does not show support or is not open minded to different opinions; they need to see this attitude from their teachers. Marshall Rosenberg in *Speak Peace in a World of Conflict* mentions that expressing and receiving gratitude sustain an environment that promotes social change in a positive way, and that praise and compliments are useless if they are not honest. In order to pacify egos, teachers have to make clear what the student does that is enriching, how we feel as instructors and what needs are met as a result of their actions. Consequently, we are connecting with them, and if we are giving gratitude we may receive it too (Rosenberg, 2005: 166).

#### 4.7 *Adults need to be self-directed*

Language teachers should not expect learners to understand everything or to agree with them all the time. The role of the teacher ought to be that of a guide without the purpose of just transmitting knowledge and getting students to simply obey or follow instructions with no inquiries. NVC suggests that we make request using positive action language in order to guide learners, by letting them be the responsible for making their own decisions. "Your language is positive in the sense that it requests what you do want the other person to do, rather than what you don't want or what you want them to stop doing" (Rosenberg, 2005: 42).

Whether professors serve as facilitators, adult learners must feel free to involve in participating while they are being autonomous, expressing their interests and setting goals for their own learning. Learning from their own mistakes could be a great tool as well, so teachers can also provide regular constructive and specific feedback. Flexible teachers can have students responding more positively, since they see teachers' requests and not demands. Requests are clear and nicely asked while demands are seen as difficult things to do, these are asked forcefully, in a way that shows that a refusal is not expected, so that the concept of empathy would be at risk and therefore students would not feel comfortable at all, this will definitely hinder their learning and create a harmful student-teacher relationship. "Make clear requests that people trust as requests. In order for them to trust that it's a request, they need to know that they can disagree and be understood" (Rosenberg, 2005: 49).

#### 4.8 *Adults have individual differences*

Along this paper, NVC has been established as a life-enriching approach for education that can be applied as a resource to help adult learners improve their second language performance as they reduce conflict, communicate needs and feelings and also enhance relationships with classmates and teachers, conducting a more tolerant view of the society and everything that surrounds us. We mentioned before that adults have a difference in experience that youth. Hence, teachers need to consider that all humans learn at a different pace and through different styles. There are individual differences that might help or hinder the learning process, so that the implementation of alternative teaching methods that includes a variety of learning styles will benefit the classroom environment.

NVC invites teachers to a practical application of strategies to find needs met, so students should have practices in which they identify their best strategies for learning. For instance, using surveys or questionnaires for adult learners can be helpful to identify their needs and therefore, teachers can benefit from the scores and provide useful strategies that fulfill the student's attention span and progress in the learning process. H. Douglas Brown, who affirms in *Principles of Language Learning and Teaching* that students who are able to understand their own abilities and capacities can recognize their strengths and weakness in order to be used to overcome difficulties and reach success (Brown, 1004: 136).

#### 4.9 *Adults like problem-solving tasks*

Adults learn in a practical setting where they can find themselves looking for solutions in real life contexts. If students are learning a second language, they have the need of communicating in the target language for specific purposes, either for getting a better job, earning more money, applying for a scholarship to study abroad, traveling, or just to communicate with others. Having students participate in problem solving activities will face them to use the language, to assess how much they know. It is convenient to link theory to practice by having students experiencing as much as possible. Bringing opportunities for coming up with situations in which learners work together to find the solution to a problem or situation without conflicts is a NVC strategy.

Since conflicts can be mediated with the use of NVC, teachers must teach adults to be mediators, that is to have conversations and chat in community involving in a disagreement but trying to help them agree or find a solution to their problems. An activity in the class could be to call in students to be negotiators to mediate between two sides in different contexts. For instance a debate or simulation could be set in order to find answers, not to create struggles or discussions that do not lead to solutions, but the opposite. In these cases, it is important to ask adults what their needs are and what their requests are, these basic questions can make us understand others and even ourselves (Rosenberg, 2003:112).

#### 4.10 *Group work to create sense of community*

Team works and small groups promote interaction and that is why we can start to teach students through NVC to connect empathically with others. It is not easy to see beauty inside



others when we are now living in a violent world; however it is our job as teachers to use NVC in our classrooms to connect with learners and help them connect with others and with their own selves. By hearing feelings and needs behind any message, using group strategies builds a sense of community, thus their processes of learning a second language eases thoughtfully. Even if some practice can be done individually, we should recall Brown's words in his work *Strategies for Success*: "Language is used for communication. It is a way to understand other people's thoughts, feelings, and ideas. With language you can tell others about your own thoughts, feelings, and ideas. Therefore, a large amount of your English language practice should involve other people" (60).

Brown suggested some strategies for success using group work by considering extrovert and introvert students. Among these, he suggests to extroverted learners to continue to practice the language with others but also to focus on practicing a little more on their own, since being so dependent on others may turn out to be a disadvantage. The opposite occurs with introverted learners. It is a good idea to pair up students with different partners, to work in groups with unusual classmates promotes interaction and builds up new relations. Through dialogues in groups, NVC proposes to have students expressing how they feel and what they want in order to connect with others, no matter how people respond, they need to communicate needs and feelings in order to meet everybody's requirements (Rosenberg, 2003: 91).

Adult learners need to create personal and professional relationships in mutual respect, compassion and emotional safety. It is a great tool to use NVC in a classroom environment where adult students are learning a second language since having them work in groups in a peaceful environment will make them move beyond struggles and finally learn to cooperate and trust in others and themselves, this will help them be more successful learners and at the same time, we as teachers will be contributing to society, creating settings in which the focus on observations, feelings, needs and clear requests becomes more compassionate, and as a consequence more productive. This is not any kind of utopia, but a powerful device inside each and one of us. Considering NVC principles and adult learning principles collectively, we can support teachers, students and the educational system in general to make a radical transformation, to work in harmony, and therefore get better results in relationships inside and outside the classroom as well as in the acquisition of a second language.

## 5 Conclusions

Foreign and second language educators are always examining a variety of approaches to enable students become functionally competent in the target language. There are studies about the acquisition of a second language to find tools that help adults learn and engage in their language learning process. We suggest teachers to review the study of acquisition of a second language, the NVC approach and adult principles to find out strategies to implement in the classroom and avoid hindering learning for acquiring a target language competently. Therefore more research can avoid present conflicts in the classroom and possible future problems

In order to lower the variables that impede a relaxing and motivating environment and create a positive learning setting that help learners acquire a second language more effectively, this paper is focused on adults learning English through Nonviolent communication (NVC) that spotlights the concepts of empathy and compassion, taking into account one's feelings and needs and act to help get those needs met. We have tried to create awareness on educators by increasing interaction in which cooperation contributes to a peaceful environment that opens and develops empathy overcoming judging the one-self and the others.

Here we have emphasized specific principles on adult learning, providing information about how to teach skills through techniques based on NVC that can help the learner discover that the study of English as a foreign or second language could be more relevant and meaningful if the learning environment is physically and psychologically comfortable.

The use of NVC can have high impact learning on adults. Therefore we recommend language educators to analyze and experience its benefits taking into account the recognition of strengths in each student and encouraging learners to share knowledge gained from their daily lives as part of classroom learning. NVC considers there is significantly less violence in a culture where people think in terms of human needs, so a group of adults will function well by paying attention to NVC language and its components. Each of the pieces were described and analyzed to be put into practice for opening up a space of discussion with the educators to see the value of this NVC approach in terms of adult second language learning.

Since adult learners bring their own experiences and may be hesitant or confused, they have different expectations that professors need to know to avoid tension. Getting to know those needs and feelings, language educators should examine NVC effects to help students react positively to their first experiences. The teacher is responsible to guide students towards completing tasks in a nonviolent environment maintaining positive connections with each other.

As a final point, this paper has presented and suggested NVC as a paradigm shift seen as perspective that based on adult principles, looks for creating awareness to avoid judging oneself, others and the setting of learning. Meeting needs of grown-ups through this approach will underline the importance of allowing ourselves to be vulnerable and help resolve conflicts mainly caused by the psychological variables that have been studied in second language acquisition hypothesis.

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