

TEACHING FOREIGN LANGUAGES TO OLDER ADULT LEARNERS: PRELIMINARY OBSERVATIONS

Małgorzata Karczewska

PhD, Assistant Professor, Department of Modern Languages, University of Zielona Góra, Poland

Marcin Zygmunt

BA, MA student, Department of Modern Languages, University of Zielona Góra, Poland

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Abstract

When discussing the topic of teaching and learning foreign languages, what comes to one's mind first seems often to be the school environment in which learning a foreign language is obligatory throughout the entire education. However, adult learners, including older adult learners (OALs), and their foreign language learning process require scientific investigation as part of life-long learning proven to be an important aspect of the well-being of seniors in the psychological, social and medical dimension.

The aim of the paper is to take a closer look at what experiences related to foreign language learning older adult learners have, what their motivation is about, what teaching methods and materials they find efficient, what difficulties they experience and what could enhance the process of foreign language learning. In order to find answers to these questions, an online Google form questionnaire was created which was filled in by respondents aged 60 or above.

The answers received, despite being limited in number, show that OALs have experience with learning several European languages, they want to communicate with foreigners, including members of their family, in both travel and at work. They prefer private classes based on conversations, as well as the use of course books and other printed materials. The main difficulties include a lack of time and memory-related problems while having an opportunity to use the language in practice and having a good teacher could enhance the foreign language process.

Keywords: foreign language learning, older adult learners, life-long learning.

Introduction

Relevance of the topic. Lifelong learning is one of the leitmotifs of current reality as the learning process goes far beyond the institutional framework for children and teenagers. Therefore, learning is not just about schools and young people, adults continue to develop their skills long after graduation. Among adult learners, one can identify the eldest learning group, i.e. older adult learners (OAL). For this group of learners, acquiring knowledge and skills offers particular advantages, but it may also present certain obstacles uncommon among younger learners (Słowik-Krogulec, 2019). These particularities need further investigation. In addition, while a significant amount of research focuses on children and teenage learners, less is published on seniors in the educational context, with more attention paid to health-related and social aspects of senior activity (Czerniawska, 2000; Uzar, 2011).

One of the activities undertaken by seniors is foreign language learning which enables them to get familiar with foreign cultures and obtain a tool of communication (Słowik-Krogulec 2020). This paper aims to investigate the OAL reality of foreign language learning, including possible problems and obstacles faced by OALs. With a growing number of seniors and the significant relevance of international communication, this topic requires further research.

Research problem. While school-based foreign language teaching and learning is widely analyzed in research, the reality of older adult foreign language learners is not commonly investigated. Still, the studies by Słowik-Krogulec (2019; 2020; 2021) and Niewczas (2022) focus on seniors as a particular group of foreign language learners with their needs, expectations and possible obstacles to face. The present paper focuses on the motivation, favorite teaching methods and materials as well as the difficulties encountered by older adult learners – respondents who took part in the research.

Subject matter of the research – The subject of this research is foreign language learning of older adult learners, with particular focus on the needs and expectations of this group of learners stemming from their life experiences, medical condition and other factors. The results obtained can be useful tips for teachers.

Research aim – The paper aims to investigate older adult learners in the framework of foreign language learning, with a particular focus on the specific needs and expectations of this age group.

Research objectives:

1. To analyze the reality of seniors, in particular in the learning context.
2. To investigate the needs and expectations as well as possible obstacles faced by this group of foreign language learners through a survey.

Research methods: scientific literature analysis, survey method.

1. Theoretical background

With a growing population of elderly people and changing lifestyles among seniors, there is a clear need to investigate the functioning of the members of this age group in various aspects of social life. However, it is important to define the notion of a senior. According to different sources, the age threshold of becoming a senior may differ significantly, usually from 50 to 65 years while the term *middle age* is broader, it may refer to people as young as 40 years old (Słowik-Krogulec, 2020; Niewczas, 2022). In the Polish reality, a good indicator might be the retirement age which is 60 for women and 65 for men. This post-working age, referred to as the third age, is a period of life with its characteristics, possibilities and challenges.

Undoubtedly, the key terms for characterizing older people are ageing and old age. The first of them means a long-term process lasting the entire human life. It can be divided into three types: “biological (body), mental (including intellect, emotions, identity) and social ageing (social roles)” (Brzezińska & Graczkowska, 2012, p. 13). This process is irreversible and leads to old age. This term refers to the condition of an older person, which can be estimated to begin between the ages of 60-65 (ibid.). In addition to these changes, such as prudence or life experience, there are also negative ones - health issues, financial problems, or the death of loved ones (Janeczko, 2013). Therefore, attention should be paid to these problems, because, according to WHO, the number of older people will have increased to 1.4 billion by 2030 (<https://www.who.int/news-room/fact-sheets/detail/ageing-and-health>). The Centers for Disease Control and Prevention released the results of a study on the health of people over 65 years of age. According to the research, the greatest reported challenges are related to movement and hearing (<https://www.cdc.gov>). Loss of skeletal muscle mass and strength is inevitable when ageing and may be exacerbated by factors such as a lack of physical activity or nutrition (Bienias, 2017). Moreover, bone tissue loss is a characteristic feature of osteoporosis which contributes to greater susceptibility to bone fractures. As a result, older people may have problems with balance and responding to stimuli from the body (Brzezińska & Graczkowska, 2012).

The second equally high indicator in the above-mentioned study referred to hearing impairment. This undoubtedly has a negative impact on everyday life and is of significant importance in the framework of foreign language learning. An equally important difficulty that older people have to struggle with is vision-related problems. As many as 23.3% of respondents in 2022 confirmed to be struggling with worsening eyesight, which is 1.3 percentage points more than in 2019 (<https://www.cdc.gov>). In addition to eye diseases such as cataracts or glaucoma, there is often a problem with seeing at close range. As a result, older people may struggle, among others, with lower visual acuity, different color perception, sensitivity to light, or pain (Dzięgielewska & Dzięgielewski, 2016, p. 107). All consequences related to visual dysfunction significantly affect functioning in everyday life and may even influence the development of other diseases, such as depression. “Research has shown that in the group of people with visual impairment, the risk of depression within 2 months of the disease increases 2.5 times compared to the group without vision problems. [...] This percentage increases as vision deteriorates” (Kłak, 2016, p. 61).

Although mental problems are less common in older people than physical health problems, they are of great importance when it comes to well-being and quality of life. An example is depression, which is characterized by, among others, low mood, anxiety and fear, associated with, for example, the feeling of imminent death or fear of the future (Brzezińska & Graczkowska, 2012). Moreover, loneliness, which can also accompany older people, is one of the three main causes leading to depression and ultimately even suicide attempts (Misra & Singh, 2009).

The physical and mental condition of older adults is reflected in their lifestyle: some are passive, while others are more active taking part in social life, travelling or participating in activities proposed

by institutions such as the Universities of the Third Age (Czerniawska, 2000). It is proven that an active lifestyle plays a crucial role in positive aging and maintaining a better psychophysical condition (Uzar 2011: 43), so the participation of senior citizens in activities aimed at this age group helps to improve their intellectual capabilities. One of such activities is foreign language learning offered e.g. by the University of the Third Age. However, courses and learning materials designed specifically for older adult learners are scarce.

Foreign Language Geragogy (FLG), a term in use since around 2013, refers to senior foreign language education, a phenomenon discussed, among others, by Marek Derenowski (2021). This is a developing area of study with a still relatively limited number of studies published (Słowik-Krogulec, 2021). With the growing percentage of seniors in society and their interest in learning foreign languages, it can be predicted that both scientific research on the matter and practical solutions for both teachers and students are to be expected. As studies on FLG show, senior foreign language learners do manifest needs and preferences as far as the teacher's approach and the materials used in the foreign language classroom are concerned (Słowik-Krogulec, 2019). Senior foreign language learners may tend to base their attitude to learning on "previous negative learning experiences" (Słowik-Krogulec, 2019, p. 191), which, taking into account the teaching reality of the past decades, may result in a negative approach to learning a foreign language. Another issue can be one's current reality with possible health problems, financial limitations or a family situation which may all have a negative impact on the learning process. Another obstacle might be a lack of appropriate offers for senior learners (Słowik-Krogulec, 2019). Last, senior learners may face opinions and fears related to their presumed incapacity, or at least difficulties, in foreign language learning. All these factors have to be taken into account by foreign language teachers working with older adult learners.

An important aspect to be taken into account is the learners' motivation. As in each group the motivations to learn a foreign language may be different, e.g. obligatory school curriculum for children and teenagers or job opportunities for young adults, in the case of OAL the motivation can still be varied. According to the study by Słowik-Krogulec (2020), the main motivation is „social contact” indicated by 75% of the respondents including, among others, the will to communicate with family members living abroad. As many as 30% of the respondents in the study by Słowik-Krogulec indicated this answer, which implies that numerous OAL face a situation in which they need to learn a foreign language to maintain family bonds. Even if the size of the study group (less than 100 participants) cannot be treated as a considerable one, it may indicate current trends in this age group. While emigration is not a recent phenomenon, in the case of Polish families a significant turning point took place along with the access of Poland to the European Union in 2004. Since then, thousands of Poles have decided to start a new life in Ireland, the United Kingdom, the Netherlands, Germany and other countries. While some of these emigrants might have returned to Poland after a certain period of time, many have settled down and started families abroad. This, in turn, has led to a situation in which their children are brought up in a bilingual or even multilingual environment in which the dominant language is usually the language of the country, not Polish. In many cases, the spouse of an emigrant is not a Pole, so communication within a family takes place in languages other than Polish. Therefore, to communicate with their grandchildren and one of the parents, OALs need to learn a foreign language. This need lies within the most general aim of foreign language learning, i.e. the will to communicate in the target language. Communication may take place abroad, but easy access to the Internet enhances international communication without the need of travelling. Nevertheless, motivation related to travelling and getting to know foreign cultures is also among the most common reasons to learn a foreign language (Słowik-Krogulec, 2020).

The results mentioned indicate a kind of new reality of senior life: elderly people travel abroad, make new friends, and are curious and willing to get to know new cultures. This fact is in line with the general attitude of modern seniors who seem to be different from seniors in previous generations due to new possibilities, means of communication, financial status, etc. They are more socially active and eager to maintain a good physical and mental condition which are interrelated. Lifelong learning can be beneficial for that aim (Narushima, Liu & Diestelkamp, 2016), in particular foreign language learning which may help to prevent neurodegenerative diseases (see: Niewczas, 2022).

The present paper aims to verify the results of the above-mentioned studies, with a particular focus

on the motivation of older adult learners of foreign languages, their preferred teaching methods and materials, as well as difficulties encountered, including the specific needs of this group of learners.

2. Research methodology

In order to get insight into the foreign language learning reality of older adult learners, a survey was conducted among respondents aged 60 or more (the retirement age for women was chosen as the age limit). The questionnaire in Polish in the form of a Google form included three questions related to the respondents' age, sex and education level as well as nine questions related to foreign language experience:

1. Have you ever learnt a foreign language? (yes/no question)
2. What languages do you speak or have you learnt? (open question with more than one answer possible)
3. What motivates you to learn a foreign language? (open question)
4. What teaching/learning methods do you find the most efficient? (options to choose from: individual lessons, lessons in groups, online classes, self-study, other)
5. What types of classes do you find the most interesting? (options to choose from: conversations, grammar classes, reading & writing, watching films & listening, other)
6. What learning materials do you find the most helpful? (course books, applications, books/magazines, other)
7. What difficulties do you encounter when learning a foreign language? (open question)
8. What factors may disturb your foreign language learning? (open question)
9. What factors may enhance your foreign language learning? (open question)

3. Results

The main difficulty for researchers with adult learners is more limited access to them than in the case of institutionalized teaching/learning where it is possible to involve entire groups of students in the research. Adult learners often choose private tuition or self-study, which makes them less visible to potential researchers. In addition, apart from the University of the Third Age, courses designed specifically for seniors are rare to find. Taking into account the methodology of the present study, another possible difficulty may be the online form of the questionnaire sent to seniors as not all of them may be familiar with new technologies. As for the moment of writing this paper, only ten respondents have filled in the questionnaire, so the study is limited and requires more participants to be more representative. Nevertheless, the results obtained can be treated as preliminary observations and indicators of possible factors related to foreign language teaching which need to be taken into account by both researchers and teachers.

When it comes to the age, the respondents were 62 (4 people), 66, 68 (1 person each), 69 (two people), 70 and 79 (1 person each) years old. Six men and four women filled in the questionnaire, out of whom seven had a university degree and three had secondary education (corresponding to A levels). All the respondents confirmed having learnt foreign languages (question 1) and indicated Russian (8 respondents), English (7), German (6), French (3) and Italian (2) as the languages with which they had learning experience (question 2). These answers show that all the respondents had experience with foreign language learning, which was expected as foreign languages are a part of the Polish school curriculum, and a majority of the respondents had experience with more than one foreign language, which can serve as an opportunity to compare different learning circumstances, e.g. obligatory language learning at school and adulthood learning for a particular aim. The answers to the question on motivation (question three) indicate that the main reason to learn a foreign language is the ability to communicate with foreigners (three answers), in both professional (two respondents mentioned work specifically) and private contexts (travelling). One respondent indicated the ability to use source materials available in a foreign language, such as books or journals/magazines, while one person declared no particular motivational factor. These answers confirm that older adults are still active, they communicate with foreigners and travel abroad, which is contrary to the stereotypical perception of this age group.

Among the responses to question 4, individual classes were the most frequently indicated option (8 respondents), followed by self-study (3) and lessons in groups (2). One respondent indicated travelling to the countries where a given language is spoken as the most efficient way of learning a foreign language. None of the respondents chose online classes, which proves that older adult learners do not perceive this option as the most efficient way to learn a language. As far as the type or content of lessons is concerned (question 5), conversations were indicated as the most interesting type of class (6 respondents indicated that option), followed by reading and writing (5), watching films and listening to audio files (2), grammar classes (1) while one respondent indicated the option “other”. When it comes to the most helpful and useful learning materials (question 6), course books turned out to be the most popular materials, indicated by seven respondents, while books and magazines were chosen by five respondents and mobile applications were selected by three respondents. These answers show that some of the respondents chose more than one option, and traditional materials, i.e. course books, are believed to be the most helpful in learning a foreign language.

Among the answers to question 7 on the difficulties encountered in the process of foreign language learning, the respondents mentioned learning and remembering vocabulary, pronunciation patterns and forgetting what one has learnt. One person mentioned a lack of time and one respondent did not indicate any particular difficulty encountered when learning a foreign language. In the case of a more general question on possible factors disturbing the process of foreign language learning (question 8), five respondents indicated a lack of time, two mentioned the factor of age while the responses related to tiredness, lack of success, lack of motivation, and memory problems were mentioned once each. As far as the factors which could enhance the process of foreign language learning are concerned (question 9), a stay abroad resulting in a necessity to speak a foreign language was mentioned three times, while the following answers were given once each: a direct contact with native speakers, a good teacher and a decent course book, a higher level of motivation, more frequent opportunities to use a foreign language and more free time.

4. Discussion

The results of the survey, even if limited in number, allow us to observe certain tendencies in foreign language learning among older adult learners. As most of the respondents held a university degree, they presumably had had more opportunities to learn foreign languages in their lives, both within the obligatory education framework and in adult life. Many respondents have experience with more than one foreign language, which allows them to observe similarities and differences between these experiences. In addition, this experience might help older adult learners to realize what teaching/learning techniques are more efficient for them. Nevertheless, possible negative past experiences might have a negative impact on their current approach to learning foreign languages. The study shows that older adults are still active, some continue their professional lives. This activity, both in professional and private life, brings a necessity to communicate with foreigners, so the ability to speak foreign languages is of significant importance to the respondents. As a result, older adult learners are aware of the reasons for which they want or have to learn a foreign language, which is important in the context of motivation. For the respondents, learning foreign languages gives a tool to communicate, first and foremost in speech, with foreigners, at work and during travels, which shows the active aspect of modern older adult life. This active lifestyle may also be the reason why some respondents regret not having enough time to learn languages. Among other impediments, one can indicate issues related to memory problems which make the process of learning vocabulary or pronunciation patterns more difficult. On the other hand, among the factors which encourage older adult learners is a real opportunity to speak a language during a stay abroad or in other circumstances in which international communication is necessary. Therefore, the preferred type of classes is individual classes devoted to conversations and the use of printed materials such as course books. Teachers running classes for older adult learners have to take these aspects into account while choosing materials and teaching methods as well as during classes. Older adult learners may need more repetitions, and more time to learn a given piece of knowledge or may require additional assistance with modern tools such as online applications. Foreign language teachers have to be aware of the particular needs of this age group. In the future, with the ageing society,

more and more older adults will be likely to participate in foreign language classes, therefore, this topic requires more consideration from researchers and teachers.

Conclusions

1. Older adults often lead an active life including social contacts and travelling, which motivates them to learn foreign languages. The main motivation is the will to communicate with foreigners. Many seniors learn a foreign language in order to communicate with their family members, i.e. grandchildren, living abroad.

2. While the Universities of the Third Age do have an offer of foreign language learning, other courses and learning materials designed specifically for older adults are more difficult to find.

3. While research on older adults often focuses on the social, medical and financial aspects of senior life, studies on older adults as foreign language learners is still scarce.

4. Older adult learners often have experience with learning more than one language which can be helpful in present language learning. However, possible negative experiences may have a negative impact on their will to learn a foreign language.

5. Many older adults are still active in the labor market, which, on the one hand, may promote foreign language learning if required at work, but on the other hand, many older adults do not have enough time to learn a foreign language as much as they would like to.

6. Memory problems may impede the learning process, so teachers have to take this fact into account and adjust their course to the needs of this group of learners.

7. As older learners wish to communicate with foreigners, their preferred type of class is individual tuition in the form of conversations. Still, the skills of reading and writing are also important and older adult learners prefer traditional printed materials, mainly course books, to modern tools such as online applications.

8. As the present study is limited in the number of participants, further research is necessary to have a broader picture of the issue of foreign language learning to older adult learners.

9. Taking into account the ageing modern society, the topic should be of significant importance to both researchers and foreign language teachers.

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Dr. Małgorzata Karczewska, Marcin Zygmunt

Summary

Teaching foreign languages to older adults is a topic of significant importance which deserves more thorough research. While studies on formal education including obligatory language teaching to children and teenagers abound, research on adult learners, in particular older adults, is less popular. This difference may be due to the fact that adults learn languages outside the state system, often choosing private tuition or self-study, which makes it more difficult for researchers to analyze. Nevertheless, in the times of ageing societies and active senior lifestyle, it seems vital to examine this group of learners. Many studies on the life of seniors focus on medical, psychological or sociological issues, such as age-related diseases, problems with loneliness, everyday routine of pensioners or relations with family members, while research on seniors as adult learners of foreign languages is limited. The present paper aims to analyze older adults' experiences and preferences related to foreign language learning. Particular attention is paid to their motivation, favorite teaching methods and tools as well as possible problems. The results give insights into this topic which are undoubtedly important not only for researchers but, first and foremost, for teachers. The methodology is a literature review which indicates what aspects of older adult foreign language learning deserve further analysis and a survey among people aged 60 and more conducted with an online Google form containing questions on the issues mentioned above. The research is at its preliminary stage as only ten respondents filled in the questionnaire. Further research is planned.

The study brings several findings. First of all, it turns out that current seniors often lead an active life in which social contacts, also with foreigners, are important. The will to communicate with foreigners is the main factor of motivation to learn a foreign language among older adults. As many older adults still work, this communication can be related to one's professional life, but also to travelling in one's free time or to family life when family members (usually children and grandchildren) live abroad. This interest in foreign language learning is not reflected in the offer of course books or classes as, apart from the Universities of the Third Age, it is difficult to find materials and classes designed specifically for older adult learners. The study shows that all the respondents had experience with foreign languages, many speak or have learnt more than one language. This previous experience makes learners more aware of their needs and expectations, but possible negative experiences may render the process more difficult. Another possible difficulty is a lack of time as many older adults are active in the labor market and therefore cannot spend as much time as they would probably wish to on language learning. Other obstacles are age-related: it is mainly difficulties in remembering vocabulary, which is an indicator for teachers that older adults might require more time to learn vocabulary accompanied by frequent repetitions. The study confirms previous observations that learners wish to communicate in a foreign language, therefore, their preferred type of classes is individual conversations with a teacher. Reading and writing skills are also of significant importance to these learners who prefer traditional printed materials, such as course books, to modern online learning applications. As the study is limited, it requires more research as this topic is important not only for researchers but also for foreign language teachers.

Keywords: foreign language learning, older adult learners, life-long learning.