"It's never too late": A Narrative Inquiry of Older Polish Adults' English Language Learning Experiences

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Abstract

Globally, the number of adults aged over 50 is increasing and this group is becoming more active in second language (L2) learning. Despite these demographic changes, little research has focused on the issues faced by older learners. They are either omitted from research studies or viewed as part of a homogenous group of adult learners. Several assumptions appear to exist about this group, for example, that they are too old to learn, or they are likely to have memory problems. These assumptions can impact the pedagogical approach taken by language instructors. This study aims to supplement existing research by exploring the L2 learning experiences of a group of Polish learners of English aged 55 to 68. We conducted a series of interviews using a narrative inquiry approach to uncover the participants' L2 learning stories in order to understand their aims, challenges and aspirations. Our findings suggest that older adults can be highly motivated and aware of the challenges they face, but also eager to overcome them. This study emphasises that older learners are a neglected group within the field of second language acquisition (SLA) and pedagogical adjustments are needed to meet their learning needs.

Keywords: age effects, older learners, aging, narrative inquiry, memory, learning experience

Introduction

While age is one of the most distinctive individual differences between language learners, a lack of agreement exists regarding the precise effects of aging on second language acquisition (SLA). This may be because researchers tend to favor learners at the younger end of the biological spectrum, focusing on children, teenagers and young adults. Even though over 50

years ago Lenneberg (1967) drew attention to the fact that "a person can learn to communicate in a foreign language at the age of forty" (1967, p. 176), older adults persist in being a neglected group within the literature. In the 1990s, Scott (1994) confirmed that adult learners in the 50+ age bracket were absent from SLA research and two decades later, researchers are still recommending that attention be paid to this group (e.g., Andrew, 2012; Mackey & Sachs, 2012; Singleton & Ryan, 2004).

In recent years the number of older people worldwide has been growing steadily. A United Nations (2015) report predicts a 56% increase in adults aged 60 and over between 2015 and 2030. Thanks to medical advancements, older adults are remaining more healthy and active and there is a growing recognition of the importance of lifelong learning for this group (Withnall, 2010). Although the number of older learners is increasing, insufficient research into age-related factors runs the risk of reinforcing a stereotypical view of older adults as inactive and unsuccessful. This notion that older learners are deficient is challenged by Ramírez Gómez (2014) who also points out that society's ageist presumptions could negatively influence language teachers and prejudice their teaching methodology. There also exists a tendency to treat adult learners as a single homogenous group. For example, adults in their 20s and those in their 60s will differ from each other and Long (1991, p. 25) points out that "it is erroneous to speak of 'the adult learner' as if there is a generic adult that can represent all adults." Nevertheless, the idea of viewing adults as a uniform group seems widely accepted in SLA research.

Developmental psychology has traditionally divided adulthood into three stages: adulthood (20 to 40 years), middle adulthood (40 to 65 years) and late adulthood (65 years and older) (Sigelman & Rider, 2012). Upton (2011) claimed that the "middle stage" receives the least attention, a view echoed by Mackey and Sachs (2012) who describe older adults as an "understudied population of language learners" (p. 707). Widening the discussion around age factors is also encouraged by supporters of the Critical Period Hypothesis (CPH) who suggest "separate analyses per age group" are needed (DeKeyser *et al.*, 2010, p. 417) to develop a more rounded picture. Although the separation of adults into older and younger groups could be seen as ageist, it cannot be denied that differences do appear to exist between learners in the three stages of adulthood and one way to ensure we meet the needs of older learners is to uncover the distinctive features that characterise individuals in this particular group.

Age Effects in Second Language Acquisition (SLA)

The belief that better language learning outcomes are achieved by younger learners first found theoretical success with the Critical Period Hypothesis (CPH) (Lenneberg, 1967). However, the current status of the CPH is inconclusive, raising the question whether comparisons between adult and child learners are justified. Andrew (2012) points out that the CPH fails to address differences amongst adults of different ages, making no distinction between "30-, 40- and 50-year-old learners" (Andrew, 2012, p. xiii). By neglecting certain age groups, the CPH provides an unsatisfactory explanation for age effects in SLA and provides only a limited picture.

Other authors reject a purely biological approach to age-related effects, emphasising the full complexity involved. For example, Moyer (2004, p. 12) views age as a "continuous variable" interacting with other factors, rather than existing on its own. This is supported by other researchers (e.g., Dörnyei, 2009; Ellis, 2008; Marinova-Todd, Marshall & Snow, 2000) who believe age interplays with psychological, cognitive, and social factors and cannot be used in isolation to explain SLA success or failure. We share the view that age-effects in SLA are a complex process and this study attempts to move beyond purely biological explanations and gain a more comprehensive insight.

Older adults and SLA

Several studies exist which focus on younger adults in the 20 to 40 age-range (e.g., Abrahamsson & Hyltenstam, 2008; DeKeyser, 2000; Ehrman & Oxford, 1995; Johnson & Newport, 1989). However, these studies mainly assess the attainment of *native-like* levels among adults of various ages. Studies of older adults in the 50+ age-bracket are less common (e.g., Bongaerts *et al.*, 1995; Hakuta et al., 2003; White and Genesee, 1996) and tend to focus on comparisons with younger learners, often presenting older adults in a negative light. Other studies examining older learners (e.g., Moyer, 2004; Mackey and Sachs, 2012; Wang, 1999) focus on immigrants outside of their country of birth. Few studies exist which examine older adults learning English in their native country, where English is a *foreign* (EFL), rather than a *second* language (ESL).

One study by Andrew (2012) brings a fresh approach to the existing research on older adults and is important for two reasons. Firstly, Andrew concentrated on adult FL learners in their native country and secondly, age was examined from a socio-cultural perspective rather than a purely biological one. The study was based in Mexico and involved seven adult learners of English with ages ranging from 23 to 69. Andrew (2012) found that age and learner identity were closely interlinked with gender, class and ethnicity and a purely biological approach gave only limited insight. The author also argued that a focus on the CPH had created a stereotype of adult learners and advocated instead for a more "holistic" approach. A further study worthy of mention here is Jaroszewska (2013) who examined the learning motivations of older adults from a multi-cultural perspective. Jaroszewska (2013) found that although the number of L2 courses for older adults is increasing, further improvement is needed and the current teaching methodology is inadequate, with a lack of relevant materials hindering this group. Finally, more recent research comes from Ramírez Gómez (2016b) who investigated older adults learning Spanish in Japan. It explored the vocabulary learning strategies of these learners and drew on the authors' previous research into L2 "Foreign Language Critical Gerogogy" (Ramírez Gómez, 2016a). The study suggests that older learners may need re-training in their approach to vocabulary learning and presents practical suggestions to be incorporated into the classroom, specifically tailored to older learners.

The research presented here focuses solely on older adults learning English in an EFL setting and explores their learning experiences in detail. We believe that by listening to their learning stories, we may enhance our understanding of these learners' aims, aspirations and the challenges they face in their study of English.

Benefits of FL Learning for Older Adults

Aging is associated not only with biological decline but also with neurodegenerative diseases such as dementia and Alzheimer's (Antoniou et al, 2013). Therefore, providing opportunities to slow cognitive decline has been gaining in importance. Researchers suggest that mentally stimulating activities such as learning a foreign language may reduce cognitive decline in older adults (Białystok & Craik, 2010; Valenzuela & Sachdev, 2006). Research also shows that bilingualism has benefits for cognitive functioning and may delay the onset of dementia (Białystok *et al*., 2006; Craik *et al*., 2010) and can also activate certain cognitive processes such as working memory, speech segmentation and sound discrimination (Antoniou *et al*., 2013).

Ramírez Gómez (2016a) notes physical benefits of SLA such as improved brain plasticity and also stresses the cultural benefits of L2 learning, which enables learners to interact with a global community via the English language. The importance of multi-cultural benefits is also highlighted by Jaroszewska (2013) who suggests learning English may help older adults to integrate better into a European context through improved opportunities for intercultural communication.

Characteristics of older adults

There are certain characteristics common to older adults which may affect the learning process. For example, it is believed that "crystallised abilities" (the ability to use acquired knowledge) decline more slowly than "fluid abilities" (Salthouse, 2009). Fluid abilities involve pattern recognition, working to strict time limits and understanding abstract principles (Lovell, 1989), all of which are important in language learning. Therefore, the decline of fluid abilities may negatively impact older adults.

Another issue for older learners is a reduction in working memory as well as problems with speed and attention (Hakuta, Białystok & Wiley, 2003; Scott, 1994). These may pose challenges in the language classroom which requires these skills to successfully acquire new language features, especially vocabulary learning or timed exercises. Difficulties with encoding and retaining new information are also characteristic of this group (Hakuta *et al*., 2003; Singleton & Ryan, 2004). This may hinder word memorization and the comprehension of teacher instructions. It is also suggested that a decline in hearing sensitivity is common, affecting the attainment of oral-aural skills (Singleton & Ryan, 2004) and causing difficulty discriminating speech sounds or identifying key words.

However, despite physical and cognitive decline, many researchers believe that older adults still retain a characteristic ability to learn and develop. Although the learning process may be more challenging, they believe there is no single point after which a healthy adult cannot acquire an L2 (Herschensohn, 2007; Singleton & Ryan, 2004). We believe this view is encouraging for older learners and indicates that further research would be beneficial.

From Pedagogy to "Gerogogy"

The perceived differences in learning processes between children and adults led to an alternative teaching approach for adults termed "andragogy." Knowles (1980, p. 43) defined it as "the art and science of helping adults to learn" in contrast to *pedagogy* which focuses on the art of teaching children (Knowles, 1980, p. 43). However, a lack of specific focus on *older* adults, as opposed to adults in general, led to the development of "gerogogy," an educational theory aimed specifically at older adults (John, 1988). This theory was further enhanced by Formosa (2002) who explored the concept of "Critical Educational Gerogogy" (CEG) which he viewed as an example of "transformative education" (Formosa, 2002, p.79). Recognising the lack of older adult SLA research, Ramírez-Gómez (2016a) then introduced "Critical Foreign Language Gerogogy" (CFLG), an extension of Critical Gerogogy to L2 learning. Ramírez-Gómez is keen to promote the advantages of CFLG in the face of an absence of L2 methodologies for older learners. CFLG aims to take the characteristics of older learners into account and counteract any negative attitudes they may hold towards their own abilities.

Research Purpose

Faced with the lack of existing studies into the experiences of older adult learners, this study attempts to examine three main questions:

1. How do a sample of older Polish adult learners of English subjectively perceive their L2 learning experiences?
2. How do these older adults view age effects in relation to their language learning?
3. What advice and recommendations would these older adults give to their language teachers?

Methodology

Research Method

As research into age effects in SLA is currently dominated by quantitative methods (Bongaerts *et al.*, 1995; Hakuta *et al.*, 2003; Mackey and Sachs, 2012; White and Genesee, 1996) we decided to adopt a qualitative approach to complement and expand on the existing literature. This study aims to explore the subjective experience of older adult SLA by using a "narrative inquiry" approach. Barkhuizen (2014) explains that narrative inquiry is interested in the stories of experience that people tell, and these may take the form of "big stories" derived from biographical data, or "small stories" obtained from interviews. In this study it was decided to derive "small stories" from the conducted interviews. Data derived from "small stories" is believed to be especially useful as it provides many insights into language learning and teaching (Benson, 2014). Pavlenko (2002) believes that narratives of personal experience are "extremely important for the TESOL field as they allow for learners' voices to be heard on a par with those of the researchers" (p. 213). This is particularly important in the case of older FL learners whose voices are absent from the SLA research.

Participants

We adopted a purposive sampling strategy (Patton, 2002) to select the subjects for the current study. Participants had to be 50 years or older, to have been learning English for at least six months and had to be learning the language in the country of their birth. As a result of the selection process, seven older learners between the ages of 55 and 68 were interviewed: six women and one man. Four of the participants attended the University of the Third Age (U3A), one had private 1-to-1 classes, one attended group classes at a local library and one was learning independently. All of the participants were Polish native speakers living in Poland. Pseudonyms were adopted in order to maintain participants' anonymity. Table 3.1 lists the participant details:

Table 3.1 Participant profiles

Name	Age	Sex	Time learning English	Occupation	Study Mode
Lucyna	68	F	9 months	Special needs teacher	Group
Helena	55	F	7 months	Physics and IT teacher	1-to-1
Maria	65	F	2 years	Special needs teacher (retired)	Group
Anna	62	F	3+ years	Agricultural scientist (retired)	Group
Barbara	61	F	1 year	Office administrator (retired)	Group
Ewa	66	F	1.5 years	Russian as an L2 teacher (retired)	Group
Tomasz	65	M	1 year	Vet	Self-study

Data collection and Analysis

Data was gathered via a series of semi-structured interviews. Before each interview, participants were assured of their anonymity and the confidentiality of any data collected and they were required to sign a consent form prior to any data collection taking place. The interviews were conducted in Polish as all participants felt they lacked sufficient skills to be interviewed in English. Each interview was translated into English prior to data analysis taking place. To ensure translation reliability, a language professional fluent in Polish and English examined a sample of each translated interview. Following an initial round of transcription and analysis, a series of follow-up interviews were conducted to verify data and allow for further exploration of themes.

Once the interview transcriptions were completed, they were printed into hard copy and re-read numerous times to process the content. There was a focus on deriving snippets of "small

stories" (Barkhuizen, 2014) from the interviews which highlighted the participants' personal experiences. The coding process was made up of an initial, general orientation stage followed by second-level coding which was more detailed (Dörnyei, 2007) and allowed for patterns to be matched to research aims. During the initial coding stage interesting responses were highlighted and summary notes added to the margins to record initial discoveries. The second coding stage involved the identification of emerging patterns and separating them into categories such as "difficulties," "perception of age," and so on. This was followed by a comparison of all individually coded interviews to identify and categorize common themes. Final-order categories were then matched to the research questions and the themes re-named so as to be more focused. However, other themes which emerged were not discarded but treated as potentially valid. These were also included in the findings to create a more comprehensive view.

Findings and Discussion

An exploration of the participant narratives revealed hidden insights, uncovering a complex combination of factors which shaped their experiences. This section focuses on three themes which emerged: the subjective experiences of the participants, their perceptions of age-related factors and also the participants' own recommendations for L2 teachers.

In general, the participants were eager to share their experiences and in most cases their stories highlighted similar issues, although viewed from a variety of angles. The combination of each individual "small story" revealed a picture of older learners who were motivated to learn, aware of the challenges they faced but nonetheless remained positive and determined to continue their learning.

Participant Experience: Motivations and Aims

Poland was granted access to the EU in 2004, with the result that many Polish people emigrated to English-speaking countries such as the UK and Ireland. It is estimated that 1 million Polish nationals are currently living in the UK (ONS, 2016). Therefore it is unsurprising that most participants reported that one of their main reasons for learning English was because of family and relatives living abroad in an English-speaking country. For example, Anna explained "My brother has been living in London for years with his children and grandchildren and I was invited lots of times to come and visit." And Tomasz added: "My son lives in London, I felt very self-conscious, I was embarrassed, I felt silly that I'm in Europe but I can't understand anything." Other reasons included: computer use, work-related reasons and also to train the memory. These reasons correspond with the findings of Jaroszewska (2013) for reasons older learners typically give for foreign language learning.

The main aim of the participants was to develop the ability to communicate, with Barbara declaring that "I need practical English… I don't need any other at my age… but I need practical knowledge." The participants preferred to focus on language aspects which allow communication in situations they are likely to find themselves in such as shops and airports. This implies a functional or situational-based syllabus may be beneficial, as the former is

structured around communicative language functions whereas the latter provides learners with the practical language needed in real-life situations (Richards, 2001).

Participant Experience: Challenges and difficulties

The participants identified a number of challenges when acquiring language skills, although none viewed these as an impossible barrier. Five participants felt the main challenge was developing appropriate listening skills (although none of the participants reported suffering from hearing impairments.) They related having difficulty in identifying individual sounds, in putting sounds together and in understanding the listening texts:

> *What's really hard for me is when I don't understand a listening text (…) I had great difficulty trying to understand or even differentiate between individual words… I still can't do it. (Lucyna)*

Difficulties with L2 speech perception are common among older adults and this may be due to a decrease in hearing abilities or a decline in working memory (Scott, 1994; Singleton & Ryan, 2004). This may also hinder the processing of incoming auditory information. Problems differentiating individual words appeared to be a concern, with Anna explaining "I think I can't hear certain words properly…When somebody speaks English, it's hard to recognise, to hear individual words…they all run into one another."

Research shows that phonetic coding ability is also impaired in older adults (Singleton & Ryan, 2004) which may block comprehension and lead to an inability to respond orally. This relationship was recognised by the participants who were aware that English words link together smoothly in normal speech, but were not aware of the exact mechanics of connected speech. Although it would not be advisable to over-train beginners, Field (2008, p. 96) suggests that "cracking the code of connected speech" should be incorporated early in the learning process. Although older learners often rely on "top-down" processing, such reliance on contextual cues reduces their processing speed and further impedes learning (Ramírez Gómez, 2016b). Helping learners to expand their processing repertoire may help overcome listening problems. Such an approach may also improve oral production as several participants reported difficulties:

> *We hear a word but sometimes can't repeat it correctly (…) It's a bit like when a child can't fully pronounce a word. Even if they hear it ok, and it's said to them many times, they just can't say it… they say it in their own way. So that's the problem (Anna).*

This difficulty is echoed by research which finds adult learners may hear a distinction between various sounds but are unable to produce them (Brown, 2007). Some participants felt like children acquiring their L1 and not being able to reproduce it due to underdeveloped speech organs. It suggests that work on "bottom-up" decoding skills may be beneficial, that is, instruction on pronunciation and exercising the speech organs. Supplying a transcript could also aid comprehension. Although transcripts are sometimes viewed as counterproductive to the development of listening skills, several participants felt it could be an effective tool.

The second most common difficulty faced by participants was vocabulary. Learning new words is believed to be fundamental in the early stages (Service & Craik, 1993) and most participants focused on increasing their vocabulary. However, a significant problem was caused by the diverse meaning of some English words:

> *One word has so many meanings ... and they are all so different, it's not logical (...) you need to know the context to be able to understand what a word means ... It's strange (...) And so that's the number one problem for me (Tomasz).*

Laufer (1990) believes that the difficulty level of a word depends on factors such as pronounceability, idiomaticity, multiplicity of meanings and grammatical complexity. The participant interviews suggest that pronounceability and multiple meanings were especially difficult. The difficulty with pronunciation was perhaps due to lack of flexibility with speech organs:

> *I say it completely different, I can't get my tongue right ... so sometimes it works better if you repeat it a couple of times after the teacher… you don't need to do it too many times but… just enough… so that older people can use their tongues, make them more flexible. (Barbara)*

This agrees with previous findings that pronunciation is an area older learners are disadvantaged compared to younger learners (Herschensohn, 2007; Long, 1990; Scovel, 2006). It is noteworthy that the only participant without pronunciation problems was Ewa. She was a teacher of Russian as an L2 and believed Russian speaking practice made her speech organs more flexible. Explaining that she did not have too many problems with pronunciation, she said, "maybe because my tongue is more flexible after learning Russian (…) maybe my mouth and tongue are more flexible, so maybe that's why it's easier for me."

The participants were also aware that context is vital for learning English vocabulary, and tried a variety of techniques:

> *But just learning individual words by heart ... that's a disaster (...) I quickly forget what I've learnt. So it's easier to learn the whole phrase… And I think with English it's essential to pay attention to the context. (Anna)*

It has been argued that all learners, regardless of age, should be presented with new lexical items in a meaningful and realistic context (Schmitt, 2008). This improves the ability to remember new words and seems especially relevant to older learners who experience memory problems.

Participant Experience: Learning strategies

The high level of motivation shown by the participants was reflected in the variety of learning strategies they used. The most common strategies were: "flash-cards," doing extra homework, revising regularly, listening to English songs, using Internet resources for self-study or using a dictionary. It appeared the choice of strategies was self-directed and the two most common

strategies were: "flash-cards" (used by four participants) and regular revision and repetition (all participants):

> *I make my own 'flash-cards.' I put individual words on some of them. On others I put whole sentences or set phrases. And I usually study for one hour every day. I look at them and I divide them into the ones I already know and the ones I still need to practice. (Lucyna)*

The majority of participant strategies were designed to aid the memorization of course material and vocabulary. However, the reasons for choosing a particular strategy did not seem to be a conscious process, and there was insufficient awareness on how to use a strategy most effectively.

As previously highlighted, the participants had difficulties memorizing new vocabulary and it may be beneficial to receive instruction in effective memory strategies (Singleton & Ryan, 2004). Some participants relied on repetition and rote-learning and although these increase the recollection of lexical items, older learners require more recovery time (Jacoby, 1999 in Grady & Craik, 2000). Repetition is also considered to involve shallow processing and therefore association-making is considered more beneficial instead of the memorization of new items (Grady & Craik, 2000). However, as fluid abilities are more impaired in older adults (Lovell, 1989; Salthouse, 2009) it might require more effort from older learners. Therefore providing context when learning vocabulary would seem to be more beneficial for older learners.

Age perceptions: Comparisons with younger learners

When asked about age factors in learning, the predominant feeling reported by the participants was a sense of difference between older and younger learners. They reported a feeling that learning English over the age of 50 is more challenging than learning it at a younger age. Lucyna stated that "learning the basics of a language is not that easy when you are over 50, it really isn't." and Helena added "I think it's harder… well, maybe not necessarily harder but it's different." Some research does indeed suggest that older L2 learners may need to invest more effort (Ellis, 2008; Herschensohn, 2007). The participants themselves believed that some differences were due to biological factors and also the fast pace of learning:

> *The young ones take in things more easily, simple as that… they don't need as much time to master things. Maybe they have more contact with the language too… at school … or on TV. (Maria)*

However it is difficult to establish if this belief was influenced by common stereotypes in the minds of the participants, rather than actual facts. Several participants reported a subjective feeling that physical changes influenced their capacity to learn and retain new information. Barbara felt that "your brain gets tired easily… maybe it's used up already and it doesn't 'get' things the way it used to." Helena agreed, stating that "the lessons are very tiring for me, for

my brain. After 45-50 minutes I'm really tired. Maybe it's my age. Because there is a difference."

One difference between the learning outcomes of children compared to those of adults may come from the learning situation, with children tending to receive more frequent instruction in a school setting (Larsen-Freeman & Long, 1991). Even in a non-naturalistic, EFL instructional setting, younger learners are exposed to greater input, increasing their attainment rate. However, differences between older and younger learners were also viewed in a positive light especially in terms of affective factors. Many participants expressed a difference in the motivation to learn:

> But I'd like to stress something…there's a bigger commitment and motivation to learn now. Because children…or even teenagers learn because they have to, they have it at school…But now there is a desire of gaining knowledge, of learning for yourself…For your own needs (Anna)

The participants emphasised "want to" as opposed to "have to." They compared their early experiences of school-based FL learning (mostly Russian) to their current situation, with the latter being seen as more positive. Similar findings of the importance of learner choice over feelings of obligation were reported by Hooker (2012) who examined FL learning among older adults in the UK.

Most of the participants displayed a motivation that could be characterised as "intrinsic." Ushioda (2008, p. 21) defines intrinsic motivation as "doing something for its own self-sustaining pleasurable rewards of enjoyment, interest, challenge, or skill and knowledge development." Intrinsic motivation is seen as more effective in learning situations, as the learning process provides a sense of personal satisfaction. Several participants agreed and Ewa felt one should "Do it for yourself. It gives you a satisfaction. Because at our age it's easier for us to learn something we're interested in, we're more motivated, we learn for ourselves." Although motivation by itself does not ensure success (Birdsong, 2007), and the participants experienced many challenges despite strong motivation, it may nonetheless be an essential factor for older adults if learning is to progress beyond the initial stages.

Age perceptions: Memory

All participants appeared to link memory problems to their age and it was viewed as a major issue. This finding is consistent with earlier findings of a decline in working memory among older adults (Hakuta et al., 2003, Scott, 1994). One participant reflected on her memory problems and said:

> But my memory is worse. I always had a good memory. I learnt fast and I had no problems. But with English I see that it takes longer. I can't get around the fact of my age. (Helena)

Research has found that older learners commonly identify memory problems as a major obstacle in L2 learning (Grotek & Kiliańska-Przybyło, 2012; Ramírez Gómez, 2016b;

Singleton & Ryan, 2004). It could be argued that L2 learning entails memorizing a substantial amount of vocabulary and grammar, and all learners, no matter their age, find this task challenging. However, older adults may be more susceptible to a decline in working memory (Hakuta, Białystok & Wiley, 2003; Singleton & Ryan, 2004). Working memory is limited and unless information is processed and placed in long-term memory, it disappears (Loewen & Reinders, 2011, p. 179). This sense of "disappearance" was echoed by Barbara:

> *… during our lessons, we learn, we are happy we got some new words, 'ah, it's easy, isn't it, we'll remember', we say…Then we leave the class, we talk about some other topics and somebody asks 'ah, what was it, it seemed so easy', suddenly we don't remember, it's gone from your head…as if there were some holes there…it doesn't stay in your deep memory so that you can remember. (Barbara)*

Barbara's phrase "deep memory" may refer to long-term memory and the newly-learned English words may not have been processed enough to allow transfer between working memory and long-term memory. Problems experienced by older adults with their memory may also impact their processing speed and recovery mechanisms (Ramírez Gómez, 2016b; Scott, 1994). This was also reported by several participants. Ewa thought that "it's not just me but everyone at that age … their brains … the cells work slower… it's slower, it takes longer." Helena agreed, stating that "I can see my memory is not the same. So yes, I have to spend more time learning."

Bellingham (2004) in his study of older learners, also found that participants indicated more time was required to process incoming information. However, he points out that although it may seem like a significant concern, it does not receive a large amount of attention in the research literature. Ramírez-Gómez (2016b) suggests that relying on ineffective learning strategies also plays a part. Older learners may be using strategies from their childhood which may not be appropriate in older age. Barbara used repetition, and her tip for learning new vocabulary was "well, you have to repeat, repeat and repeat…like a poem (…) you have to take a dictionary and learn."

However repetition by itself may not guarantee vocabulary is transferred to long-term memory. Laufer & Rozovski-Roitblat (2015, p. 707) state that "what learners do with a word may be more important than how many times they come across it." Mechanical repetition may be unsuccessful if the word is not in context. This is relevant to our study as many participants reported difficulties with the multiple meanings of English words.

In addition, because memorization relies on working memory, this technique might not be well suited to older learners. A decline in working memory is thought common in older adults, although recent research on brain plasticity suggests the brain can be exercised and training for working memory may be beneficial for older adults (Karbach & Verhaeghen, 2014; Klingberg, 2010). Therefore, a useful strategy could be to incorporate working memory training and general memory strategies into a revised teaching methodology.

Age perceptions: Aging is not a problem.

Although the participants reported a difference in the learning experience as they aged, they also showed a high level of enthusiasm and commitment. They were also realistic when setting goals and none of the participants wished to achieve "native-like" speech, or expected quick results. They viewed English as a tool to expand their skills and become members of a global community. There was also a sense of achievement and pride:

> *I'm proud as a peacock, oh, I just am, I am…It's as if I was getting a medal. So a great feeling of satisfaction… and joy that I know something, that I understand…or that I can read something. (Barbara)*

> *It's great because you are pleased with yourself…Education is a continuous process. And even though we might say we always learn something new in our daily lives…But the language learning is more organised, it's different. (Helena)*

The participants also had a message for those who stereotype older adults. They disagreed with those who feel older learners cannot be successful:

> *…it's never too late [to learn English]. You can do it at any age. The older you are…it may be more difficult… maybe it won't just take you 3 lessons, maybe it'll take 6 to remember something… but you will remember. (Barbara)*

> *I don't think there's an age when it all ends, when you can't learn anymore. There's no end. Maybe we learn less but we still learn something…so you can't say there's no point in learning at that age… (Ewa)*

Much discussion on aging is based on negative assumptions and it is essential to introduce a more balanced view and acknowledge that older adults view themselves as competent language learners. Age and age-related changes are a fact of life that cannot be denied, but this may be viewed as an opportunity rather than a problem. Anna highlighted this, feeling that "the stereotypes aren't true (…) it's about your commitment."

Participant Recommendations: The Role of the Teacher

Existing SLA research holds few methodological suggestions tailored for older learners. One aim of this study is to record suggestions from the learners themselves. When asked for advice to enhance the teaching of older adults, most of the participants focused on the qualities of the teacher. They perceived the teacher as playing a critical role in successful learning, and a key characteristic needed is patience. Anna thought that teachers "need patience because the pace of a lesson is different, it's slower…" with Barbara adding that "patience is extremely important and needed when teaching older adults (…) lots of patience with the students."

Another aspect important to the participants was to be treated as an ordinary learner, without lowering expectations because of their age:

> *It's better (…) to find a good teacher, a demanding teacher who will be truly teaching us so that we aren't pretending we're learning something or that we're just going [to the lessons] because it's nice and then half a year later all we know is the verb 'to be'. (Helena)*

This indicates the participants take their learning seriously and expect the same from their teacher. As there is limited research into older adult FL learning, teachers may rely on their own preconceptions about older adults. Ramírez Gómez (2014, p. 232-233) found that a common assumption about older adults is they are "always struggling, don't remember new words, are more emotionally and socially fragile, but have more experience and this makes the class much more interesting." Assumptions about older learners may be over-pessimistic or over-optimistic but they are just that: pre-conceived assumptions often based on stereotypes.

Participant Recommendations: The Learning Environment

Most participants studied in group classes with the majority attending the "University of the Third Age" (U3A). Helena attended individual one-on-one lessons as she was an IT teacher and needed specialized language. Tomasz was the only self-study student due to work commitments and a lack of nearby language classes. The U3A classes are specifically aimed at learners aged 50+ and the participants considered this beneficial:

> *It's good…it's more fun…we're on the same level, our brains are on the same level (laughs), we laugh at each other, we laugh at our memory problems (…) I think they [younger people] wouldn't be able to put up with us. I think you need to have separate groups. (Barbara)*

One advantage of separate groups is that the specific needs of learners, and the specific characteristics of their age are taken into account (Singleton & Ryan, 2004; Ramírez Gómez, 2016). It allows lessons to be conducted at a slower pace and this decreases learner anxiety. However, Singleton and Ryan (2004) also point out the dangers of such a separation: older learners may feel isolated. This was not the case among the participants who appeared to enjoy each other's company and felt supported within the group. Some consideration was also given to mixed-aged groups:

> *I think there could be mixed-ages, not just the 50+ age-group… Because mixed groups ensure co-operation… I think my experience tells me people in their 30s can be mixed with people in their 50s and they can help each other. (Helena)*

However, these opinions are hypothetical as most participants had not experienced a mixed-age learning environment. Only Maria attended a mixed-age class, although the youngest learner was in their 40's – so the age gap was not substantial.

One benefit of group learning for older learners is that it appears to equip them with skills to continue learning by self–study. Anna felt that "without the group lessons I'd probably fail very quickly" and Maria said "it was easier because I think I gained some basic knowledge

during the course … that was very helpful." A lack of group-based instruction may explain why Tomasz reported difficulties in making progress. He lacked interaction with other learners and did not have access to a teacher to clarify language issues. As a result his learning was reduced to dictionary work. He said "it would be easier if I had someone to talk to, in English and in Polish."

Another finding was the lack of higher level courses for older learners. This was highlighted by Maria and Anna who relied on self-study because of a lack of further opportunities:

> One thing about these lessons is that new people join every year so… you can't continue or move forward but you have to start all over again … That's why I stopped attending (…) because there are no opportunities for higher levels. (Anna)

The lack of opportunities may be caused by funding issues within the University of Third Age (Jaroszewska, 2013) but may also be because of an assumption that older learners lack the ability to complete higher levels. This then may result in learners ''fossilization'' and remaining eternal elementary learners.

Participant Recommendations: Teaching Methodology

The participants experienced a variety of teaching approaches, including communicative activities such as contextualised role-plays and the practice of related vocabulary. The grammar-translation method also incorporated sentence translation given to the learners as homework. The lessons were topic-based covering subjects such as airports, family, professional life, celebrations such as Christmas and ordering food. In contrast, Tomasz relied on dictionary work.

Ehrman & Oxford (1990) suggest the lack of suitable teaching approaches is one reason for the belief that older learners are less successful, with most approaches being designed with younger learners in mind. However, some participants believed the methods they used when younger may still work now:

When I was at school, grammar was the number one thing. You had to learn it by heart… Some people criticise that… but you always remember those things, because it's engraved in your brain and that's it. (Ewa)

The participants reported a difference in capacity between older and younger learners which suggests a separate methodological approach may benefit older adults. Singleton & Ryan (2004) suggest that certain issues should be addressed in any methodology for older adults: adequate lesson timing, adjustments oral-aural difficulties and phonetic decoding, clear visual and audio input along with support for memorization. This is consistent with earlier reviews (Jaroszewska, 2013; Ramírez Gómez, 2016b) which advocate teaching methods that reflect the physical and cognitive characteristics of older learners.

The participants also strongly emphasized the importance of repetition and revision. They recommended the regular inclusion of these activities. For example, Tomasz particularly liked revision:

> *… Any language that you don't revise goes out of your memory. But if you revise it regularly something starts in your brain and the more you revise the deeper it goes. And the deeper it is the harder it is to lose it. So you need to practise it a lot so you remember it better. It's like with Russian, it's deep there and even if I didn't use it for a couple of years it'd come back. (Tomasz)*

Revising previous material requires the allocation of extra time and may result in a slower lesson pace. However, a slower pace was also important for the learners due to a decline in their processing speed. Therefore, any methodology should take these factors into account. Ramírez Gómez (2016a) believes that slowing down during the lessons helps learner memorization and the building of connections that lead to a more suitable learning strategy.

Affective factors play an important role in older adult learning and proposals from "Foreign Language Critical Gerogogy" (FLCG) may be helpful (Ramírez Gómez, 2016a). It is interesting however that most participants in this study displayed a positive attitude towards learning in contrast to FLCG which addresses learners' negative beliefs in their abilities. In general, FLCG encourages learners to reflect on widespread stereotypes of aging, as well as examining their own beliefs and learning experiences. However, it is important for any teaching methodology for older learners to genuinely enhance successful outcomes.

Conclusion

This study explored the FL learning experience of a group of older adults in Poland. It focused on learners aged 50+ and their semi-structured interviews were analyzed to uncover several key themes. It showed a group of learners who were highly motivated and eager to learn. They were aware of the biological and cognitive changes that come with aging but attempted to overcome them. Memory problems appeared to be a particular challenge, however recent research has shown the brain remains "plastic" throughout the entire lifespan and memory enhancement strategies may be helpful for older learners. Listening skills and pronunciation were also reported as problem areas and focus could also be placed on these skills. The participants did not fit the stereotype of the unsuccessful older learner and all showed a positive attitude, while also setting realistic goals.

This study also aimed to provide methodological signposts for teachers of older learners. Nearly all participants reported that the characteristics of the teacher were very important. This is thought-provoking as the current trend towards student-centered research and pedagogies means that the teacher's role in SLA can sometimes be neglected. They also felt that lessons should be slower paced, and a variety of materials should be used to cater for hearing and eyesight issues. It is also necessary to coach older learners in specific learning strategies, especially those that improve memory. The application of Foreign Language Critical Gerogogy (FLCG) may also be helpful in re-examining the assumptions older learners have of themselves.

Our research has shown that older learners are a rewarding group to engage with. The participants were eager to learn, intrinsically motivated and took pride in their achievements. The study hopes that recording the voices of this neglected group will provide a useful addition to SLA age-related research. The participants appeared to support the belief of Singleton and Ryan (2004) that "there is certainly no particular point in the ageing of healthy adults when L2 learning becomes impossible" (Singleton & Ryan, 2004, p.214). Although current SLA research may favor learners at the younger end of the age spectrum, it is time to acknowledge that older adults are also present in the classroom. They need only be given a chance to succeed.

About the Authors

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