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COMPLEXITY OF AGE EFFECTS AND ITS IMPLICATIONS FOR INSTRUCTION: THE CASE OF 50+ LEARNERS

ABSTRACT

This study aims to explore the effects of age across adult groups on selected aspects of language learning. To achieve the aim, a study was conducted at the Open University of University of Warsaw. It focuses on reasons for taking up learning, relative importance of individual skills, major difficulties, individual goals, emotions and self-assessed ability to learn. The assumption that adults represent a single age group is questioned and the results are interpreted in terms of practical implications for course design.

KEYWORDS: language learning, age effects, course design, emotions

STRESZCZENIE

Niniejsze badanie ma na celu zbadanie efektów związanych z wiekiem w grupach wiekowych w zakresie wybranych aspektów uczenia się języka. W tym celu przeprowadzono badania na Uniwersytecie Otwartym, Uniwersytetu Warszawskiego. Badania te koncentrują się na powodach rozpoczęcia nauki języka, relatywnej ważności poszczególnych umiejętności, głównych trudności, indywidualnych celów, emocji oraz samooceny zdolności do uczenia się. Założenie, że dorośli reprezentują zwartą grupę jest podważone, a wyniki badań są zinterpretowane w kontekście praktycznych implikacji istotnych przy projektowaniu kursu.

SŁOWA KLUCZOWE: uczenie się języka, efekty związane z wiekiem, projektowanie kursu, emocje

INTRODUCTION

A considerable amount of literature has been published on the impact of age on language learning. Recent research suggests that maturational constraints have been overestimated (Moyer 2014; Munoz/ Singleton 2011; Yates/ Kozar 2015) and that there may be an issue of negative attitudes towards mature learners and their ability to learn. Ramírez Gómez (2014: 229) points out that “instructors’ age-related

views on older learners [...] are not entirely supported by scientific evidence, but rather are based on generally held preconceptions”. Up till now research has focused too much on the neurobiological effects of age, thus promoting ‘ageism’, when it should focus on practical solutions of teaching mature learners. Mackey and Sachs (2012: 732) argue that there seem to be differences between younger and older adults and we need to tailor our instruction to the abilities and needs of the mature population. Moreover, some researchers emphasize that age-related issues should be addressed in a way that may bring immediate practical solutions relevant to practitioners (Yates/ Kozar 2015: 2; Mackey/ Sachs 2012: 704). All of this clearly points there is a need to focus on age effects in the area of learning English by mature learners both from the perspective of learners and pedagogical implications.

Due to the ongoing debate in gerontology of when exactly a person may be called ‘senior’ and the negative connotations of this term, in our study we refer to our 50+ participants as ‘mature’ and ‘older’ learners. Mackey and Sachs (2012: 732) point out that chronological age does not map exactly to functional age and there are differences in mental and physical capacities between various learners. Being ‘old’ seems to be much more complex than chronological age and both physical factors and biological factors play a crucial role in defining it. Moreover, it seems only logical that there should be differences between adults in their 30s and 50s. Finally, learners’ beliefs are crucial in this context and they may be influenced by stereotypes. As Schultz (2006: 42) holds, “older people tend to adopt negative definitions about themselves and to perpetuate the various stereotypes directed against them, thereby reinforcing societal beliefs”. To understand age effects one needs to take into consideration that they reflect underlying spectrum of biological, psychological and sociocultural changes and should be put into a broader perspective and only then implications for instruction should be considered which is the main goal of this paper.

COMPLEXITY OF AGE EFFECTS

There is currently a growing consensus among scholars that age effects should be indeed viewed from a broader perspective. As Mercer points out (Mercer 2011: 376) SLA is undergoing a “complexity turn” due to the increased awareness of language learning complexity and dynamism. Complexity perspective refers to holistic models comprising complex systems in a constant state of flux; the contexts being an integral part of it. Analogically, we recognize that there is no one-size-fit-it-all approach of pedagogy and that methods have to be considered for learners and specific contexts conceptualized at both micro and macro level in accordance with Holliday’s (1994) understanding of complexity of cultural practices. Various interacting cultures in

the classroom make each context unique and an appropriate methodology cannot be discussed without it. That is why Mercer (2011: 393) views it as important to cooperate with teachers working in a variety of contexts, as practitioner classroom-based research would enable to make expert knowledge of teachers more explicit in terms of patterns in the dynamic and emergent classroom situations.

In view of the abovementioned approaches it seems appropriate that that age effects should not be viewed as biological constraints of learning, but discussed in the context of an array of various factors that influence the learning process. As mentioned earlier many researchers criticize the age effects perceived as deficit. The potential for growth and improvement is in every learner and it is the task of the teacher to help them to achieve their full potential. Late learning seems to be different, and not characterized by deficit (Moyer 2014: 447). Although age definitely impacts resources crucial for language use, such as memory, perception, attention or language skills (DeBot/ Makoni 2005: 15), there is a widespread criticism that researchers concentrate on the inevitability of age as a negative influence (Moyer 2013; Munoz/ Singleton 2011; Yeats/ Kozar 2015). Yates and Kozar (2015) maintain the shift of attention should move from the age effects towards the way to address them. They advocate for broadening the research agenda and focusing on real-life applications as the role of socio-psychological factors become increasingly important with age (Hyltenstam/ Abrahamsson 2003). We do not view age as having a negative effect on learning (Klimczak-Pawlak/ Kossakowska-Pisarek 2018) and in the following section we look more closely at various aspects and factors in connection with age effects.

AGE EFFECTS AND OTHER FACTORS INFLUENCING LANGUAGE LEARNING

There are plenty of positive aspects of learning a second language at an older age. Adult learners are more self-reliant in comparison with children and come with prior knowledge. They have accumulated knowledge and experience upon which they can draw while making decisions (Park 1998). Muñoz (2008: 588, after Muñoz/ Singleton 2011: 17–18) claims that older learners have superior cognitive development and it helps them to understand a task better in comparison with younger learners. They use more adequate strategies for learning and testing tasks. Moreover, the increased efficiency of adult learning is connected with more explicit learning processes (Byram/ Hu 2013). As the age advances it may mean that learners possess increased tolerance for ambiguity, more willingness to consider multiple perspectives and stable and crystallized intelligence (Mackey/ Sachs 2012: 707).

More recently literature has emerged to provide evidence on the continuity of a smooth linear decline in L2 learners' capacities well into adulthood (Muñoz/ Singleton 2011: 10–11), which is probably connected with the interplay of a range of variables. As MacDonald and Stawski (2011: 5) put it:

Perhaps one of the most serious assumptions made by many psychologists is that of universal cognitive decline. While it is true that the proportion of individuals who show cognitive decline increases with each decade after the 60s are reached, it is equally true that many individuals show such decline until close to their demise, and that some fortunate few, in fact, show selective ability gains from midlife into old age.

At the same time there is ample evidence that cognitive decline is not evenly distributed across all capacities, but there are areas which are affected more severely by age effects.

Fundamentally, as Burke and Graham (2012: 778) point out, there is asymmetry in aging effects between various aspects of language. More specifically, language production in the area of phonological retrieval is susceptible to age-related declines, while comprehension and especially the semantic processing of language are well maintained throughout adulthood. Many mature learners report a decline in some aspects of cognitive functioning, however, the extent of them differs from one individual to another (DeBot 2012: 42). MacKay and Abrams (1996: 252) conclude that as far as older adults are concerned “they require more time than young adults to form new connections for representing novel combinations of words”.

In the early stages of second language learning adults often progress faster than children (Muñoz 2006), but these are children who are likely to attain native-like fluency, in particular in case of pronunciation. As adults age some factors interfere with learning, i.e. loss of perceptual acuity and memory. DeDe and Flax (2016: 110) emphasize that older adults recognize words more slowly than younger ones and that there is a general age-related decline in processing ability, a more abrupt one for more complex sentences i.e. sentences with double negation, comparatives, doubly embedded relative clauses etc. At the same time they process information less quickly than younger learners (Peters et al. 2011: 141) and this suggests that they may need some additional time before dealing with tasks.

The abovementioned age effects interact with other psychological factors. Declines in language processing, such as difficulty in understanding spoken language, undermine both older adults' ability and desire to communicate (Burke and Shafto 2008: 373). What is more, ideas about cognitive decline permeate both learners' and teachers' view of learning in older age. Mercer (2011: 78–79) remarks that as people get older the self-concept seems to become increasingly multifaceted and complex. Self-concept is vital as it provides learners with a sense of agency, guides them enhancing their motivation, and may result in having a more positive affective attitude towards learning.

Unfortunately, negative stereotypes about elderly are ubiquitous in many domains (Peters et al. 2011: 4), inter alia, including universal cognitive decline due to aging, although many individuals do not show such a decline. Recent research (Schultz 2006: 43) has shown that older people often internalize negative stereotypes and those aging self-stereotypes can influence both cognitive and physical health. Unfortunately, as Schultz (2006: 41) maintains, ageism, a process of systematic

stereotyping and discrimination of people due to the fact that they are old, is deeply engrained in society. This view is shared by Ramírez Gómez (2016) who points to ageist discrimination as a serious problem in education for older adults. Preconceptions with regard to FL learning of mature learners generate self-defeating attitudes in those learners and may obstruct their learning process.

Another crucial factor of learning in the older age is willingness to communicate (WTC). MacIntyre et al. (1998: 547) define WTC as “a readiness to enter into discourse at a particular time with a specific person or persons, using a L2”. This affective factor is tied to one’s personality and experiences and is influenced by perceptions about one’s own language competence. Older speakers generally tend to be less willing to engage with native speakers socially, which is possibly connected with their greater self-consciousness and lower tolerance for risk-taking.

Peters et al. (2011: 137–8) point out that aging is linked to increased attention to emotional content. Older adults exhibit superior memory and greater preference for affective sources of information and this is affective information that should be particularly salient to older adults. As Peters et al. (2011: 8) maintain, in later years of life the information that people acquire needs to be meaningful to them, and the tasks should be related to those in their lives. They are not interested in wasting their time on meaningless tasks. Peters et al. (2011) suggest that according to socioemotional selectivity theory time is perceived by older learners as limited and that is why short-term benefits become more important. In addition, their focus is more on positive than negative information due to the fact that older learners seek to optimize emotional experience.

As far as motivation is concerned, in her study Gómez Bedoya (2008, after Ramírez Gómez 2016) indicates that Japanese older learners exhibit higher motivation and participation than younger adults. However, their primary objective is to enjoy the lesson and not learn the foreign language to a high level. The latter helps them to avoid frustration. Some learners might not want to be as proficient as to sound like a native speaker because it brings some benefits for them (Kinsella 2009), and ultimate attainment is not the goal of their learning. All these facts pose various challenges to instruction that should be tailored to the needs of mature learners. So, what is the current state of research in the context of instruction?

INSTRUCTION

There are several proposals formulated by various researchers as far as instruction for mature learners is concerned. Moyer (2014: 447) reminds us that instruction matters and that we have to take into account both individual variation and social dimensions of language learning. Ramírez Gómez (2014: 229) emphasizes that the state of research on older adult FL learning is limited which impedes

researchers from developing a teaching method for this cohort. Age influences the effectiveness of instruction. Muñoz (2010: 41–46) points out that there are differences in age effects in natural and instructed settings. In instructed settings input is limited to on average 2–4 sessions per week and also exposure is limited in quantity and source to mainly the teacher. Generally, the target language is not spoken outside the classroom and is not the language of communication between peers. Explicit instruction linked to the classroom favours explicit language learning and this is the type at which older learners are superior due to their cognitive maturity.

Many researchers agree that autonomy is a crucial issue and instruction should be targeted on development of autonomy including strategy-based instruction, as mature learners have capacity of self-direction (Pawlak 2015: 61). This view is supported by Ramírez Gómez (2014: 233–235) who advocates for experimenting with different vocabulary learning strategies and strongly advises to introduce memorization strategies. In addition, the researcher recommends using simple sentences, vocabulary related to information already stored, and reducing the number of lexical items to teach. Ramírez Gómez (2016: 143) draws our attention to the fact that these are older learners' assumptions that aging is the principal, if not the only, cause for their learning struggles and it may adversely affect their learning process. The result is increasing frustration, lowering learners' goals or even abandoning the course. However, the problem may be also, as Pawlak (2015: 57) puts it, that "older learners, particularly those who have been successful in learning another language or are experts in other domains, may prove to be overly confident in the efficacy of their approach and reluctant to change their ways". It is the teacher's role to explain the usefulness of strategy training and to enhance learners' self-efficacy. Furthermore, Pawlak (2015) maintains that anxiety may have a debilitating effect on mature learners and that it is extremely important to ensure a non-threatening atmosphere and diminish anxiety with strategies such as relaxation techniques.

The views are shared by Formosa (2012: 41) who proposes 'critical educational gerogogy' (CEG) that is based, inter alia, on "a self-help culture towards a more decentralized and autonomous learning experience as power is shifted to older learners". Negotiated curriculum between learners and teachers is advised, and also it is held that programs should be relevant to the lived experiences of learners. Ramírez Gómez (2016) proposes 'critical FL geragogy' (CFLG) to help learners enhance their learning experience and to address negative attitudes towards their learning skills. Ramírez Gómez (2016) advocates for 'empowering FL education environment' which provides learners with a deeper understanding of their abilities without inaccurate beliefs. Ageist preconceptions that limit learning should be minimized in various ways and learners should be equipped with tools to self-direct.

STUDY

This study is a part of the larger study that was conducted at the Open University, the University of Warsaw, Poland. In this study age effects are investigated on the basis of cross-sectional research on mature English learners attending courses at the Open University. The exploratory research reflects differences in constructs across age-heterogeneous groups measured at a single point of time, and as such it provides no information how the constructs may change over time and it may be influenced by cohort effects (Schaie/ Willis 2011: 17). The aim of this study is to investigate the answers to the following research questions:

What motivation and goals do learners have to learn English?

What are their attitudes and beliefs towards various aspects of learning English?

What are their emotions connected with learning English?

This is a mixed methods exploratory study to investigate the array of factors that are interconnected with mature adult learning. The data was collected as a part of a larger study at the Open University. The Open University caters for the educational needs of adult learners who attained the age of 16. The majority of learners are between 31–40 (44%) and learners over 50 constitute around 10% of all learners. There are more women (77%) than men (23%). The groups are mixed and learners of 16 and over 50+ take part in the same courses. The quantitative and qualitative data includes a questionnaire with both open and closed questions, as well as semi-structured interviews. The study was conducted in 9 ESL groups (A1 to B1 level), taught by 4 teachers at the Open University, University of Warsaw, Poland from September 2015 to February 2016. All lower level groups of English at the Open University took part in the research. Interviews were conducted with 16 participants aged 50+ from 4 groups at A1 to B1 level at the Open University, University of Warsaw.

The participants are English learners (N = 171, 24 M, 147 F) at the Open University, the University of Warsaw. All participants were Polish and were between 21–59 years old, 97% work. 36% of learners declared that they speak one foreign language and 20% two languages. 85% acknowledged previously learning English, the length of it was between 1 and 25 years of learning English. The participants belonged to the following four groups (see Table 1).

Table 1. Participants' age

	Frequency	Percent
21–30 years	31	18,1
31–40 years	48	28,1
41–50 years	38	22,2
50+	54	31,6
Total	171	100,0

As we can see a third of participants were 50+, and the second largest group was 31–40 years old. The learners in all groups pursue their lifelong learning out of their own volition, participating and paying for their courses at the Open University, University of Warsaw. 50+ learners take part in the same courses as the younger participants.

The data was collected by means of a questionnaire and semi-structured interviews. The questionnaire contained 12 questions regarding age, sex, knowledge of other languages, motivation, goals, attitudes, beliefs and emotions related to learning English as a second language. The statistical procedures were computed using SPSS Statistics Version 24. Semi-structured interviews were conducted with 16 learners. The interviews centred on the following issues: goals and motivation of learning English, problems with learning English, emotions with regard to learning English, beliefs about learning English regarding the importance of skills, types of communication, aspects of learning, and being a good/bad learner.

PROCEDURE AND DATA ANALYSIS

Both the interviews and the questionnaires were in Polish due to a low level of English proficiency of learners and with an intention to retain the accuracy of comprehension of both the researchers and participants. An informed consent was obtained from all the participants. A questionnaire was piloted by a group of learners and problematic items were reworded. The final version was administered in all groups at levels A1–B1.

The interviews included some standardized questions. The length of interviews with learners lasted up to 20 minutes. There was one interviewer to ensure a high degree of consistency between interview sessions. The interview data were transcribed and prepared for further qualitative content analysis. Data analysis process was based on a Grounded Theory approach (Charmaz 2006) with the purpose of generating findings without any preconceived notions or theoretical frameworks on the data.

RESULTS AND DISCUSSION – QUESTIONNAIRE

Older learners at the Open University often do not relearn English, but start from the beginning. 45% of 50+ learners had not learned English before, while in other groups it was respectively group 21–30 years – 3%, group 31–40 years – 4% and 41–50 years – 19%. There is a significant negative correlation between age and years of learning ($\rho = -0.257$, $p < 0.01$) (Table 2), which means that the

higher the age the fewer years of learning English. Non-parametric test was chosen to evaluate the correlation as the data was verified negatively (K-S test) to be fit for parametric tests.

Table 2. Correlation analysis for age and years of learning English (Spearman's rho)

			Age	Years of Eng.
Spearman's rho	Age	Correlation Coefficient	1,000	-,257**
		Sig. (2-tailed)	–	,004
		N	171	125
	Years of Eng.	Correlation Coefficient	-,257**	1,000
		Sig. (2-tailed)	,004	–
		N	125	125

** Correlation is significant at the 0.01 level (2-tailed).

Learners were asked an open-ended question about what they would like to achieve thanks to learning English (see Table 3).

Table 3. Goals of learners

Age group/ Goals	21–30	31–40	41–50	50+
Communication	47%	54%	49%	69%
Self-confidence	–	17%	11%	13%
Speaking	17%	11%	2%	9%
Work-related goals	43%	35%	34%	9%
Films, songs	–	4%	–	6%
Travel	2%	9%	6%	6%

The highest difference between 50+ learners and other learners is in work-related goals. It was distinctly less often mentioned by those learners (9%), while in the 21–30 group almost half of the learners (43%) mention it. In all groups communication is quite important, but for 50+ learners it is crucial (69%). Communication, which involves both speaking and listening, is the highest answer in the 50+ age group, while speaking is mentioned relatively less frequently when we compare it to adults of 21–30 years old (47%).

Learners were requested to evaluate whether they believe they are a good learner or not (see Figure 1). 40% of 50+ learners claimed that they are good learners and it was the highest number in all groups, 25% said that they are not very good and 35% claimed that they are not.

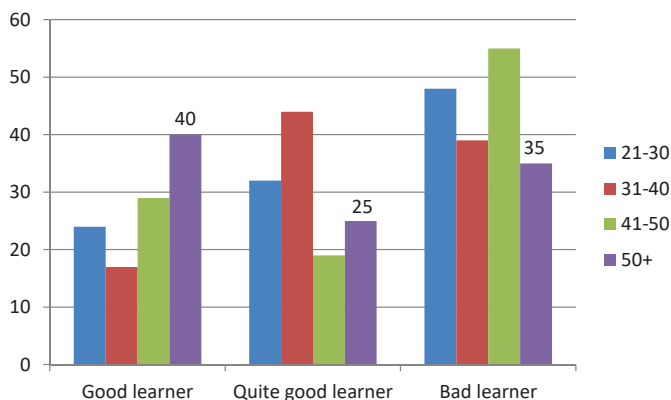


Figure 1. Being a good learner

As far as attribution is concerned, for 50+ learners to be a good learner means being systematic (17% of learners used this very word) and trying to learn or learn (27%). To be a bad learner means mainly lack of time (27%) or work (6%) and lack of systematicity (17%). If we compare these results to 31–40 year olds, we can see that 44% claim they are quite good learners, 39% claim that they are bad learners, and only 17% claim they are good learners. Again, to be a good learner means that they are systematic or they are trying to be. To be a bad learner means not working enough and lack of systematicity. If we compare the two largest groups of learners we can see that 50+ learners tend to perceive themselves as being more systematic and trying really hard to learn, so it seems that more learners have positive self-concept as good learners.

Learners were also asked whether they have problems with learning English and if so then what those problems are. The most important problem areas are presented in Figure 2.

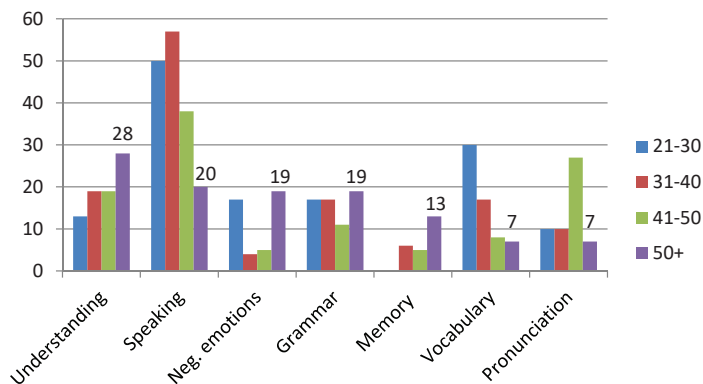


Figure 2. Problems with learning English

As we can see in all groups speaking is a problematic issue, yet for 50+ group understanding is regarded as a more problematic one (28%). In addition, 20% of learners in this group indicated that for them there is a connection between understanding problems and listening. It is worth mentioning that memory in this group (13%) is rated relatively high as the problematic issue in comparison to other groups. As far as negative emotions are concerned in both groups 21–30, 50+ the score is high, however if we remember that the lower the age the more years of learning the learner has on average, it may be connected with the fact that although younger learners have been learning English for many years, they are still at quite low level (A1–B1).

As far as the importance of skills is concerned there were many similarities between groups (see Figure 3).

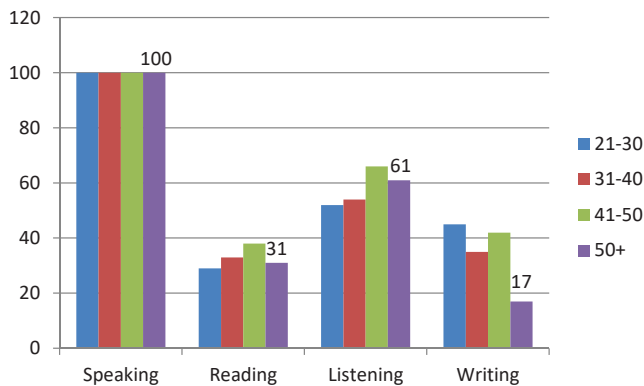


Figure 3. Importance of language skills

All participants indicated speaking as the most important skill (100%). Reading was also indicated similarly in all groups ranging from 29% (21–30 years old), 33% (31–50 years old) 40% (41–50 years old) to 31% (50+). Correspondingly, listening was indicated by 52% (21–30 years old), 54% (31–50 years old), 66% (41–50 years old) to 61% (50+). The most variance could be seen in writing, as only 17% of 50+ learners indicated that skill, while 45% of 21–30 years old and 35% of 31–40 years old and 42% of 41–50 years old. Although there is no direct correlation between age and importance of writing, we can see that writing is relatively less important for 50+ learners in comparison to other groups of learners.

Learners were asked to evaluate the importance of various aspects while learning English. These aspects were as follows: their own work, materials used for learning, support of the teacher, support of the other participants of the course, possibility of using the language, atmosphere at the course. Non-parametric test was chosen to assess the correlation between age and those factors as the data was verified

negatively (K-S test) to be fit for parametric tests. In two cases there is a significant positive correlation (Spearman's rho), i.e. relative importance of support of other participants between age and support of the teacher ($\rho=0.158$, $p<0.05$), and age and support of other participants ($\rho=0.173$, $p<0.05$), which means that the older the learners the more important is the support of the teacher and the support of the other participants (see Table 4). As we can see from descriptive statistics for these variables (see Table 5) support of participants is the aspect of learning with the highest SD, which means that the opinions of learners were the most varied here, and at the same time the importance is believed to be the lowest ($M=1.58$) out of the researched variables. Only 11% of learners between 21–30 and 31–40 years old decided that this is very important, while 26% of 50+ learners referred to it as very important.

Table 4. Correlations between age and other variables

		own work	materials	teacher	participants	use of lg	atmosphere
Age	Correlation Coefficient	,011	,008	,158*	,173*	,025	–,027
	Sig. (2-tailed)	,889	,916	,043	,032	,752	,736
	N	161	160	164	154	164	161

* Correlation is significant at the 0.05 level (2-tailed).

Table 5. Descriptive statistics for importance of various factors influencing learning

	Mean	Std. Deviation	N
own work	2,53	,548	161
materials	2,42	,629	160
teacher	2,62	,579	164
participants	1,58	,920	154
use of lg	2,77	,499	164
atmosphere	2,41	,693	161

As far as emotions are concerned learners were asked whether they associate learning English with positive or negative emotions (see Figure 4).

In case of 50+ learners the majority of them associate learning English with positive emotions (56%), while only 10% with negative ones. Yet, 34% of learners indicated that they have mixed emotions about learning English. Some of the learners named their emotions and the most popular positive ones were: satisfaction, joy, pleasure, while negative ones included frustration, stress, shame and anxiety. In this group the amount of positive emotions is the highest of all groups ranging from 34% to 56%.

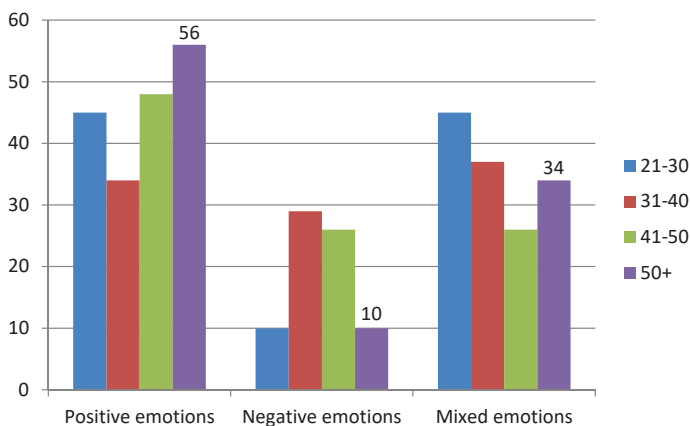


Figure 4. Emotions among learners

INTERVIEWS

Many beliefs were expressed explicitly by learners, some are indirectly reflected in opinions about previous learning experiences or their goals. Learners often express their beliefs that learning at their age is worse in terms of memory:

Ludmiła (N#7, housewife)

“Maybe I don’t have problems with language, but with my memory and concentration. It is hard and I become irritated when I see that I don’t catch it”

Antoni (N#8, artist & teacher)

“it is hard, hard at this age and with this memory, but I don’t give up”

Kasia (N#12, doctor)

“my ears are 50 years old, this is different”

The most often mentioned problems include memory, listening comprehension, and anxiety.

Ewa (N#10, pharmacist)

“I am bad at remembering words”

Małgosia (N#3, clerk)

“with listening if it is slow I can understand it, when (he) speaks a bit faster, I can’t understand it, I can’t”

Ludmiła (N#7, housewife)

“Stress makes me shut down and I feel nervous. It is not that I give up, but if it is too fast, I am not able to do it and I feel stressed and I stop, and I don’t do it anymore”.

Jola (N#14, clerk)

“first of all, barrier, barrier, when they ask me in English, I would like to answer in Russian, this is this barrier, I get nervous, I more or less understand, but[...]. If I were younger, it would be for sure better and easier to learn English, but it is not catastrophic”

Alina (N#15, health professional)

“I don’t think I am a good learner, because I feel all the time that there is no progress, that what I seem to learn I don’t remember, my mind going blank, I don’t feel comfortable, although I really sit and learn”

Not being able to speak English is connected with many negative emotions, and this inability adversely affects learners’ self-esteem as we can see below.

Antoni (N#8, artist & teacher)

“when somebody approaches and asks me a question, it was a catastrophe, that is why I have all the time, this feeling, if I go somewhere I do not want to be a total moron”

Ewa (N#10, pharmacist)

“everybody around me speaks English, this is the most depressing”

Martyna (N#6, publisher)

“the world is open, we go to many places and this is stupid just to smile [...] it is a bit embarrassing and humiliating”

Małgosia (N#3, clerk)

“Thanks to language I would like to have more self-confidence, for sure, to be more self-confident, to be a 100% European”

As we can see below learning English and participating in courses is a positive experience for them and it is worth doing.

Kasia (N#12, doctor)

“When I come here, I feel better, I feel younger or something, I learn something new, and this is what is important”.

Ewa (N#16, musician)

“I treat it like an investment for future, learning a language is brain training, as I see it”.

Instruction and problems with tailoring it to the needs of the learners appear in some of the interviews with 50+ learners.

Aldona (N#1, medical technician)

“Last year I had classes with a girl who is a translator, and after half a year, I said to her, listen, either I am not clever, or this level is too high, I cannot learn [...] but then I understood that this is how you teach that is important and appropriate materials”.

All these findings support the standpoint that communication is the most important for older learners. Communication involves both listening and speaking and as such it is more problematic for older learners than just speaking due to perceptual, and especially hearing, acuity problems. Understanding is believed by many 50+ learners to be the most serious problem that they encounter. The findings demonstrate that while researchers often focus on ultimate attainment, mature learners are interested in just communicating with other people. A foreign language is a means to communicate for them, not the goal in itself, and for that

purpose learners do not need native-like pronunciation or proficiency but they focus on practical aspects of communication and limited proficiency that they are able to achieve.

Analysing the results of this study it can be observed that learning a foreign language at an older age is connected with many psychological constraints, not necessarily due to actual deficits, but often connected with self-perception, beliefs and stereotypes that impact their learning. The fact that they participate in mixed age groups may also influence their self-concept and may lead to frustration. The results suggest that support of the teacher and other participants is the more important the older learners are and it is believed to help them in their learning.

Besides exploratory nature of the research there are other limitations of the study. There was no even sex distribution which is typical in groups at the Open University, University of Warsaw, where the majority of learners are female. Also, this is the context of learners working and living in Warsaw, the capital of Poland, and the findings are influenced by this. Moreover, the questions of the questionnaire were in some cases stated not specifically enough to obtain conclusive answers, *inter alia* pertaining to being a good learner or the goals of learning English. The latter should not offer the array of so varied choices as it makes it hard for respondents to choose and for the researcher to reach satisfactory conclusions. More research is needed to confirm the results and to overcome the abovementioned limitations of the study.

IMPLICATIONS FOR INSTRUCTION

Based on the literature and the research conducted and described in this paper a set of guidelines may be prepared that seems appropriate for teaching older learners. First of all, due to serious problems with understanding in the context of oral communication 50+ learners should be encouraged to do many more listening tasks in order to train their listening skills as age effects adversely affect listening comprehension. As writing is relatively not so important to them the ratio of listening and writing should be balanced towards the former.

As more time is needed to process and respond to information, materials should be presented at a slower pace, allowing more time for learners. Teachers should present one concept at a time, at a comfortable pace. Content should be meaningful for learners, relevant and of interest to them. It should be something that learners are familiar with and have previous experiences with. Teachers should frequently summarize what has been covered and use more repetitions. They should pause from time to time to let learners process the information, and learners generally need more time to deal with cognitively demanding tasks. Learners' attention should be paid to one problem at a time. Teachers are recommended to use simple sentences,

limit the number of new lexical items, and try to stick to those which are easier to remember for a given group based on their previous knowledge. Using non-verbal cues, gestures, and aids along with verbal message is advised.

Some adults feel threatened and object to speaking publicly in English, so at least at the beginning stages of learning a foreign language more group repetitions and groupwork are recommended instead of asking learners questions individually. Teachers are recommended to use a non-threatening approach and reassurance generously, avoid tests, offer friendly and positive atmosphere, encourage participation and provide positive feedback. It is advised to share stories, comment on various aspects to introduce relaxing atmosphere.

Developing learner's autonomy is crucial and that is why it is recommended to use strategy training especially with the use of memory strategies, such as mnemonics, quizzes, categorization, spaced retrieval techniques plus repetitive practice. Teachers should offer support to learners catering to their emotional needs and emphasize frequently that learning a foreign language is possible at any age, but it is a process that takes a lot of effort. Dealing with debilitating beliefs and emotional problems is pivotal as they adversely affect the learning process.

CONCLUSIONS

There is a practical reason for taking into account age while teaching. Whether the students' language aptitude is good or not it is hard to assess, and we cannot decide straight away what students' learning styles or personality are. But if a teacher comes to a group that consists of a marked minority of mature learners they can immediately assess their age without any problems. Tailoring your teaching to the needs of mature learners would be an easy task if a teacher knew at least the general characteristics and recommendations for a FL geragogical methodology and how to deal with beliefs that may debilitate older adult learning. Furthermore, it is vital for teachers to be aware of the fact that 50+ learners may face challenges concerning emotional needs specific for this group of learners, especially in the mixed age groups. They may require thorough understanding and heightened awareness of the teacher. Taking into consideration the guidelines stated above will enable a teacher to create a positive environment for older learners, and to tailor instruction to the needs of this group of learners.

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