

Third-Age Foreign languages Learners

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Contributor: Blanka Klimova

Foreign language learning in the third age is one of the popular activities among the elderly. The question remains as to how to teach a foreign language to older adults properly. The first objective of this review was to identify suitable pedagogical approaches, teaching methods, or strategies for teaching foreign languages to third-age learners.

Keywords: older adults ; language teaching ; methods ; approaches

1. Introduction

Demographic development in Europe as well as in other developed countries makes older adult education more important than ever. Moreover, the European Union, OECD, UNESCO, and national governments have been supporting the policy of lifelong learning ^[1]. The number of citizens who are 65 and older has been growing steadily and ageing societies feel the need for lifelong learning and ensuring that all age groups have access to education. In all probability, education will need substantial rethinking and reshaping in this fast-changing world.

As education is a lifelong process, the elderly also participate in various educational activities, either formal or informal. Some authors ^[1] point out that these activities occur in a range of contexts, including the family, workplace, community, where the exchange, or learning is intergenerational, as well as educational institutions, where it can also be targeted solely at groups of older adults as it is at, for example, the U3A (University of the Third Age).

Whether formal or informal, intergenerational or third-age-only, all education should lead to individual empowerment and the emancipation of older adults as a social group (e.g., ^{[1][2]}). The same authors add that intergenerational learning also supports social cohesion and strengthens social networks across generations. Both intra- and inter-generational education facilitates social networking, thus lowering the risk of social exclusion and promoting social (also intergenerational) cohesion and inclusion as well as active ageing of older adults ^{[1][3][4][5][6]}.

Nowadays, in the EU countries, 47% of older adults between 55 and 64 years know at least one foreign language ^[7], and 3% of them actually learn it at a later age ^[8].

The main aim of this review is to identify suitable pedagogical approaches to foreign language teaching of third-age learners. The secondary objectives include identifying whether or not foreign language learning later in life is beneficial, especially concerning their cognitive functions. Furthermore, the authors of this review would like to determine what specific demands the elderly, as a homogeneous group of learners, have in foreign language learning. More specifically, the following questions were asked: What are the most suitable pedagogical approaches, teaching methods and strategies for foreign language learning of third-age learners?

2. Theoretical Background

It seems to be taken for granted that particular needs apply to foreign language learning later in life ^{[9][10][11]}. Tam ^[12] maintains that older adults have, in comparison with their younger counterparts, unique needs, motivations, and interests. Consequently, it is advisable for teachers to adapt their teaching style as well as adjust the environment and course materials to the particular needs of seniors as well as age-related barriers like longer reaction times, age-related health problems, cognitive and motivational hindrances ^{[3][13]}. According to Schlepegrell ^[14], if there is a real barrier, it is the doubt about older people's ability to learn a foreign language.

Nonetheless, there is a broad agreement that older adults are not a homogenous group. They manifest a heterogeneity of learning interests, needs and abilities, biographical backgrounds, living conditions, inter-individual and intra-individual differences in learning aims and learning needs ^{[1][2][15][16]}. Consequently, one of the issues is how to exploit the aforementioned heterogeneity (see ^[1]).

In the same vein, Rogers ^[13] argues that older adults cannot be stereotyped as their diversity eludes globalisation, which applies to the word “education”, too. He points out that true adult education is more about learning by doing than learning for doing, and it should not be separated from social work. Similarly, Jamieson ^[2] highlights that older people do not constitute a homogeneous group and proposes paying attention to empowering benefits of lifelong learning rather than emphasizing work-related skills.

^[17] posit that foreign language learning initiated in later adulthood can result in improvements in cognitive functions if language training sessions are of sufficient length and frequency. Eguz ^[3] is also aware of many benefits of L2 (second language) learning for older adults, whether it be their good health, linked to the fact that cognitive activities tend to prolong the onset of dementia or social networking. On the other hand, Klimova ^[10] claims that there is a need for further research in order to determine whether or not foreign language learning enhances or at least maintains cognitive abilities in a healthy older population as there is still little evidence of that. Nonetheless, Pfenninger and Polz ^[18] claim that foreign language learning in older adults brings cognitive, linguistic as well as socio-affective benefits.

Yates and Kozar ^[11] emphasize the importance of determining suitable pedagogical approaches to teaching older adults, and tackling particular demands of language learning later in life. In an attempt to do so, Slowik-Krogulec ^[13] aimed at determining how to create a friendly learning environment for older adults. The author claims that the teacher should be aware of age-related barriers as well as the needs, abilities and learning preferences of older adult learners and provide social meaning to learning activities. She concludes that teachers should strive to create propitious, friendly and motivating learning environments, bearing in mind that learning in the third age ought to be informal, non-authoritative, and life-centred.

Eguz ^[3] claims that older adults tend to be highly motivated and responsible; they usually have considerable experience and knowledge of a wide range of topics. Therefore, older adults should have an opportunity to share their vast knowledge and experiences ^[13]. Furthermore, some authors (e.g., ^[14]) posit there is no decline in older people's ability to learn. In fact, adults usually learn foreign languages faster than children, at least at the early stages ^[14].

Similarly, Muñoz ^[19] refutes the general opinion that the earlier a person starts learning L2, the better. Although she agrees that children usually learn much faster than their older counterparts in a natural setting, where they are almost constantly exposed to quality input, she claims that this is not the case in an instructed setting, where the exposure to L2 is limited both in source and quality. What is more, the author maintains that even in natural settings, older starters may outperform their young counterparts due to their cognitive maturity and in short periods. All in all, what really matters is the length of exposure and quantity of input.

Yates and Kozar ^[11] observe that age-related research in applied linguistics remains more focused on describing the effects of age than on dealing with age-related effects. They were particularly interested in linguistic abilities, problems, and strategies of older Scandinavian expatriates living in Alicante, Spain. Although many of these migrants initially tried to learn Spanish, they have only limited ability to use it. Moreover, these expatriates rarely speak to local people as they live in Scandinavian communities.

Tam ^[12] attempts to determine whether a distinctive theory of teaching and learning for older learners is necessary. As she admits, older learners have unique needs, related to their physical, cognitive, sociocultural and motivational dispositions. Nevertheless, learning and teaching for older people are not so distinctive as to justify a separate theory of teaching and learning (see ^[12]). The author also highlights effective practices favoured by older learners.

Of course, some overviews of older adults' education (e.g., ^[1]). Nevertheless, various issues need to be tackled in order to better understand and further improve education in the third age. Thus, the main aim of this article is to explore the teaching methods/strategies, which can contribute to better language teaching to third-age learners.

3. Results

Six studies were detected on the basis of the set literature search. Five studies originated in Europe and one in South America. In addition, one study ^[20] was based on the teachers' opinions, while the other studies were described from the learners' point of view. The oldest study dates back to 1996 and the latest to the year 2020. The subject samples ranged from eight individuals to 40 participants. The main teaching/learning methods/strategies were based on a communicative principle.

The main strength of all these studies was that the authors of the detected studies were fully aware of the fact that they had to reflect and meet their students' needs when designing their language courses, as well as consider age-related issues, such as impaired vision, hearing, higher anxiety, or attention.

The key limitation, apart from the small sample sizes, consisted of different outcome measures used for evaluating the research findings, as well as different methodological study design. One of the studies consisted of only one teaching method that seemed of lower quality, i.e., [13][20][21], whereas the methodological design in the intervention studies, especially [18][22] was of higher quality.

Thus, the following research questions were set:

- **Question 1:** What are the most suitable pedagogical approaches, teaching methods and strategies for teaching foreign languages to third-age learners?
- **Question 2:** Is there any evidence in the literature that foreign language learning later in life is beneficial?

Concerning Question 1, there is no clear outcome—approaches vary. Some authors [24] put an emphasis on self-study, practicing and repeating; others [18] recommend applying a wide variety of teaching methods, most significantly group discussions, playing games, or watching videos on the Internet. Another approach supports the communicative method with an emphasis on talking about familiar topics [24] or one-to-one counselling [20]. Nonetheless, there is a discrepancy between teacher-centred instruction [18] and student-centred approaches [13][20]. Some authors [13] also highlight the importance of adjusting teaching materials and creating a pleasant learning environment. Other authors [22] support applying the keyword method.

As far as Question 2 is concerned, the findings from the detected studies (see **Table 1**) illustrate that even older people can benefit from learning a foreign language at a later age. These benefits seem to be not only travelling, but also social inclusiveness by getting in contact with their peers [18][23], as well as maintenance and/or improvement of their cognitive skills [18], e.g., working memory [22], which has a tremendous impact on the seniors' overall well-being.

Table 1. An overview of the findings from the detected studies.

Study	Characteristics of Participants + Description of the Intervention	Teaching/Learning Methods/Strategies Used	Outcome Measures	Findings
Garcia [23] Brazil	25 older individuals at the age between 60 and 81 years; 23 females and 2 males; they were native Brazilians, studying basic English.	Asking for clarification or verification; paying attention; finding out about language learning; self-monitoring; self-evaluating; asking for correction; reviewing well; setting goals and objectives; practicing/repeating; taking risks wisely; and getting the idea quickly.	A placement test and two questionnaires (one to gather personal thoughts about learning English, and the second one focusing on language strategies); statistical analysis.	The results show that the main learning strategies of the seniors are metacognitive and social strategies. The main motivation for these people is their interest in language studies, travelling and socializing.
Gruneberg and Pascoe [22] UK	40 female seniors at the age between 60 and 82 years, all UK natives, beginners in Spanish; they were divided into an experimental and control group; the experimental group was in addition to 20 Spanish-English word pairs given an image of the studied word.	Keyword method using a mediator to link an English word to its Spanish target.	Language tests + statistical processing.	The keyword method considerably improves recall of the English word given its Spanish equivalent (receptive learning), as well as the learning of Spanish equivalents of English words (productive learning) using a “soft” criterion of correctness, compared to a control group given no instruction on how to learn.

Study	Characteristics of Participants + Description of the Intervention	Teaching/Learning Methods/Strategies Used	Outcome Measures	Findings
Pfenninger and Polz ^[18] Austria	12 German-speaking subjects, half of them German-Slovenian bilinguals, between 63 and 90 years of age attended a four-week intensive English course for beginners.	A variety of teaching methods used, however, preferred methods were group discussions, reading and playing games; writing dialogues; in the bilingual group, those were mainly group discussions, reading, watching YouTube videos and teacher-centred instruction.	Pre- and post-tests; the Stroop Task; a socio-affective questionnaire; statistical analysis.	The findings reveal that FLL brings seniors cognitive, linguistic and socio-affective benefits.
Savina ^[21] Russia	30 participants at the age between 55 and 62 years, participating in a 72-h English course.	The main methods used: communicative method + talking about familiar topics, listening comprehension; facilitating senior's learning.	A questionnaire survey.	The results indicate that the teacher should always meet the immediate learner needs.
Schiller et al. ^[20] Hungary	8 foreign language teachers (2 German and 6 English teachers); mean age: 47 years, teaching senior students (mean age: 65 years).	Communicative teaching; student-centred approach and autonomous learning (one-to-one counselling).	An interview.	The findings indicate that teachers should respond to seniors' needs, promote learners' autonomy and self-awareness.
Śłowik-Krogulec ^[13] Poland	40 older adult learners of English who attended the classes at the University of the Third Age in Wrocław.	Student-centred approach, creating a pleasant learning environment, as well as adjusting teaching materials.	A questionnaire survey.	Older adult learners' needs, abilities, and learning preferences should be taken into account while designing language course

4. Conclusions

The authors aimed to determine what strategies are most common. Although foreign language learning in the third age has become popular, pedagogical approaches as well as teaching methods vary significantly. On the other hand, it can be generalized that foreign language teaching among the older generation should be student-centred and a communicative method should be implemented. Furthermore, it is advisable to incorporate real life experience and content.

The other objective was to find out how older people can benefit from learning a foreign language at a later age. The answer is that in many ways, including areas like travelling, social inclusiveness, improvement of cognitive skills, and overall well-being.

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