



Review

# Third-Age Learners and Approaches to Language Teaching

Jaroslav Kacetyl  and Blanka Klímová \* 

Department of Applied Linguistics, Faculty of Informatics and Management School, University of Hradec Králové, Rokitanckého 62, 500 03 Hradec Králové, Czech Republic; jaroslav.kacetyl@uhk.cz

\* Correspondence: blanka.klimova@uhk.cz

**Abstract:** 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. The second objective was to determine whether foreign language learning later in life is beneficial. The authors used a method of literature review to achieve these goals. The former objective was not fully achieved as there is no clear outcome, although some generalizations based on other review studies can be made. Namely, foreign language teaching among the older generation should be student-centred and a communicative method should be implemented with a special focus on talking about familiar topics and listening comprehension to facilitate a senior's foreign language learning. In addition, the teaching methods ought to incorporate real life experiences and provide relevant content. Respect should also be paid to the fact that older adults have intrinsic rather than extrinsic motivation to learn a foreign language. The latter objective was attained since older people can benefit from learning a foreign language at a later age in many ways, including areas like travelling, social inclusiveness, improvement of cognitive skills, and overall well-being.



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## 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. All OECD countries witnessed gains of about 10 years in life expectancy at birth between 1970 and 2015 [1]. 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 [1,3–6].

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? Is there any evidence in the expert literature that presents learning a foreign language later in life as beneficial?

## 2. Theoretical Background

It seems to be taken for granted that particular needs apply to foreign language learning later in life [9–11]. 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.

Authors like Antoniou et al. [9], Woll and Wei [17], and Wong et al. [18] 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 [19] claim that foreign language learning in older adults brings cognitive, linguistic as well as socio-affective benefits.

Another recurring topic is giving advice to teachers on how to teach the elderly. For instance, Eguz [3] maintains that it is demanding to teach this target group as the teacher should adapt and modify not only the teaching style, but also both the environment and course materials. 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. Older adults learn differently. In fact, adults usually learn foreign languages faster than children, at least at the early stages [14].

Similarly, Muñoz [20] 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 point out the importance of finding out what it means to be a more mature learner both in classroom and in the community. This was, at least to some extent, done by Gustafson and Laksfoss Cardozo [4], who looked into international retirement migration and raised questions of linguistic, as well as social and cultural, inclusion. 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. Therefore, they tend to prefer using either English or their native language as they feel too old to learn a new language and spend time in Spain only part of the year. 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. At the same time, they encounter age-related difficulties and dispositional, situational as well as institutional barriers. 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. Namely, involving learning experiences, the key role of the instructor, and familiar as well as relevant topics.

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. Materials and Methods

The authors used a method of literature review of available articles found in the following databases: Web of Science, Scopus, and ScienceDirect, which have the greatest coverage and scope. The literature review was conducted by both authors of the article in March 2021. The search collocations were as follows: elderly AND language teaching; older people AND language teaching; elderly AND foreign language methods; older people AND foreign language methods. Furthermore, the reference lists of the identified studies were investigated in order not to omit other vital studies on the research topic. Altogether, 1186 articles were detected. In addition, a Google search with the collocated words was conducted to detect unpublished (gray) literature. Nevertheless, no articles were identified. After removing duplicates and titles/abstracts unrelated to the research topic, 124 English-written studies remained. Of these, only 19 articles were relevant to the research topic. The selection of these articles was done manually based on their clear relevance to the topic.

Thus, 19 studies were investigated in full and they were considered against the following inclusion and exclusion criteria. The inclusion criteria were as follows:

- Only studies involving teaching methods used in learning a foreign language among the elderly were included;
- The search was not limited by any time period;
- Only empirical studies were considered.
- The exclusion criteria were as follows:
  - The studies outside the scope of the research topic were excluded;
  - The pure abstracts, descriptive studies, and review studies were not involved.

Considering the above-described criteria, six studies were eventually included in the final analysis and they are discussed in the following section.

#### 4. 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 [21] 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., [13,21,22], whereas the methodological design in the intervention studies, especially [19,23] 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 [22] put an emphasis on self-study, practicing and repeating; others [19] 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 [22] or one-to-one counselling [21]. Nonetheless, there is a discrepancy between teacher-centred instruction [19] and student-centred approaches [13,21]. Some authors [13] also highlight the importance of adjusting teaching materials and creating a pleasant learning environment. Other authors [23] 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 [19,24], as well as maintenance and/or improvement of their cognitive skills [19], e.g., working memory [23], 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 [24] 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 [23] 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.
Pfenninger and Polz [19] 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 [22] 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. [21] 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.
Słowik-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 courses.



## 5. Discussion

The findings of all detected studies apart from [23], who used only one teaching method to retain foreign language vocabulary, show that a variety of methods are used when teaching the third-age learners (see [12,19,21,22,24]). This is, in fact true for foreign language teaching in general since each learner has different learning needs. The results on teaching methods in fact, reveal that foreign language teaching among the older generation should be student-centred (see [13,21]) and a communicative method should be implemented with a special focus on talking about familiar topics and listening comprehension to facilitate senior's foreign language learning.

Overall, three main areas have a profound effect on older adult foreign language education. First, the learning environment, both intangible and palpable, needs to be adjusted to third-age learners. The former, i.e., intangible, includes considering the classroom atmosphere. It has to do with the teaching style. The teacher should be able to establish and then maintain teacher-student rapport. It might be risky to apply completely new approaches to teaching older learners as they may prefer slightly different approach to that applied to teenagers or young adults.

The latter, palpable, relates to classroom physical environment, which should respond to older adults' particular needs and possible age-related barriers to their successful learning. Older adults often struggle with age-related barriers, such as sense impairment. Moreover, third-age learners encounter a significantly higher incidence of specific problems, including lower cognitive abilities, leading to further exacerbation of both learning and teaching.

The second area covers teaching methods. They need to be adjusted to suit older learners. Teachers should consider the individual learner's characteristics, i.e., his/her needs and cognitive abilities, in order not to discourage seniors from learning a foreign language [25]. As Ramirez Gomez [26] maintains, teachers should exploit activities that third-age language learners usually like doing, such as the use of drilling exercises, scaffolding strategies or providing written learning materials in a visible font. In comparison to younger learners, third-age learners usually prefer different learning activities, in particular those they know very well from their past experience. As there is usually much lower pressure to follow the syllabus and teachers are more free to adjust the speed of teaching, the quality of input and length of exposure. At the same time, it enables the practise all language skills and teachers may also utilise their students' real-life experiences, which makes language learning meaningful. Moreover, it often enables all participants to acquire considerable non-linguistic knowledge through using a foreign language. This makes language learning worthwhile to them.

Third, older adult motivation tends to be intrinsic, which is a clear advantage. Whereas extrinsic motivation has to do with external rewards or punishment, intrinsic motivation means people learn a foreign language because the activity itself makes them feel good and they like doing it for its own sake. Older adults are usually highly motivated. Their motivation tends to be intrinsic rather than extrinsic. Nonetheless, older learners often not only want to learn a foreign language for its own sake but also aim to socialise with other people, of similar age or not. This is an opportunity for teachers to make foreign language classes both enjoyable and beneficial. Older learners' needs are educational as well as social. Matsumoto [27] claims that learning a foreign language at a later age is clearly intrinsically rewarding for older people since it contributes to their sense of meaning in their life. Viktorova [25] extends that it is a positive intrinsic motivation that plays a significant role in foreign language learning by older individuals.

These three areas are mentioned in other review studies. Schlepegrell [14] or Határ and Grofčíková [8] report that the most significant factors for successful older adult foreign language education are the learning environment, teaching methods, and motivation. These authors share the same opinion concerning these three aspects. Firstly, the learning environment should compensate for potential impairment of their senses. Secondly, teaching methods ought to respect and incorporate real life experience and provide relevant

content. The development of both receptive skills (listening, reading) and productive skills (speaking and writing) is important. Older learners prefer a slower speed of learning, avoid competitive activities, appreciate a friendly and enjoyable classroom atmosphere.

In addition, as many recent studies reveal, e.g., [8,28–33], learning a foreign language seems to be an efficient tool for enhancing the overall well-being of older people, despite the fact that their learning outcomes are poor. The reason is that learning a foreign language brings them subjective feelings of happiness, satisfaction and positive motivation and thus positively affects their mental health and expands their social networks.

Thus, there are several pedagogical implications to be considered for practice when teaching older adults, which are as follows:

- Creating a friendly and pleasant learning environment;
- Adjusting teaching methods to older people's individual needs, taking account their hearing and vision impairments, as well as the overall learning pace;
- Using a mixture of both receptive and productive teaching methods;
- Implementing familiar topics of their interest.

The main limitation of this review study is obviously a lack of research studies on this topic. Therefore, more research in this area is required, especially now when there is a rise in older population groups, which can result in the rise of aging diseases, such as dementia [34]. One of the symptoms of this disease is a cognitive decline that cannot be cured at this time, but can be delayed by non-pharmacological approaches [35,36], such as learning a foreign language at a later age (see [37]).

## 6. 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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