

Teaching foreign languages to seniors: Some insights from pre-service EFL teachers

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ABSTRACT

The study of adult-learning does not have a very long tradition, as it was initiated by Malcolm Knowles in the United States in the middle of the 20th century. However, a fast-growing interest in this area of research can now be observed due to ageing populations, especially in the European context (Ramirez Gomes 2016, Gabryś-Barker 2018). Among others, it is perceived as an acute problem in Polish society. Thus, numerous institutions have come into being attempting to accommodate seniors in modern society by offering a wide range of educational opportunities, among them the Third Age Universities (Gabryś-Barker 2018, Grotek 2018). The main focus of this article lies in assessing the adequacy of teacher training for the specific context of teaching foreign language to late adults by pre-service EFL teachers. The data demonstrates clearly an urgent need for more instruction in teaching a FL to senior learners. It appears that the pre-service teachers participating in the survey have a very critical view of their present training programme. Thus, their awareness of the specificity of the process is not very well-developed and ideas proposed are not well-grounded in theory, instead they follow intuitive and experiential assumptions.

This text is a tribute to Professor Graca Pinto's achievements in the educational research on (late) adults, who along with such scholars in America as first Eduard C. Lindeman or later on Malcolm Knowles was one of the first scholars in Europe to undertake and pursue this important research area in her admirable scholarly career. *Muito obrigada.*

KEYWORDS

seniors, foreign language instruction, EFL trainee teachers, teacher training, Third Age University

Introduction

Whether to study seniors (and senior as learners) is a pressing question in the situation when the citizens of nations across the world are getting older and older. As a consequence, numerous provisions need to be made in societies, where seniors constitute a significant percentage of people. It is both economic and medical measures that should be in focus, but also educational and social needs cannot be ignored. Educational needs drive

the creation of new models of education that need to go beyond classroom instruction as they follow the dictates of life-long education, promoting learner autonomy. The development of technology and dissemination of resources make the process of learning much more available, although not less complex. Such a new TEL (technology enhanced model) requires new skills in older adults, something that the young find very basic and indispensable in their lives: the use of computers, the internet, learning and interactive platforms, etc. But seniors are often much more motivated by real instrumental concerns so they may be able to overcome the obstacles resulting from their fear of modern technologies. In relation to foreign language learning, the growth of mobility across the world has created an urgent need for languages - as those all-inclusive trips catering for seniors are an important way of spending time and in fact of feeling alive (provided the financial means are there). Importantly, with the intensive growth of immigration, communication with family members and newly born grandchildren abroad create totally new communication challenges for older adults. Such is the case, for example, with the wave of Polish emigration to Great Britain some ten years ago, when Poland was in economic decline. Also, seniors, defined as those retired, deprived of the work that has more often than not constituted the core of their lives and impacted their lifestyles, need to search for something new, some new pastimes. Learning a new foreign language, or indeed several foreign languages, may be a very good option, especially in Poland and perhaps other ex-communist countries, where seniors have been the least privileged of citizens and most affected by rapid economic change, and in the past by the severity of post-war and communist-era difficulties and shortages. One of these neglected areas was education and thus little opportunity to learn things like foreign languages. It is urgent to provide these opportunities for seniors, whose numbers will grow quickly in the years to come. For instance, in Poland, 13% of the Polish population at the moment is senior, whereas in 2030 it will amount to 17 %. Despite the fact that government has taken various measures to “de-age” Polish society with pro-birth policies, it is still an aging society. One possible policy for the elderly is not only making their lives easier in economic terms, but also energising them in various spheres of life (Jaroszevska 2013, Gabryś-Barker 2016).

1- The advantages of (language) education for senior learners

It was already in the 1950s that Erikson (1959) characterized the human life cycle in stages with dichotomous features of: trust - mistrust, autonomy - shame, initiative - guilt, industry - inferiority, identity - role confusion for the earlier stages, and intimacy - isolation, generativity - stagnation and integrity - despair for the adult and late stages of life. The last three stages describe the challenges of late adulthood defined as living in seclusion (alone) where nothing happens apart from daily chores, which may lead to despair. However, on the bright sight, there is a chance that elderly will develop relations, get closer to their families and especially, grandchildren (intimacy), become creative through developing new pastimes (generativity) and form new selves and states of wellbeing within a new paradigm (integrity) (Oxford 2016). In other words, there are clearly numerous advantages for seniors in learning foreign languages:

- FL learning as a process of self-development.
- Development of communication skills (even transfer to L1 contexts).
- Enhancement of memory load, concentration and organization of information in the brain.
- Effort to express thoughts and feelings more precisely.
- FL learning as a form of rehabilitation.
- Prevention (or delay) of some diseases and brain development (e.g. Alzheimer´s disease, dementia – Bialystok et al. 2014).

One of the major institutions promoting (late) adult education, the University of Third Age (U3A) (known as *Universités. Du troisieme Age, Tous Age, du Temps Libre, UN13, des Aîné, Uniwersytet Trzeciego Wieku* in various national contexts) assumes that educational activity adds significant quality to the lives of seniors by:

- Life-activation (becoming active and involved, overcoming stagnation)
- Use of seniors' potential in the work market
- Historical reasons (to make up for a war-time generation functioning in the post-war period of difficulty, when there was not much

opportunity to develop and fulfil one's needs and aspirations)

- Social environment and contact both with other seniors and young people (overcoming isolation and despair)
- Contact with and work for the environment
- Making contacts with other institutions easier through exposure to modern-world ways of functioning (e.g. development of IT)
- Pastime (to overcome the loss of loved ones, to see the world from a different perspective)
- Accumulating mental capital to develop an extensive cognitive reserve (an ability to resist ageing and degenerative conditions - greater number of neurons, bigger brain)

(Gabryś-Barker 2018: xix)

Education in the later stages of life may be a challenge, but there is also a strong chance that it will make seniors' lives much more positive (as in Erikson's positive life descriptors). As mentioned above, foreign language learning is a serious educational option for seniors. To be able to develop effective ways of FL instruction for late adults, much more needs to be known about how this group of learners learns, what their possible difficulties may be and how to facilitate this process by decreasing the negative qualities of senior age and at the same time using the potential of the seniors themselves. In other words, at the start, what is needed is much more research in the area in order to become more aware of the specificity of teaching FLs to seniors. Using research findings, we can reform teacher training programmes to create more effective FL teachers for this age group.

Although studying seniors/gerontology is not very new as a science, it is fairly new in second language acquisition studies and methodology course-books. Fortunately, the situation is changing fast and with every year there are new scholarly contributions, such as the publications of Andrew, P. (2012), Ramirez Gomes (2016), Gabryś-Barker (2018) (for a detailed overview see Pfenninger, Singleton, 2019). There is great promise in these developments and clearly the words of Merriam (in Knowles, Elwood, Holton, Swanson 2005: 1) may be a bit too pessimistic; "It is doubtful that a phenomenon as complex as adult learning will ever be explained by a single theory, model or set of principles." Some progress has been made over the past decade.

However, we need to realise that there is still a long way to go.

2- Late adult learners: some background assumptions

It was in 1926 when Lindeman in his discussion of adult learners within the already developing field of andragogy suggested the core characteristics of adult learners. Adults are described as motivated to learn as they experience needs and interests that learning will satisfy. In other words, adults' orientation to learning is life-centred. Their life and learning history experiences are the richest source for further learning. Additionally, adults have a deep need to be autonomous and self-directing. Simultaneously, they constitute the most heterogeneous group, as it has been observed that individual differences among peoples increase with age and have an impact on their opening up to new learning situations and eventually, their success (or failure) (Gabryś-Barker 2016). Adults are motivated differently and Houle (1984), in his discussion on why adults engage in continuing education, believes that adults are either goal-oriented, activity-oriented or learning-oriented learners. Similar views are expressed by Knowles, Holton, Swanson (2011), who see adults as learners that most of all need to know explicitly why they are learning, what they learn and how to learn (and how to be taught - which often may be fallacious!). As a result, they have their self-conceptions as learners developed; they tend to be autonomous and self-directing. Their prior experience of learning becomes their resource and a mental model. They are ready to learn and this learning experience is a life-related, developmental task, problem-centred and contextualised. It expresses their motivation to learn as both extrinsic and intrinsic personal reward. In other words, the characteristics (profile) of an adult learner embrace two dimensions. The cognitive dimension expresses the development of knowledge and skills (such as using a foreign language), whereas the affective one demonstrates new opportunities for finding friends and sharing one's life with them or developing a new sense of purpose in life in its later stages. Following Erikson's life cycle for adults (1959), educational pursuits promote the development of intimacy and eliminate isolation, foment generativity and prevent stagnation and develop integrity and reduce despair in seniors.

With the ageing process at the stage of late adulthood (seniors), the above characteristics may be less visible due to physical deterioration in all spheres of functioning; thinking with brain limitations (e.g. partial memory loss) or generally less sense agility as well as possible physical incapacitation. Embracing additional activities such as engagement in educational pursuits may become too much of a challenge for seniors. At the same time, engagement in such activities may visibly slow down the process of (mental) deterioration. Although medicine knows a lot about aging processes both on the level of the cognition, affect and motor deterioration of senior citizens, not much is known about the learning processes at this stage of life - among them the now frequently promoted learning of foreign languages. As mentioned earlier, due to the development of societal ageing across the world (and especially in the European context), more research is being carried out. However, before we get to know much more, it is necessary to observe and diagnose what the level of awareness of specificity of the learning process is in those who are responsible for the education of the elderly and those who will soon take over from them. This is the objective of the mini-diagnostic study presented below.

3- Pre-service EFL teachers' perspective on foreign language instruction to seniors (the study)

3.1. Description of the study

First of all, the focus of this study is on the diagnosis of trainee teachers' awareness of the specificity of teaching a FL to senior learners on the basis of their own observations and instructional experiences. Secondly, the study presents the trainees' assessment of the teacher training programme at their university in relation to FL instruction in the case of third age learners.

Thirty-eight EFL pre-service teachers (trainees) took part in the narrative survey. They were all in their final year of study in a university department of modern languages, majoring in English and specialising in teaching English as a foreign language (TEFL). The data was collected on completion of their methodology module and school placement, which is an obligatory part

of the studies. Most of the trainees have already had some experience of teaching, be it in language schools or during private one-to-one tutorials in English. At the moment of data collection, these trainees were in the process of completing their M.A. theses in TEFL, which were based on action research projects designed and carried out by them in their own school placement classes.

The tool used for data collection was a descriptive questionnaire entitled *Teaching Foreign Languages to Seniors*, which was to be based on the trainees' knowledge, intuitions and also, on some experience they have already had. It required narrative responses from the subjects in two thematically related parts:

Part 1: What do I know about teaching FLs to seniors?

- Comment briefly on the following aspects: define a senior learner, seniors' reasons for learning FLs, places where seniors can go to learn FLs, characterise a FL senior learner and their difficulties seniors.
- Comment on teaching a FL to seniors in terms of approach/method/technique, materials to be used and strategies of coping with difficulties.

Part 2: My teacher training assessment, assumptions and experiences.

- Adequacy of teacher training in my programme of studies (methodology component) -assessment on the scale of 0-10 pts.
- Components expected but missing from the training

The categories were pre-determined in the instructions to the survey however, the students were also encouraged to go beyond the set thematic parameters.

4- Data presentation and discussion

4.1. *What do I know about teaching FLs to seniors?* (Part 1)

The subjects, young students in their early twenties, do not seem to present a uniform view on what it means to be a senior. For most of the trainees, it is naturally, the age over 60 with additional qualifying terms:

retirement, whereas for some from people 45 years of age onwards are already members of the senior group. Psychology makes a distinction within this age group into 60-80 - the third age, and from 80 onwards – the fourth age (Blanchard-Fields, F., Kalinauskas, A.S. (2009).

In commenting on reasons for learning foreign languages, the responses are compared here with the study conducted among senior learners of FLs themselves by Jaroszewska (2013: 257). (Table 1).

Table1. Trainees' perceptions *versus* seniors' reasons for learning FLs.

Reason	Trainees' views	Seniors' responses
Travelling	40%	55,38%
A way of spending free time	31%	24.99%
To develop memory/To maintain intellectual agility	31%	58.9%
Have contact with other people and feeling needed	8.3%	27.04%
Being trendy	8%	0
A must in a multicultural and multilingual world	0	42.47%
Family abroad (31.93)	0	31.93%
To learn about other cultures (28.39%),	0	28.39%
Because it was learnt in the past	0	24.66%

It is interesting to see how the small batch of data in this study demonstrates the unawareness and reductive perceptions held by the trainees about seniors as FL learners and their ability to take up new paths in life and be active, as well as to spend time (31%), develop memory (31%) and at best to travel

(40%). The seniors in Jaorszewska's study demonstrated full awareness that learning FLs gives them much more than just instrumental value (though it is not to be neglected - *A must in a multicultural and multilingual world* with 42.27 %), but FL learning also develops their horizons in reaching out to other cultures (28.39%), so it has an integrative dimension as well.

The trainees commented on the possibilities seniors are given in terms of FL instruction and most of them (64%) see various language schools as the main centres, whereas the Universities of the third age only come in second (43%), with private lessons as third (31%) in popularity. Also, individual tutorials (35%) and the internet (14%) are pointed out as possible venues and sources of language learning for seniors. Unfortunately, no statistics on seniors' FL learning places of choice are available to substantiate these perceptions. The only available report on the study carried out among Polish seniors learning FLs (2011) is found in a journal for FL teachers *Języki Obce w Szkole* (2013/4) in which Anna Jaroszewska reported some statistical findings based on the data collected. The study included forty-three U3As and nine language courses and 2145 seniors. Out of this group 86% were women, 70% from big cities and 63% with higher education.

In their views on what constitutes a profile of a FL senior learner, the trainees pointed out:

- *a slower pace of learning* (29%),
- *being truly engaged and motivated* (20,1%),
- *needing repetition* (20%),
- *a part of daily life* (8%),
- *interaction with others* (7%).

This seems to be a fairly random mix of opinions relating both to difficulties and resulting from pedagogical strategies employed (e.g. needing repetition), reasons for learning a FL (interaction with others) and attitude to learning (being truly engaged and motivated). The above comments were expanded on in the enumeration of difficulties that seniors encounter when learning a FL

- *pronunciation* (32%),
- *comprehension problems* (29%),
- *memory deficits* (28%),
- *decrease of motivation* (14%)

There seems to be very little awareness here of the deterioration of senses in the case of late adults (except perhaps for memory loss), as described by Knowles (1980), Ellis (1994) and Knowles et al (2005, 2011), which relate to both cognitive abilities (or inabilities rather) resulting from maturation and deterioration (e.g. deterioration of sensory equity effecting recognition and production of sounds, loss of plasticity, lateralization and cerebral maturation, analytical skills). Importantly, the trainees did not demonstrate any awareness of affective-motivational factors, which result in communicative anxiety, identity issues and integration problems, as well as loss of self-confidence due to lack of coping potential and as a consequence more belief in failure than success. The role of previous learning experiences (learner profile, transfer of training, transfer of learning), as well as the (fairly) good physical health needed to be mentally engaged, were totally neglected as factors characteristic of seniors' learning potential, possible problems and challenges to be faced by both the senior-learners and by their teacher, who needs to adjust his/her instruction accordingly.

This lack of awareness of the major issues relating to this age group in the context of learning a FL resulted in a totally erratic and inconsistent view of how to teach seniors held by the pre-service teachers. These views ranged from direct method through grammar-translation and audiolingual method (ALM) to communicative teaching and even, total physical response (TPR!). What is advised is drilling, grammar-translation and the focus on communication: in short, some form of eclectic approach. Materials to be used that seem to the trainees most appropriate for this age group are visual materials such as flashcards, pictures, *realia*, authentic materials and course-books with clear instructions. It is difficult not to notice that seniors are seen by the subjects as young learners, with the major teaching styles focusing on encouragement and praising, and above all being patient. Maybe such a view derives from the persistence of a common belief that when we become older adults, we return to childhood and behave like children.

4.2. *My teacher training assessment, assumptions and experiences* (Part II)

The trainees participating in this mini diagnostic study were extremely critical of the foreign language teacher training programme they had just completed in relation to senior learners of FLs. The students, asked to assess its adequacy on the scale of 0-10 pts (from the lowest to the highest), came up with very low numbers - as the mean assessment was 2 points. In terms of content of the courses, a lot of basic elements of teaching methodology were expected – from instructing future EFL teachers on how to plan, execute and assess seniors. This was already their major problem in their own teaching in groups of late adults, which though not quite common, occurred mostly in their one-to-one classes and language schools (personal communication). However, the trainees complained explicitly that they did not have a chance to teach seniors during their school placement (9%), where they were supervised by their mentors. That would have allowed them to get some feedback from experienced teachers. Also, some of the students straightforwardly stated that teaching seniors was not mentioned at all during their training (9%). What was naturally expected to be included in the training was seen as the lack of very basic instruction on

- an appropriate approach/method/technique (34%), with specific focus on facilitating pronunciation development (16%), assessing seniors (1%), materials and coursebooks for seniors (1%)
- motivating seniors (10%)
- knowledge of a profile of a senior learner, for example, problem areas (such as memory, concentration (2%)
- assessing seniors (1%)
- materials and course-books for seniors (1%)
- other issues: patience, impairments, developing confidence, relevant syllabus, anticipated learning difficulties of seniors.

The above cited areas of instructional practice were fairly erratically enumerated, with some of the students not being able to formulate specific aspects of EFL methodology they would like to know more (or indeed anything at all) about, in the case of senior learners. The initially expressed disappointment with the present syllabus of EFL teaching module, also

resulted in an inability to justify in a more coherent way what it should contain in terms of FL instruction topics, but also what it should involve in terms of, for example, possibilities for teaching practice (course placement). Maybe more opportunities for the actual teaching of a FL to senior learners would awaken the trainees' curiosity and awareness that it is a very specific process. An example of such awareness training is the interesting - at various levels - course designed by Niżegorodcew (2018).

5- An example of a good practice in improving teacher training programmes (closing comments)

As can be seen from this small diagnostic study conducted in a Polish universities /which is probably not much different from other educational contexts in Poland), the situation is highly unsatisfactory. The debate over how to improve this scenario is becoming more and more urgent and some steps have already been taken to popularize research on senior learning and teaching though academically-based events and publications, as well as the participation of Polish scholars in the activities of the U3A. An example of one such initiative is the Third Age University affiliated to the University of Silesia, where some attempts to run these courses are being piloted and observed. Another example is the course that was run at the Jagiellonian University by Prof. Anna Niżegorodcew (2018).

In the words of Niżegorodcew (2016, in Niżegorodcew 2018) "foreign language teachers should receive a special training (...) to work with senior students" and that this training should include elements both "to identify senior students' needs, to specify aims (...) and to develop suitable syllabuses" (p. 174) and importantly, to introduce a firm theoretical basis derived from psycholinguistic and educational studies (ibid.). This highly successful course *Teaching EFL to senior students* is an example of good practice. It embraced both a theoretical part focused on a series of lectures related to senior students (relevant psychological and sociological factors, European Union policy towards senior students, among other things), followed by a set of observations of an experienced teacher in her EFL class of seniors and her post-lesson reflections. An integral part of the course was a series of individual tutorials conducted by trainees, trainees' interviews

with senior students and written reports prepared by them on the basis of all these sources of data and personal experience (for a detailed description and the effects of the course, see Nizęgorodcew 2018).

At a moment when research on senior FL learners is not too abundant, in fact in its infancy, all we can do is to use the available knowledge from other disciplines (psychology, sociology) and our experiential findings to guide us and our student-trainees. Let us hope that similar courses like the one mentioned here will become common practice in the programme of studies of educational institutions training future FL teachers.

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