

# Older Adult FL Learning: Instructors' Beliefs and Some Recom- mendations

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The literature on foreign language learning in older adults (60 years old and over) is limited. Instructors must rely on their own beliefs and experiences teaching younger adults to make decisions in the classroom. In this study, I looked at some of these beliefs and clarified them according to previous cognitive and psychological research. The objective was to identify teachers' age-related stereotypes regarding older adults' ability to learn a foreign language and to offer a more accurate picture of the strengths and weaknesses of older learners. Additionally, drawing on the observations of a methodological study in progress, I provide some concrete techniques to help instructors develop more confidence in the older adult classroom and ultimately offer more gratifying lessons.

シニアの外国語学習者（60歳以上）についての文献はまだ限られている。そのため、シニアの学習者を教えるときに、外国語講師は自分の意見、もっと若い学習者に教えた経験等を基にし、授業に関する決定をせざるを得ない。本論文では、認知的、心理学的な先行研究を基に、それらの意見を議論し、明らかにしていく。目的は、高齢者の外国語を学ぶ能力に関して教師が持つ年齢に関する固定概念を明らかにし、年配の学習者の強みと弱みに関してもっと正確な概念を提供することである。さらに、現在進行中の方法論の調査を基にし、シニアの学習者向けの授業を担当する講師に対して、より効果的で確実な授業を行うための具体的な教授法の提案をする。

**L**EARNING A foreign language (FL) is a process initiated by many individuals at different stages in life. Indeed, an increasing number of senior citizens in Japan and other developed countries are currently studying an FL, and many instructors are being required to teach these first-time older learners. Consequently, the field of FL learning is beginning to focus on older adults (60 years old and over). Still, only a few empirical studies have been conducted on the topic. The first section of this paper constitutes a summary of this literature.

The limited state of research on older adult FL learning has hindered scholars from developing a teaching method specific for this cohort. Therefore, it is reasonable to hypothesize that instructors' beliefs outweigh empirical evidence when making decisions in class. In this paper I discuss some of these beliefs and compare them to the results of previous cognitive and psychological research. I argue that instructors' age-related views on older learners—at least those included in this paper—are not entirely supported by scientific evidence, but rather are based on generally held preconceptions. A few concrete recommendations are also provided as essential elements of lessons with older learners. These techniques may contribute to an overall



better classroom experience for instructors and students.

Finally, I want to emphasize the importance of instructors comparing their age-related preconceptions with evidence from the literature, reassessing their views of elderly individuals, and ultimately adopting a more realistic attitude towards elderly learners of an FL.

### Research on Older Adult FL Learning: A Review

Adult learners have received much attention in FL learning research (i.e., L2 learning in formal settings in the L1 country), and the basic notions of andragogy (Knowles, Holton, & Swanson, 2011) have enhanced the FL learning experience for adults of all ages. The particular cognitive and psychological transformations conveyed by aging and retirement, however, motivated scholars such as Lebel (1978) and John (1988) to coin the term *geragogy*—older adult education. Since then, many studies on educational gerontology and geragogical methodology have been conducted (e.g., Findsen & Formosa, 2011; Peterson, 1976; Sherron & Lumsden, 1990), although they have focused mainly on general education for the frailest members of the elderly population (Formosa, 2002, 2012). Although such a framework peripherally applies to FL education, it does not directly account for many aspects of the FL learning experience. A few empirical studies, nonetheless, have been attempted to contribute in this respect. Following is a summary of this research.

### Cognitive Aspects of FL Learning in Older Adults

Van der Hoeven and de Bot (2012) studied the retention of lexical information on the level of subthreshold memory and compared three groups of 15 adult native speakers of Dutch who had studied French as an FL in school: young (mean age 22.4), middle-aged (mean age 50.3), and old (mean age 76). The

participants were measured on their ability to learn new words and *relearn* old ones, which meant consciously recalling previously learned information that seemed forgotten. The results of this study showed that older learners performed somewhat worse than younger adults at learning new words, but that the former exhibited an advantage in relearning old words over learning new ones. Additionally, the authors mentioned some methodological adjustments that are necessary when studying older adults, because stress and demanding environments seem to affect these individuals more than younger adults.

A study by Ramírez Gómez (2014) described vocabulary learning strategy (VLS) use among Japanese older learners of Spanish. This study involved 48 participants, aged 60 years old and over (mean age 66), and included a questionnaire on VLS use, a memorization–recall task, and an immediate retrospection session in which the participants described the memorization mechanisms they had employed in the memorization task. According to the results, the generalized assumption that more proficient learners use more strategies—and more selectively (O'Malley & Chamot, 1990)—did not seem to apply to older learners entirely. These individuals' diverse trajectory as FL learners may have contributed to the development of varied strategic behaviors matched with different levels of performance.

Even though these studies are insufficient to reach decisive conclusions with regard to FL memorization processes in older learners, they provide new insights on this issue, as well as evidencing the need to adjust certain mechanisms of cognitive empirical research in order to study this age group.

## Psychological Aspects of FL Learning in Older Adults

A few studies have focused on the psychological dimension of the older learner classroom. These include comprehensive research on several affective variables of the learning process and also a study focused on social factors.

The UN's Grundtvig Program, created to foster the development of educational programs for older adults, released a handout for a training course for FL instructors of older learners (Volkshochschule im Landkreis Cham, 2006). Among the recommendations was adjusting pedagogical notions to the reality of older learners by paying attention to the learner's needs and also promoting self-directedness. Unfortunately, the handout did not offer any specific theoretical or empirical support for its proposed methodology. Furthermore, to the best of my knowledge, no other documents have been released and the training course was not being offered at the time of this writing.

Alvarado Cantero (2008) attempted to propose a series of concrete strategies for teaching older learners, based on their physical, psychological, and social characteristics. The study included a revision of the literature on age-related decay and the results of a series of interviews with older learners. The author concluded that memorization and tiredness after an activity are the greatest concerns for older learners, but failed to provide further concrete recommendations to adjust adult FL teaching in light of these characteristics.

Older learner psychology was also approached by Gómez Bedoya (2008), who created a profile of Japanese older learners based on the observations of multi-aged classes (i.e., classes with students of different ages) at the *Instituto Cervantes* in Tokyo. According to this study, older learners show higher motivation and dedication than younger adults, and they are also more individualistic, although their memorization abilities and

work speed do not always match those of younger adults. This work concluded by proposing a few mechanisms for teaching older learners, such as giving value to the learner's interests and lowering the difficulty of assessment tests.

A study by Andrew (2012) focused on the psychological effects of learners' and instructors' ageist preconceptions. Based on interviews with one multi-aged class of Mexican adult learners of English, the researcher argued that such preconceptions negatively affect the dynamics in the classroom (e.g., emergence of patronizing behavior, jokes about age) and become more relevant for older learners than the learning process itself.

In sum, the literature has explored a few facets of older adult learning. Even so, there are many cognitive, physical, and psychological age-related transformations in these individuals that still need to be accounted for in the context of the FL classroom.

## Characteristics of Older Learners of an FL: Preconceptions and Reality

There is a great deal of research on cognitive and psychological aging (see reviews in Katagiri, 2012; Park & Schwarz, 2002). Most of this research, however, has been conducted from the *loss-deficit* perspective (Wagner, 2009), which regards old age mainly as a period of cognitive and physical decay and has influenced society's views of senior citizens (Andrew, 2012; Katagiri, 2012). FL instructors are not immune to these ageist constructs, and many instructors exhibit preconceptions that may influence their attitude towards older learners (Kuzborska, 2011). Based on a series of interviews with instructors who had experienced teaching elderly individuals in Japan, the present study was aimed at determining qualitatively the most common age-related beliefs and contrasting them with existing empirical evidence.

## Method

### Participants

The participants in this study responded voluntarily to an open call for collaboration posted on the Internet. They included 16 instructors—10 of Spanish and six of English—with experience teaching older adults in Japan. There were nine male and seven female instructors, with ages ranging from 27 to 66 years old (mean = 39.31), who had an average experience in FL teaching of 10.03 years. The instructors' nationalities included Spanish, Peruvian, Japanese, Canadian, New Zealander, and American.

### Procedure

The study involved a series of individual interviews, both in person and through email. In order to avoid an overt focus on the instructors' beliefs, the interview comprised 20 questions about the instructor's experience teaching Spanish or English to older adults (see Appendix), and it was conducted mostly as a free conversation. The unstructured nature of the actual interview allowed the participants to speak or write freely and discuss the topics that they deemed relevant. The information provided by the participants was transcribed and organized by the researcher.

### Results

Based on the interviews, four recurrent preconceptions of the characteristics of older learners were identified: two related to cognitive aspects, one regarding affective variables, and one related to older learners' experience. The following sections present these preconceptions and clarify them based on previous research on cognitive aging and psychology, which either refute them or support them to an extent.

### *“Older learners are always struggling”*

Cognitive decay among healthy older adults is a fact. The belief that older learners experience difficulties across all tasks and regarding all linguistic skills, however, is not well founded. There is strong evidence that this decay is not uniform; no two older learners experience the same cognitive decay, nor do all the cognitive abilities of one individual decay at the same rate and to the same extent as others (de Bot & Makoni, 2005; Singleton & Ryan, 2004).

### *“Older learners don't remember new words”*

When learning an FL, the retention of new information is considered older learners' main difficulty, both by instructors and by the learners themselves (Alvarado Cantero, 2008; Gómez Bedoya, 2008). Although this idea may be based on valid perceptions, the interaction between age and memory is still under debate. For example, although many studies on cognitive decay have found that aging causes problems at the level of working memory (WM) capacity (see Burke & MacKay, 1997; de Bot & Makoni, 2005), the exact relation between memory capacity and linguistic development remains unclear (Burke & MacKay, 1997), as do the mechanisms through which WM capacity loss may hinder FL learning. Furthermore, variables such as level of education, L1 (Burke & MacKay, 1997; de Bot & Makoni, 2005; Labos, Del Río, & Zabala, 2009; Schmitter-Edgecombe, Vesneski, & Jones, 2000), vocabulary learning strategies, and meaningfulness of the task (de Bot & Makoni, 2005; Juncos Rabadán, Elosúa de Juan, Pereiro Rozas & Torres Maroño, 1988) also have an important influence on memory performance.

Additionally, it has been suggested that although cognitive aging causes problems with creating connections between new information and information in long-term memory (LTM) (Burke & MacKay, 1997), what is termed *high quality* of the items

to be learned—i.e., level of elaboration, distinction, and memorability—could contribute to their easier acquisition (Anderson, 2005; Schmitt, 1997). This suggests that older adults' difficulties storing new information in LTM are not insurmountable, although the task may require more effort.

### *“Older learners are more emotionally and socially fragile”*

Recent studies on older adults' psychology have contradicted this belief, although the topic is still controversial. It has been claimed that senior citizens' physical vulnerability engenders emotional vulnerability (Alvarado Cantero, 2008). Indeed, all the instructors interviewed reported a tendency to refrain from putting pressure on older learners, particularly in front of the rest of the class, mainly to create a warm atmosphere and avoid feelings of frustration.

On the other hand, in studies such as Katagiri (2012), it has been argued that lifespan is currently increasing worldwide, along with the number of years between retirement (60–65 years old) and the need for full-time nursing care. In other words, older adults in their 60s today—particularly in Japan—exhibit a much stronger physicality than individuals who were in their 60s even 10 or 20 years ago and consequently, more confidence. Although this does not necessarily concern all older learners, and many of these individuals may experience feelings of vulnerability, it is important to consider that traditional views on old age may not necessarily apply to the current reality of older adults.

### *“Older learners have more experience and this makes the class much more interesting”*

Although the literature seems to support this notion, older learners' experiences may have different effects on the learning

process. Many instructors agree that older learners' life experiences enrich the development of the lesson. These experiences, though, are also thought to generate preconceptions in the learner regarding what should be learned, how it should be learned, and how long it should take to be learned (Alvarado Cantero, 2008). These preconceptions influence the learning process in several ways.

First, learner's experiences influence the methodology used in class. For example, Japanese older learners are viewed as perfectionists, individualistic, and dependent on the instructor, which has been associated with their trajectory studying with the grammar-translation method (Gómez Bedoya, 2008). If accurate, these characteristics may be advantageous for certain tasks (e.g., translating) but conflict with the constructs of the communicative approach, which requires active participation in class, pair and group work, and tolerance for mistakes.

Additionally, older learners' experiences also determine their VLSs. According to Ramírez Gómez (2014), Japanese older learners tend to use oral and written rote repetition as a main vocabulary consolidation strategy (for a categorization of VLSs, see Schmitt, 1997). As indicated by the participants of this study, the reliance on this technique originated in childhood and persists despite its current perceived ineffectiveness.

In sum, older learners' experiences determine their level of engagement in communicative activities and also the degree to which these learners will be efficient during self-study. It is reasonable to hypothesize that more empirical knowledge in this field will provide the theoretical support to transform these learning habits for the better.

## **What Can Instructors Do?**

Developing realistic beliefs towards elderly individuals is a crucial element in the instructor's preparation for teaching older

learners. The second step is to adjust classroom techniques to suit these learners' needs. This, however, may seem a daunting challenge if an FL geragogical methodology has not been proposed, as there are only a few studies on FL learning in older adults. The following section is an attempt to assist instructors in this respect and offer a series of concrete techniques for the older adult classroom that are directly connected with the four preconceptions above. Before embarking on these topics, however, two clarifications are in order, and these should be considered at all times.

First, the techniques included in this section share characteristics with those used with younger learners. However, the age-related cognitive and psychological transformations in old age require paying special attention to these techniques. In other words, although these recommendations may benefit younger learners as well, their absence may have deeper negative consequences with older learners.

Second, these techniques are based on previous cognitive research and the observations of a methodological study that comprised two courses of Spanish for Japanese senior citizens (60 years or older) and included 56 students. This study is still in progress, and as such, no definite conclusions have been reached. Nevertheless, it has provided many reflections that, even in their current form, may serve to increase the confidence of many instructors and improve the experience of their students.

### ***On the Variability of Cognitive Decay***

The irregularity of age-related cognitive decay, and the consequent need to aim the lessons at a heterogeneous group, entail significant difficulties for lesson planning. As mentioned by Andrew (2012), older learners who consider themselves as perfectly competent may feel offended by activities that have

been adjusted to suit more struggling learners, who in turn may experience frustration and discomfort if the activities have not been adjusted to their needs. This situation makes clear the need for exclusive classes for older learners—and even further subgrouping among them if possible. Administrative decisions, however, are usually out of the instructor's hands and this may not be viable. In such cases, the instructor needs to invest time in understanding the older learners' individual characteristics in more detail, because any strategy he or she decides to use in the classroom (for example, slowing down the pace or using easy exercises) may suit these learners differently.

### ***On Perceived Memory Problems Among Older Learners***

The acquisition of new information among older learners is seemingly these learners' and instructors' main concern; consequently, this section includes greater detail and several strategies aimed at the facilitation of the memorization process.

First, it is important that the instructor reduce the focuses of attention. Working memory is deemed closely related to—and even dependent on—attention (Fougnie, 2008). Age-related WM problems in older adults require from the instructor an extremely efficient management of attention focuses to avoid impeding these learners' processing, understanding, and memorization. It is important then to entirely avoid habits such as writing on the board and talking simultaneously, or talking to the learners when their attention is focused on a task.

Using simple-structure sentences is also recommended. The level of complexity of a sentence determines the amount of information that needs to be stored and processed in WM. Complex sentences (i.e., sentences that include at least one subordinate clause) are more taxing on WM and require more processing resources, which is particularly detrimental for older

adults who experience WM problems (de Bot & Makoni, 2005). Consequently, the recommendation is to use simple sentences (i.e., sentences with one subject) in the L2 as much as the lesson plan allows. Simple-sentence explanations regarding grammar points or classroom activities, for instance, may also make more processing resources available for older learners.

In addition, it has been suggested that the more interesting or relevant a piece of information is to the learner, the more easily it will be remembered (Richards & Rodgers, 2001). As previously mentioned, connecting new information to LTM becomes more difficult as aging advances. Thus, it is fundamental that instructors provide lexical items in a modality that fosters the creation of new connections (Burke & MacKay, 1997).

Two recommendations may be useful in this regard. First, new lexical items should be relatable to information already stored in LTM. For instance, cultural topics may be interesting for older learners, but if they find it difficult to relate to the vocabulary at a personal level, it may be hard for them to create new connections. The relatability of vocabulary, however, will depend on the learners' characteristics. It is up to the instructor to judge which vocabulary is more appropriate according to what he or she knows about the learners. Second, using class time for experimenting with different VLSs and the new lexical items may also be beneficial. The learners are then forced to dedicate time and effort to this task, which would also provide a chance for the instructor to assist the learners in this regard. This may also require reducing the number of important lexical items provided in class, and also being particularly selective at the moment of deciding what vocabulary to teach.

Finally, it is recommended that the instructor introduce memorization strategies. It has been suggested that level of selectivity in the use of strategies correlates with level of proficiency (O'Malley & Chamot, 1990; Waldvogel, 2013). Nonetheless, as shown by Ramírez Gómez (2014), older learners' repertoire of

strategies does not correlate with their level of proficiency, and their learning trajectories may be key in the selection of strategies. Memory training activities would increase strategy awareness, which in turn would enable learners to select appropriate strategies for their specific needs and characteristics.

### ***On the Alleged Fragility of Older Learners***

The transformations experienced by elderly individuals are not uniform and should be dealt with taking into consideration the learners' individual characteristics. For instance, in cultures that assign a great importance to social rank, an early disclosure of the learners' status could lead to coyness and obstruct communicative activities. By way of illustration, pair work practice between a former physician and a housewife who did not graduate from college could be negatively affected by their social status, if that is known before a friendly relationship has been developed. Consequently, activities that reveal this kind of information should be avoided in the early stages of a course.

Conversely, many older adults may not identify with the traditional stereotypes that describe elderly individuals as emotionally vulnerable. Instructors should re-evaluate their views about older learners and refrain from inadvertently patronizing them. Instructors could, for instance, consider how elevating class expectations for success could improve motivation and engagement.

### ***On Older Learners' Previous Learning Experiences***

Adults in general exhibit a high degree of self-direction and autonomy (Knowles, Holton, & Swanson, 2011). Nonetheless, if older learners use strategies and exhibit learning habits that may have been efficient in previous years but do not suit their current cognitive state (e.g., vocabulary rote repetition strategies), then the positive effects of their autonomy may be lost.

Addressing the topic openly makes older learners aware of their own characteristics and gives them the chance to ask questions and explore ways to exert their autonomy more efficiently.

Finally, many Japanese older learners have the habit of studying upcoming material in preparation for lessons. In a communicative lesson, which normally relies on pair and group work, this creates imbalance among learners and hinders some learners from benefiting from the lesson plan. One possible solution is to avoid the use of textbooks. The learner is then forced to focus on reviewing previous lessons rather than preparing for upcoming ones.

## Conclusion

Many instructors face the task of teaching an FL to senior citizens without specific knowledge about these learners' needs. The limited empirical literature on FL learning in older adults may lead instructors to resort to their beliefs and experiences teaching other groups of learners. This paper has provided a few recommendations that could mitigate some challenges of the older learner classroom. These are applicable to learners of all ages and different L2s, although their absence may affect older learners more—or differently—than younger adults.

Society's ageist preconceptions pervade instructors' attitudes towards older learners and influence their expectations and behavior in the classroom. Only a few of these age-related preconceptions have been discussed; consequently, contributions are limited. It is fundamental then that instructors ask themselves the following questions: What are my views on old age? Are these views accurate from an empirical perspective? Are they applicable to the FL class? To what extent do they affect my students' acquisition process? Developing a productive approach towards elderly individuals' cognitive and psychological realities is crucial; the instructor needs to find a middle point

between a conformist view of older learners' abilities and a too optimistic attitude that ignores the age-related transformations experienced by these learners, which may preclude the need for adjustments.

The ultimate objective of this paper is to draw attention to the fact that the variables of cognitive aging are not set in stone, and that the limited research on FL learning in older adults questions the validity of many ideas formerly assumed to be true. Further research is required in order to define the exact influence of age-related transformations on FL learning. This may offer concrete answers regarding issues such as how to compensate for age-related effects in the classroom, if negative, and the degree to which popular beliefs in this regard condition the actual level of success of older learners' acquisition process. The diversity of unanswered questions related to this topic renders it a field with great potential.

## Bio Data

**Danya Ramírez Gómez** has a Bachelor's Degree in applied linguistics and English-Japanese translation from Universidad de Santiago de Chile. She holds a Master's Degree in linguistics from Kobe City University of Foreign Studies, Japan. Currently, she is a PhD candidate at the same university and conducts research on foreign language learning processes in Japanese older learners and the incorporation of linguistic constructs in foreign language teaching practices.

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## Appendix

### Interview With Instructors: List of Items (English Version)

#### First section (filled out by interviewer)

1. Name
2. Gender
3. Age
4. Current job title
5. Highest academic degree
6. Certificate or diploma in the field of foreign-language teaching
7. Years of experience teaching English to senior citizens (60 years old or more) in Japan; years of experience teaching any other language, or in any other country.

#### Second section (filled out by interviewee)

8. In relation to the number of students (in lessons for senior citizens—60 years old or more—in Japan), what types of lessons have you taught? (Circle all that apply.)

- a. Groups of more than 20 students
  - b. Groups of 10 to 20 students
  - c. Groups of 5 to 10 students
  - d. Groups of 5 or fewer students
  - e. Private
9. Which are/were your students' main objectives to study English? (Circle all that apply.)
    - a. Socializing with other Japanese people
    - b. Communicating in simple English for travel
    - c. Reading English literature
    - d. Keeping an active lifestyle
    - e. Accomplishing a high level of English
    - f. Communicating with foreign friends
    - g. Others \_\_\_\_\_
  10. In general terms, how appropriate do you consider the textbooks you use/d in your lessons in relation to your senior-citizen students' objectives?
    - a. Socializing with other Japanese people  
Very appropriate    Appropriate  
Not very appropriate    Inappropriate    No textbook
    - b. Communicating in simple English for travel  
Very appropriate    Appropriate  
Not very appropriate    Inappropriate    No textbook
    - c. Reading English literature  
Very appropriate    Appropriate  
Not very appropriate    Inappropriate    No textbook
    - d. Keeping an active lifestyle  
Very appropriate    Appropriate  
Not very appropriate    Inappropriate    No textbook

- e. Accomplishing a high level of English  
 Very appropriate    Appropriate  
 Not very appropriate    Inappropriate    No textbook
- f. Communicating with foreign friends  
 Very appropriate    Appropriate  
 Not very appropriate    Inappropriate    No textbook
- g. Other:
11. In general terms, how appropriate do you consider the textbooks you use/d in your lessons in relation to your senior-citizen students' characteristics?  
 Very appropriate    Appropriate  
 Not very appropriate    Inappropriate    No textbook
18. What advice would you give a teacher who will instruct older learners for the first time?
19. In your opinion, and in relation to foreign language learning in general and at any age, how relevant do you think is that the student accomplishes "native-like" pronunciation in the foreign language?
20. Additional comments.

*Third section (completed by the interviewer based on the interview's answers)*

12. Which do you think are the most difficult structures or grammar elements to learn for older learners? Which aspects are the most problematic?
13. Which do you think are the easiest elements or structures to learn for older learners?
14. Which do you think are the hardest kinds of exercises for older learners?
15. Which do you think are the least difficult kinds of exercises for older learners?
16. How does your methodology to teach older learners differ from your methodology to teach younger adults, teenagers, or kids?
17. Which do you think would be the fundamental elements of a foreign language teaching methodology directed to older learners?