

Book Review

Third age learners of foreign languages

Editor:

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Danuta Barker-Gabryś has made an important contribution to TESOL with her edited volume on language teaching and the third-age learner. Older learners, though visible demographically, have been somewhat overlooked as language learners since the focus in the teaching of foreign and second languages has largely been on younger learners. With the growing acknowledgement that senior learners now constitute a considerable proportion of those attending foreign language courses, this collection provides an excellent and timely overview of the current state of knowledge on issues related to the process of third-age language learning. The selection of the contributors is international, as one would expect in the Second Language Acquisition book series, and includes authors from Austria, Ireland, the Netherlands, Poland, the UK, and the USA.

The book starts with the editor's introduction. In it, Danuta Gabryś-Barker clearly sets out the aim of the book, which is to "to introduce the topic of seniors who can find a purpose in life by going back in time and becoming learners once again, third-age learners of foreign languages (FL)" (p. 16). She enumerates the reasons why senior language learners should be studied, introduces adult learning

principles, devotes a section to third-age universities, sheds some light on the values of learning and the improvement of teaching languages to seniors, and presents several recent research contributions on this topic. The overview in the introduction sets the scene for the two parts that follow: “Foreign Language Learning in the Third Age” (seven chapters), and “Foreign Language Pedagogy in the Third Age” (four chapters). Both parts are sufficiently distinct. The book closes with the editor’s conclusion in which she, once again, discusses all the contributions and points to further research directions.

Opening the first part, the chapter by Rebecca Oxford examines the third age from a developmental perspective. The chapter introduces the key concepts of age grading and then goes on to discuss the physical, cognitive, emotional and cultural changes that affect this age group, as well as three approaches that could be useful for encouraging and helping older learners with language learning. This chapter provides a theoretical basis for the rest of the book and is thus of central importance. Oxford’s post-scriptum in which she shares her dream of learning a foreign language at the age of 70 and how she would like this to be accomplished provides a refreshing personal note in a book of this kind. That said, and considering the contemporary focus on ELF-awareness (e.g., Matsuda, 2017; Sifakis & Tsantila, 2018), I find it intriguing that Rebecca Oxford should practice talking on Skype only with a “native” German speaker.

In Chapter 2, David Singleton reports on the latest theoretical findings on age in the context of language learning, including the current consensus on the critical period hypothesis, the contribution of older learners to the language learning process, and the practicalities of teaching really late learners. Singleton reminds the reader that in language learning younger does not always mean better and dispels a few language learning myths, such as the belief that late learners prefer learning grammar via explicit feedback or that senior learners enjoy learning in the company of other late learners. In several parts of the text, the author underscores the need for more research on third-age learners’ capacity, and, contrary to popular beliefs, argues that old age has less to do with a decline in capacity as such but more with the slowing down of processing speed.

In Chapter 3, David W. Green offers a neurolinguistic discussion of the interactional fluency and neurophysiological and psychological mechanisms of age-related deterioration of abilities in elderly language learners. After a comprehensive discussion of the intricacies of L2 interactional proficiency among the elderly, the author indicates the benefits of exercise interventions, including physical exercises and action video games, which may reduce age-related brain decline. He believes that senior language learners can benefit from individually tailored L2 learning programs which would reflect their personal interests (e.g., cooking and gardening) and exploit opportunities offered by the virtual world

(mobile phone interactions with actual speakers). He also calls for more studies that would investigate the neuroprotective influence of using two languages and result in tracking brain changes that would provide information about impairment in brain regions.

The contribution by Maria Kliesch, Nathalie Giroud, Simone E. Pfenninger and Martin Meyer (Chapter 4) belongs to a group of articles which take issue with the focus on age as the main factor affecting language learning. The authors claim that age is only one of many factors to be considered in foreign language geragogy. Their research project, which focused on 10 older adults learning English for 4 hours a day over a period of three weeks, aimed at verifying two hypotheses: Whether there is significant growth in older language learners, and whether the cognitive fitness of particular learners predicts successful L2 learning. Following their study, the authors claim that cognitive factors and motivation play a decisive role in L2 development, while age only explains a small part of inter-individual variance. In addition, the study provides several methodological tips related to the intensity of training, the choice of materials (classroom activities vs. software), and immediate feedback that could be used by practitioners to foster older learners' motivation to learn a language. The study rounds off with suggestions for investigating older learners in the future, especially those that apply to the manner of conducting valid and reliable research.

In Chapter 5, Mirosław Pawlak, Marek Derenowski and Anna Mystkowska-Wiertelak pick up the theme of the use of language learning strategies by elderly learners. They hypothesize that the success of language learning in this age group may not depend so much on how old learners are but on their learning strategies and study objectives. In the results of an open-ended questionnaire on the application of metacognitive, affective and social strategies, the researchers paint a picture of participants ($N = 13$) who are driven by general motives of learning English, who treat the learning experience as a way of offsetting old age, who understand planning as revising material, who are afflicted by (mostly) negative emotions and who lack autonomy and are over-reliant on their teacher. It would be interesting to speculate whether these characteristics are typical of the Polish context or are related to their memories of language learning from the past. Perhaps a sentence or two with a possible explanation why the results are like this could have illuminated the participants' learning approach, especially given the fact that the findings, as the contributors stress several times in the text, differ from those of a study conducted by Ohly (2007). The article is eloquently written, and many teachers of mature learners will undoubtedly find it interesting.

The study by Monika Grotek and Agnieszka Ślęzak-Świat (Chapter 6) is based on elderly language learners' choice of reading strategies when doing an L2 reading comprehension task. The authors argue for the implementation of

therapeutic intervention (a balance exercise) in the reading programs for senior language learners in order to free their visual capacity. The study is original and interesting but, perhaps, its findings should be treated with caution. The fact that the subjects adopted various strategies for their reading texts, regardless of the problems induced by their gaze control, leads to the conclusion that more research is needed before definite answers are proposed.

Ewa Piechurska-Kuciel and Magdalena Szyszka's text (Chapter 7) is concerned with compensatory strategies (language learning and communication strategies) used by the elderly. The chapter presents Baltes's (1987) selective optimization with compensation (SOC) model of aging, followed by a concise review of the main taxonomies of compensatory strategies, and then a description of a questionnaire study. The study was directed at 4 late adult learners who, in 12 open questionnaire sentences, described their language learning behaviors related to compensatory strategies. The findings reveal that, contrary to Pawlak et al.'s study, the role of compensatory strategies in senior language learners is important. The authors conclude that foreign language learning in late learners can be a vital experience that contributes to their sage-ing (Oxford, Chapter 1) and cognitive fitness (Singleton, Chapter 2; Kliesch et al., Chapter 4).

The second part of the book comprises four chapters. The first two articles are reports of studies carried out at two Universities of the Third Age in Poland and deal with older learners' expectations towards their foreign language teachers. The narrative study described by Monika Grotek (Chapter 8) was conducted with a group of 87 students. Its outcome is a profile of an effective foreign language teacher at a University of the Third Age which is divided into five general categories: catering for the development of students' linguistic and communicative skills in the FL; helping students function in a group of other learners; organizing classroom procedures to make them interesting, practical and suitable for senior learners; enhancing students' memory; and providing adequate feedback. This study is definitely aimed at language teachers, and all the areas mentioned here would be worth focusing on when organizing a language course for older learners. The author is fully aware that her profile is limited to the narratives of a particular group of students learning a language in a particular context, and therefore she encourages others to undertake analogous quantitative studies. Without dismissing the author's caution for generalizability, I would venture the opinion that the guidelines relating to the characteristics of a teacher of older learners are capacious enough to state with confidence that the organization of a language course according to the generated profile will be well received by senior language learners.

Another chapter (Chapter 9) on the expectations towards language teachers in the eyes of senior students is contributed by Marek Derenowski. In his

qualitative small-scale study based on interviews with 15 participants, he comes up with such desirable teacher qualities as being compassionate, showing understanding, creating a friendly atmosphere, encouraging, being enthusiastic, self-confident, energetic, patient, and flexible, giving more time for completing tasks, giving advice, being fair, explaining clearly, being well prepared, and providing a friendly learning context. This text could also be interesting to senior language learners who might confront their ideas of a good teacher with those provided by the author. That said, I wonder to what extent the participants were affected by their language teachers' characteristics, especially the one who seemed to be more popular of the two.

Chapter 10 by Anna Nizegorodcew is a description of the impact of an English as a foreign language course taught to senior students on English studies teacher trainees. I found it extremely interesting, innovative and inspiring thanks to its experiential learning paradigm. A course on teaching a language to senior learners is already a novelty in the Polish context of language teacher education, but the inclusion of the components of observation and individual tutorials is worth disseminating as good practice. As the outcomes of the course were so positive, I suggest the text serve as inspiration to many language teacher educators.

The last chapter (Chapter 11) in the second part by Anna Pot, Merel Keijzer and Kees de Bot is slightly different if viewed from the perspective of its context. The contributors believe that the struggles with language learning by late learners are largely influenced by the social and psychological environment in which it takes place. The authors focus on a special group, third-age first-generation migrants in the Netherlands, poorly-educated and sometimes illiterate in their first language, who have failed to learn Dutch despite living and working in the country for many years. The authors discuss the relationships between the knowledge of language and the late-learner adults' cognitive and social well-being and go on to present the most prominent language learning programs for social participation in Dutch society. The article is important in calling attention to an overlooked but timely topic. What is more, the authors change emphasis from focusing on L2 proficiency to focusing on language as "a tool to promote social interaction and integration" (p. 233). Interesting, yet of a secondary nature, is the point raised in the text about the lack of formal evaluation of language programs and materials that have been implemented over many years.

I shall now consider three issues that seem crucial in evaluating any SLA book on senior language learners. Firstly, the question of who the monograph is addressed to? To my mind, different chapters of the book will appeal to different readers. Those with research interests might like to focus particularly on Chapters 2, 3, 4, 6, and 11. Teachers of late adult learners may value the studies described in Chapters 5, 7, 8, 9, and 10. Older learners themselves, if proficient in English, may consider Chapters 1, 6, 7, and 9 useful. L2 syllabus and materials

designers will learn much of relevance from Chapter 11, while teacher educators may want to read the book in its entirety.

This brings us to the second issue: the clarity of presenting the content to the international readers of this book. Obviously, the writing styles of the contributors differ, and some of the chapters are always easier to comprehend for some readers while others require more background knowledge to grasp the author's intention, or simply more familiarity with the scholarly writing style. Most content discussed in the chapters of this monograph is accessibly presented, and some of it, like Chapter 1, is particularly reader-friendly.

The third issue relates to the opportunities the book provides for exploiting the notion with which it is concerned. In this book, the notion of third-age language learners comprises: viewing third age from a developmental perspective, up-to-date reports of research on age-related language acquisition, challenges with learning and using an additional language, the application of language learning strategies by older learners, student expectations of third-age teachers, teacher training, migrants' third-age problems, and future research directions. In my opinion, one of the greatest values of the book lies in the message expressed by several authors that "the picture is not nearly as bleak as some perceive it to be" (p. 241), and that getting older involves only the slowing down of the learning process. Such an approach to ageing treats the process as one of change or difference rather than decline. Another reflection that emerges from the book is that third age language learners cannot be regarded as a homogeneous group. In other words, biological age is not enough to let us take for granted how successful or unsuccessful in language learning learners will turn out to be. As a good case in point we could mention the contradictory findings of the studies of older adults' use of compensatory strategies (Pawlak et. al.; Piechurska-Kuciel & Szyszka). Finally, it is important to mention that there are different reasons why late learners attend foreign language classes, and mastering the language may not be their top priority. It could be more important for these learners to establish social contacts, improve self-esteem, or look for new intellectual challenges.

I would also like to point out that the editor of the collection, Danuta Gabryś-Barker, has done her work well. Her "Introduction" and "Concluding Comments and a Way Forward" provide a useful bridge to the theme of the whole collection. Like her contributors, Gabryś-Barker stresses the need for more research on third-age learners, which means that this aspect of language acquisition is still at an early stage of its development.

This is a well-produced book despite some slight problems with language editing. An initial search has revealed problems with Polish surnames: "Niżsegorodcew" for Niżegorodcew (p. 205) and "Ślezak-Świat" for Ślęzak-Świat (p. 131). These small reservations apart, I am convinced that *Third Age Learners of Foreign*

Languages makes an important contribution to our developing understanding of older language learners. Its wider significance has still to be assessed, but it would definitely seem to move us forward.

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