

TEACHING FOREIGN LANGUAGE TO THE ELDERLY:  
Teachers' perceptions

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PERCEPTIONS

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Väestön ikääntymisen myötä eläkeikäisten ihmisten rooli on noussut tärkeään asemaan myös vieraiden kielten oppimisessa ja opetuksessa. Ikääntyneitä oppijoita on kuitenkin tutkittu Suomessa vielä valitettavan vähän. Poikkeuksena mainittakoon Aino Jaatisen (2003) paljolti omaksi avukseksi laatima tutkimus ikääntyneistä englannin oppijoista, jota on käytetty pohjakirjallisuutena myös tässä tutkielmassa.

Tämän proseminarityön päämääränä on ollut kartoittaa vieraiden kielten opettajien havaintoja iäkkäistä oppijoista sekä heidän mahdollisesti käyttämiä opetusmetodejaan. Tutkimusaineisto kerättiin kyselylomakkeen avulla, johon vastasi kuusi opettajaa. Tutkimustulokset osoittivat, että opettajat olivat havainneet iäkkäissä oppijoissa erityispiirteitä, jotka he tavalla tai toisella ottivat huomioon myös omassa opetuksessaan. Tutkimustulokset tukivat Jaatisen tekemiä havaintoja iäkkäistä oppijoista, vaikka tutkimusnäkökulmat olivatkin hieman erilaiset.

Yhteiskunnan tarpeiden ja aiheen tarjoamien mahdollisuuksien myötä oppiminen eläkeiässä tarjoaa paljon mahdollisuuksia myös tulevaisuuden tutkimukselle.

Asiasanat: foreign language learning in old age, teachers' perceptions on teaching elderly

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## 1 INTRODUCTION

The population in Western countries has aged notably during the past decades. Many of the elderly have decided to spend their old age actively by studying in open universities or in folk high schools. In many cases, the new hobby in question is a new language or a language they have studied in the past but then forgotten. Many educational institutions have responded to this by offering courses particularly designed for or also suitable for elderly learners. The statistics provided by Statistics Finland (2006) also shows this trend: in adult education, the percentage of the participants in the oldest age group has increased every five years. However, despite this age group's interest in foreign language learning, the elderly and foreign language learning is still a rather unexplored area. Language learning and aging have indeed been popular as separate research subjects and both fields cover various approaches to the subject. Moreover, adult learning, lifelong learning and adult education have been extensively studied. Unfortunately, these studies rarely discuss the learning or teaching of the aged people in particular. However, one of the few studies carried out on language learning and the elderly is a study organised by Aino Jaatinen (2003). In her study, Jaatinen (2003) examines aged learners and their preferred learning methods, their learning strategies and what methods suit them best.

In the present study, I will explore Jaatinen's findings and also the research done on the biological and psychological aspects of the aging process. The aim is to determine the teachers' perceptions on teaching aged students. I will start by viewing the physical and mental changes and then continue to the influences that the aging process has on learning. The clarification of the physical process is meant to function as a relevant background to the central issue I will discuss in the paper. It serves as a background for the occurrences in the field of elderly learning. Then I will proceed to the section where I will elaborate and discuss the present study and the data gathered with the help of a questionnaire. I will conclude the study with a summary of the central findings and with some suggestions for future research.

## **2 LANGUAGE AND AGING**

In this chapter, I will discuss the phenomena behind aging and particularly the effects aging has on skills that are central when learning is considered. I will start by looking through the physical changes caused by the aging process. Then, I will continue to view aging and mind, and the effects aging has on the ability to communicate. Finally, I will discuss Jaatinen's article and discuss her findings in relation to previous findings.

### **2.1 Biological aging**

Aging generates physical and psychological changes that may complicate the performance of the simplest tasks. Doing basic household duties or recollecting information can become everyday challenges. On the surface, the anatomy of the body changes, muscles become weaker and skin loses its elasticity and underneath, the functioning of the brain changes. (Arking 2006:142-143; Stuart-Hamilton 2006:32-33.) The natural or pathological deterioration of the body is often the cause for the psychological changes. In fact, according to Stuart-Hamilton (2006:26), age-related changes can be measured by and divided into biological age and psychological age. Biological age refers to the state and the aging process of the body and the psychological to the mental aging process. In other words, the physical aging process is intricately connected with the psychological aging process and therefore describing in detail what aging is, is more complicated than what one might assume in the first place.

Stuart-Hamilton (2006:29) states that one of the distinct consequences of aging is cell loss which starts already during the early stages of adulthood and begins to really show during the old age. In addition, Stuart-Hamilton (2006) mentions that some of the changes considered definite results of aging may, in fact, be causes of diseases. Therefore, as Arking (2006:138) notes, some researchers do not examine the elderly who suffer from an age-related disease and concentrate on studying the healthy elderly and, thus, the research results are distorted. Consequently, Arking (2006) continues that this sort of

division is improvident since diseases can be regarded as a result of a failure in the body and diseases can be considered as a natural part of the aging process. Despite the cause of the deterioration, the physical changes may have a notable effect on the brain and therefore also on the mental activity.

## **2.2 Aging and mind**

According to Stuart-Hamilton (2006:32-33), aging can cause degeneration in the sensory system, such as decline in sight or hearing, and, consequently, hinder the functioning of the mind. As a result, if a person is eager to read, small font size can be an obstacle if the eyesight has weakened. In addition, due to the anatomical changes and the degeneration of the muscles, producing sounds and writing texts can become more challenging. (Stuart-Hamilton 2006:135-137.) Difficulties with the mind, on the other hand, are central when learning and recollecting information is considered and many of the common age-related difficulties the elderly encounter are due to the problems in the memory systems.

As Stuart-Hamilton (2006:127) notes, it has been proved that memory may deteriorate despite the fact that the nervous system is rather flexible and can replace lost nerves to some extent. However, according to research, aging does not only have an effect on a single part but also on several parts of memory such as semantic, episodic, explicit and possibly even implicit memory, and aging consequently impedes the building of new memory connections, for instance, acquiring new information and facts. For instance, Kemper (1999:12) mentions that difficulties with the working memory have effects on language and communication in particular. Thus, linguistic activities can become more troublesome. Moreover, Stuart-Hamilton (2000:119) adds that if long-term memory is impaired, even understanding a story can be overly challenging. Since the functioning of the memory plays an important part with the use of language, difficulties with the mind can also cause difficulties with understanding or producing speech or with reading and writing. In consequence, if these central abilities required in foreign language learning are

insufficient, it could be questioned, how an aged person can learn pleasantly, or, moreover, how a teacher can provide him or her with new information.

### **2.3 Aging and communication**

Since memory plays a central role in interacting with other people, deterioration of the memory systems caused by aging can remarkably affect one's communication skills. In this section I will consider some of the most common age-related phenomena in communication. As Burke (1999:6) reports, the common language-related problems among the elderly are phenomena such as word finding failures and tip of the tongue experiences (TOT), where the person cannot produce a word even though he or she knows it. Burke (1999) also describes the different theories that have been developed to explain the TOT phenomenon. According to the *Transmission deficit* model, TOTs are caused by deficient transmission between lexical and phonological nodes. Thus, TOTs happen easily with words that are not often used. However, another theory, the *Inhibition Deficit*, suggests that TOTs may be a result of a word blocking the target word. Thus, the reason for an elderly person's inability to produce the target word despite remembering other similar words may be due to an obstruction in word retrieval caused by the other words he or she remembers. (Burke 1999:6.)

Linguistic problems caused by aging can also affect negatively a person's social life. Language being the essential part of communication, changes in linguistic skills brought by aging can have a consequential influence on an elderly person's self-image and self-respect. For example, the decline in communication skills, like in language production which is a crucial part of interaction with other people, may finally lead to social withdrawal and isolation. (Burke 1999: 20). Another factor affecting one's self-image is elderspeak, noted both by Kemper (1999: xi) and De Bot (2005:16-24): a slower tempoed form of speech, which is usually used by young or elderly speakers who talk to an old person with obvious cognitive difficulties. According to De Bot (2005:25), elderspeak is used to facilitate and clarify the comprehension of the spoken message and also to

express care by avoiding, for instance, complex sentence structures. At its best, it can indeed help the communication with older people. However, De Bot (2005) states that elderspeak can also have an unfavourable effect: a slow speaking rate and an exaggerated intonation can seem to devalue the older discussion partner and, thus, have a negative effect on the person's self-image. This negative side of elderspeak is also noticed by Kemper (1999: xi), who describes it as an "insulting and patronizing form of address which is intended to enhance older adults' comprehension". As Burke (1999:3) states, other issues that seriously affect the self-concept of an older individual are the problems that complicate or slow down interaction with others such as problems encountered in word production. Burke (1999:6) elucidates that word production difficulties are in direct contact with aging process which both researchers and the elderly themselves have noticed.

#### **2.4 Aging and language learning: Jaatinen's study**

As aged learners form a significant learner group in educational institutes, the need for research organized on their learning is definite. In her study, Jaatinen (2003) wanted to map the aged learners' characteristics and their learning strategies to support her own development as a teacher. Her research consisted of three studies performed between the years 1991 and 1993. With a variety of data collection methods, she gathered the information and analysed it forming some theories close to practice. In this section of the present study I will discuss Jaatinen's article and her central findings.

Since aging is an extensive process with many causes and results, it also affects the assimilation of new information and habits. Stuart-Hamilton (2000) and other researchers mentioned in the present study listed many of these phenomena and also Jaatinen (2003:194,198) acknowledges their presence in her research. For instance, she had noticed that the aged learners had difficulties with absorbing new information, and with memorizing and retrieving it from the memory. In addition, she notes that acquiring knowledge may also be troublesome due to a hearing-impairment. In addition to listing



the phenomena she had noticed among aged learners, Jaatinen also elucidates her own teaching methods and perceptions on teaching the elderly.

Jaatinen (2003: 201) states that all the aged learners are individuals and therefore forming generalizations of them as learners is nearly impossible. However, she was able to divide them broadly into three learner groups that are *Novice*, *Senior* and *Evergreen*. According to Jaatinen (2003: 201-202), a novice is a curious but cautious learner who is afraid of new situations and tasks and to whom the teacher is the authority. A senior is hardworking, ambitious and determined. The senior develops his or her own strategies and tries different ways of learning. To the senior, the teacher is a leader, a language expert and the one who corrects the errors. An evergreen appreciates the social aspects of learning and is relaxed. The evergreen likes to use imagination and likes to express him or herself creatively without the fear of making mistakes. The teacher is a conversation partner who is not expected to remark on every error the student makes. Evidently, the categories are only to give a hint of the learners or to help the teacher.

Moreover, Jaatinen (2003) notes that the aged learners are well aware of their responsibility in learning. Jaatinen (2003:197) reports that perhaps due to life their experience and previous learning experiences, senior learners have good metacognitive skills and they reflect on their learning regularly. Moreover, older learners value practising the skills and translating as a learning method. This may be a result of the old teaching methods aged learners are used to.

### **3 THE PRESENT STUDY**

This chapter concentrates on the present study. Here, I will introduce the research question and explain the methods I used for collecting the data. I will also provide a basis for discussion by explaining the methods of data analysis.

### 3.1 The research question

As discussed above, the need for research carried out on foreign language learning in old age with its different contributing factors, follows from the increasing number of the elderly. The focus of the present study is on teachers' perceptions concerning senior citizens' foreign language learning. Senior students have different needs when compared to students from other age groups and, consequently, the concern of the present study is whether the older learner group affects the teaching and in which ways. In other words, the objective is to collect and analyse teachers' thoughts and experiences on teaching aged students and discover the specific teaching methods, in case they have used any.

Since elderly people generally attend language courses organized by folk high schools, only teachers working in these educational institutes were contacted in regard to the present study. Their ideas of the issue were determined by supplying them with a questionnaire which was constructed around the research question. The central research question with a related sub-question is the following:

1. Have the teachers perceived any differences between the learners from younger and older age groups? If yes, what are the differences in more detail?
2. How have the teachers taken the elderly into account in their teaching work?

The interest of the present study being the elderly and their learning, it is essential to define what age is considered *aged* or what age-group the *elderly*. Determining the point when old age begins is not a straightforward task since aging is rather individual but it was decided that the age of retirement was regarded as the most logical and suitable qualifier in this case. This was clarified also to the respondents taking part in the present study.

### **3.2 Data collection: the questionnaire**

The nature of the study being qualitative, it was decided that the means for collecting the data would be a questionnaire and/or an interview. However, since the time available for the data collection proved to be rather limited, it was decided that a questionnaire would be sufficient in this case. A questionnaire was constructed and sent to folk high schools in Central and Eastern Finland that arranged English language courses. Teachers were approached by e-mail with the questionnaire (see Appendix) attached to the e-mail message and were kindly asked to fill in the questionnaire if they had any experiences related to teaching the elderly.

The questionnaire consisted of eight open questions with extensive space for answering. Five additional questions were to map the respondents and their background information such as age, sex and the educational institute among others. In the cover letter (see Appendix) it was emphasized that the responses would be treated in strict confidence and viewed objectively. The respondents were also encouraged to explicate their findings and possible teaching methods as soundly as possible. However, as the answers received were rather sparse and would not have offered enough data for the study, the research area where the data were collected from was expanded from Central and Eastern Finland to the whole Southern half of the country. This attempt to collect more data did not prove to be fruitful and instead of spending more time on continuing the search for voluntary respondents, it was decided that the number of responses so far should be sufficient.

### **3.3 Data analysis: methods**

Since the nature of the questionnaire demands a more detailed examination of the results and the amount of data is insufficient for quantitative analysis, the methods used in the data analysis are mainly qualitative. Instead of attempting to define the most effective teaching methods, the aim of the present study is to disclose some of the teachers' thoughts on the issue. The answers will be discussed and compared, some useful

examples highlighted and the findings set against Jaatinen's (2003) research results on a similar issue.

## **4 TEACHERS' VIEWPOINT: LEARNING FOREIGN LANGUAGE IN OLD AGE**

### **4.1 A closer look at the questionnaire**

Approximately 20 educational institutes were approached and four (female) teachers responded to the questionnaire. The respondents were from Central and Eastern Finland and they worked in folk high schools as foreign language teachers. The questionnaire consisted of thirteen questions in total, of which eight questions concentrated particularly on the teachers' experiences on the matter. As the ages of their students ranged from 13 to 85-year-old students, the teachers were not only used to communicating with younger but also with older students. Consequently, all the teachers had noticed differences between aged learners and other age groups while teaching.

As mentioned above, the beginning of the questionnaire consisted of questions for mapping the respondents' background. The second and the central part of the questionnaire focused on finding out the teachers' experiences and perceptions. In the following section I will briefly go through the questions to clarify the content and the structure of the questionnaire. The aim of the first question was to find out if the respondents had noticed any differences between the age groups. In the next question the respondents were asked to define and describe the differences in more detail if they had answered positively in the previous question. As assumed beforehand, all the teachers had indeed noticed differences, and they described briefly their findings. Then the respondents were asked where they thought their aged students were fluent. After that it was inquired what strong areas the aged students had in foreign language learning when compared to the younger students. Naturally, the respondents were also asked what the aged students' weaknesses in language learning were and how the teachers took them into

account in their teaching. Finally, it was inquired if the teachers had used any specific teaching methods while teaching the elderly and what kinds of methods they were. Occasionally, the questions overlapped each other and the respondents noted that in their answers. Consequently, that has been taken into account also in the analysis of the responses.

To clarify the discussion, I will refer to the respondents with numbers. Therefore, the respondents are referred to as Teacher 1, Teacher 2, Teacher 3 and Teacher 4.

#### **4.2. Aged learners and challenges**

Learning in old age can be difficult due to a hearing-impairment, problems with vision, or difficulties with handling new information in memory systems. An additional challenging factor can be, for example, problems with speech production, which is closely related to the above-mentioned outgrowths of aging. These consequences of aging process were also noted among the respondents and in their answers. For instance, one of the respondents indicated that the aged learners' memory caused difficulties with learning and another respondent wrote:

(1) Teacher 1  
liian pieni tekstin fontti kalvolla tai monisteella tuottaa vaikeuksia  
(too small font size on a transparency or on a handout causes problems)

In addition, one of the teachers noted that a bad vision could hamper the ability to write. Indeed, due to the deterioration of vision older students may not see the same text that the younger ones can see without any difficulty. A respondent stated in a general and honest way that

(2) Teacher 2  
Aistit ja reaktionopeus: heikkenevät luonnollisesti iän myötä  
(Senses and reaction speed: slow down naturally along with aging)

In other words, the body ages and deteriorates and it is only natural. However, these changes do not make learning impossible even though it may seem so. They can be taken into account in teaching as it can be perceived in the further chapters.

The rest of the challenging factors the teachers listed were considered from a wider perspective. For instance, in two of the responses, learning grammar was mentioned. Indeed, Teacher 1 defined that the change and modernization of grammatical terminology may be the reason behind the difficulties:

(3) Teacher 1

Esimerkiksi kieliopin selittämisessä käytetyt nykytermit. He eivät tunne termiä "substantiivi" vaan ovat oppineet termin "nimisana".

For instance, modern terms used in defining the grammar. They do not know the term "substantive", instead they have learnt the term "noun".

Moreover, according to one of the respondents, aged learners find pronunciation and creativity difficult. The mentioned respondent also indicated that the courage to try and dare was a characteristic the elderly perhaps lacked. This finding is rather similar with the observation that Jaatinen (2003) described in her study. According to Jaatinen (2003:190), the aged learners might have all the knowledge but not the courage to use it in practice. Furthermore, one teacher had noticed that the aged students had difficulties with breaking out of the old habits of learning such as behaviouristic learning methods and memorizing. In addition, one respondent wrote rather interestingly that some of the students would see old age as an obstacle. The great variety of challenging factors proves the above-mentioned finding of all aged learners being individual valid.

The teachers were rather polarized in their perceptions of their aged students when it came to communicating in a foreign language and speaking in front of other people. One of the teachers wrote that the aged learners are more cautious with producing speech and performing in front of the classroom. However, another respondent stated that some of the aged learners consider producing speech easier. One respondent explained that to the aged learners speaking is exhilarating because it does not remind them of the old learning methods. Moreover, also Jaatinen (2003:190) stated that the aged students' of her learning

groups lacked the skills to produce speech in a foreign language, which was in this case English, or were too shy to do it. Teacher 1 sums up the divided thoughts rather well by answering that

(1) Teacher 1

Ei voi eritellä eläkeläisiä yhtenä joukkona, riippuu yksilöstä minkä asian hän oppii vaivattomimmin.

(Pensioners cannot be considered as one group, it depends on the individual what he or she learns the easiest.)

### **4.3 The advantages of being an aged learner**

Many of the respondents, if not all, had a very positive view of learning in old age. Indeed, they had noticed differences that distinguished the aged learners from the younger ones. Although one could perceive those age-related differences very negatively but the respondents also listed many positive features they considered conducive to learning. For instance, one of the respondents wrote:

(5) Teacher 4

he ovat myös tunnollisimpia oppilaita ja motivoituneita opiskeluun  
(they are also the most dutiful and motivated learners)

The aged students' good level of motivation was also noted in this answer:

(6) Teacher 3

Prosessointi voi olla hiukan hitaampaa, mutta elämäkokemukset ja korkea motivaatio auttavat.

(Processing can be slightly slower but life experiences and high motivation help.)

Therefore, even though they might be hindered by the difficulties with absorbing new information, high motivation and life experience help the aged students further. Moreover, one respondent listed nouns to describe her conceptions of the advantages of being an aged learner:

(7) Teacher 3

Sitkeys, kärsivällisyys, keskittymiskyky, rauhallisuus ja perusteellisuus opiskelussa.

(Persistence, patience, the ability to concentrate, staidness and thoroughness in studying.)

The list confirms the above-mentioned positive perceptions. An aged learner can be slow due to a variety of reasons but the perseverance entailed by life experience can support foreign language learning distinctively.

#### **4.4 The teachers' teaching methods**

The teachers were also asked if they had used any specific teaching methods to help the aged learners learn with ease. Surprisingly, some of the teachers answered that they do not use any methods. However, as, for instance, Teacher 2 continued to list several ways of teaching that could be considered methods, perhaps the definition of a teaching method was not clear enough for the respondents.

However, the respondents, in spite of all, listed many ways of teaching that can be regarded as workable teaching methods when aged learners are considered. For instance, Teacher 3 wrote that she had used traditional methods such as listening, speaking, written exercises, reading, dialogues, games and plays, the latter used also by Jaatinen (2003:196).

(8) Teacher 3

Perinteisiä metodeja; kuuntelemista, puhumista, kirjoitustehtäviä, lukemista, dialogeja, kielipelejä- ja leikkejä.

Traditional methods; listening, speaking, written exercises, reading, dialogues, Language games and plays.

Teacher 4 wrote that she used a playful and humorous approach. She also related that she tried to teach different mnemonics and use various learning channels. In addition, almost all of the respondents reported that they used a larger font in writing and more volume in their own speech and also in listening exercises. Teacher 2 told that she discussed ways



of learning with the students and encouraged the students to share learning tips such as learning numerals while throwing darts. She also wrote that she brought news articles of aged learners and shared her own experiences of how pensioners can learn. In a summary, all of the teachers had adapted themselves in some way to the needs of an older learner group, either intentionally or unintentionally.

## **5. CONCLUSION**

Even though aged learners cannot be labelled as a homogenous group, it is evident that they have special needs when regarding teaching. These needs are related to the changes caused by aging process that can vary significantly among the pensioners. However, many of the changes are common and also possible to be taken into account in teaching.

The aim of the present study was to discover the teachers' perceptions on teaching elderly. The respondents had noticed differences between the older and younger learner groups but they also wanted to emphasize that the learners are individuals. Moreover, the respondents listed challenges the older learners often encounter but also advantages of being an aged student. In addition, the respondents listed many teaching methods they used in teaching the older students. Thus, the research question was answered.

However, despite finally reaching the goal of the study, the subject had its own limits that, at times, made meeting the objective challenging. For instance, it proved to be rather difficult to find suitable sources for the study. Many of the studies done on adult education concentrated on adults under the age of retirement. Moreover, a great deal of research on aging process offered information on biological aging and psychological phenomena related to aging process but sources that would focus particularly on the issue of learning in older age were sparse. Therefore, collecting the background information for the present study was eventually more troublesome than assumed beforehand. Furthermore, the small number of volunteering respondents for the questionnaire meant

that the interest of the present study would have to be shifted from aged learners of English to aged learners of foreign languages. Perhaps modification of the data collection methods would have guaranteed more responses. For instance, interviews could provide more and more in-depth responses than a questionnaire.

If the present study was to be continued, the interest could be now on the aged learners as in Jaatinen's (2003) research but in a wider perspective. However, even the viewpoint would not have to be altered. In fact, it would be interesting to discover what sorts of answers would, for instance, interview or observation as data collections method offer.

The increasing group of active aged foreign language learners provide an interesting perspective for foreign language teachers. For teachers, it is important to be aware of the effects of aging process and its causes on learning in old age and how these factors affect the teaching. The lack of sources supports the fact that the subject of learning in old age provides a vast and fruitful field for future research.

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## Appendix

**Kyselylomake:** Opettajien kokemukset eläkeikäisten ja vanhusten vieraitten kielten oppimisesta

Vastaajan tiedot

1. Ikä
2. Sukupuoli
3. Oppilaitos
4. Olen opettanut vanhempien kielten oppijoita \_\_\_\_ vuotta.
5. Opiskelijoitteenne ikähaitari

Kokemukset

6. Oletteko havainnut eläkeikäisiä opettaessanne eroavaisuuksia heidän ja muiden ikäryhmien välillä?
7. Jos vastasitte edelliseen kysymykseen myöntävästi, minkälaisia eroavaisuuksia olette havainnut?

8. Mikä eläkeikäisillä oppijoilla sujuu vieraan kielen oppimisessa vaivattomimmin?

9. Mitä ovat vanhempien oppijoiden vahvuudet verrattuna nuorempiin kielenoppijoihin?

10. Mitä eläkeikäisten oppijoiden vieraan kielen oppimisessa tuottaa heille vaikeuksia?

11. Jatkoa edelliseen kysymykseen: miten otatte mahdolliset vaikeudet huomioon opetuksessanne?

12. Oletteko käyttänyt erityisiä opetusmetodeja eläkeikäisiä opettaessanne?

13. Jos vastasitte edelliseen kysymykseen kyllä, minkälaisia metodeja olette käyttäneet?