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# Understanding Older Adult Language Learners: Two Stories from an EFL Classroom

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In 2020, there were 1 billion people aged 60 or older globally. By 2050, experts predict this number will double (Bloom et al., 2015). About one in every six people will be 65 or older by 2050, and those reaching 100 years old are expected to more than double by 2030 (UN, 2019). In the European Union, the number of adults aged 65 and older is expected to increase from 90.5 million in 2019 to 129.8 million by 2050. This means more people will enter this stage (called third-age adults) potentially pursuing personal interests, maintaining a strong social circle, achieving economic independence, and enjoying the freedom that comes with reduced societal responsibilities (Derenowski, 202; Laslett, 1987, 1996). Many third-age adults become more enthusiastic about learning after retirement, as seen in countries like Finland, Sweden, Switzerland, and China (Jenkins & Mostafa, 2015; Ogg, 2021; Zhang et al., 2022).

Research shows that learning a new language in late adulthood has positive effects. Enrolling in foreign language (FL) classes is one of the most popular educational activities for older adults (Antoniou & Wright, 2017; Bak et al., 2016; Borella et al., 2010; Nguyen et al., 2019; Park & Bischof, 2016; Pfenninger & Polz, 2018; Wong et al., 2019). However, there is limited research on the experiences of older adult language learners and corresponding teaching methods. Educators often struggle with how to engage older learners, sometimes treating them like children or using approaches designed for other age groups without considering the unique needs of older adults. When I started teaching English as a foreign language (EFL) to older adults in 2019, I felt unprepared. This article shares the insights I gained and provides research-based suggestions for teaching older adult language learners.

In this section, I'll share stories of two EFL students in Poland, Meg and Judy (pseudonyms), highlighting key characteristics observed while working with older learners. I met both students in 2019 when I started teaching English as a foreign language to older adults.

### **Meg**

Meg, a 65-year-old woman, was in the A2 (beginning level) group. She learned English many years ago in high school and at the university but had been a stay-at-home mother for two decades. Despite her positive attitude in class, Meg harbored negative emotions from her past education, which hindered her self-confidence. Meg believed she was an average learner and lacked talent for languages, especially in older age. She associated the classroom with anxiety and wanted to escape feelings of infantilization. As the course progressed, Meg began to think more favorably about herself. Communicative activities revealed her potential, and learning strategies made her more lenient towards her past struggles. Meg aspired to take responsibility for her learning journey, overcome anxiety, and prioritize important aspects of her language learning.

### **Judy**

Judy, a 62-year-old retiree from finance, joined the A1-level (beginning level) course after five months. Despite being labeled as lazy, Judy believed she was a fast learner based on her high school achievements in Russian. She struggled with taking charge of her learning journey and associated it with tedious activities. A turning point for Judy was the introduction of a mobile language learning app in class. This empowered her to take control of her learning, becoming a confident and self-aware student. She developed a habit of learning English every day, using various strategies such as notebook revisions and voice recognition software. Judy claimed her previous laziness was due to a lack of awareness of suitable learning strategies and a lack of support, coupled with stereotypes about adult learning abilities. Positive feedback from the app and a supportive classroom environment motivated her to overcome these challenges.

## **Lessons Learned**

Meg and Judy's stories reveal that older learners, like all learners, bring experiences and feelings into the EFL classroom. While excited about learning a new language, they may also face long-held beliefs and negative emotions. Teachers may not immediately notice these influences but ignoring them can have significant consequences. Teachers must be aware of learners' attitudes to avoid infantilizing or discouraging them. Critical Foreign Language Geragogy (CFLG) suggests tailoring courses to older adults, dispelling ageist stereotypes, using evidence-based practices, promoting self-directed learning, and addressing misconceptions (Gómez, 2016).

For Meg and Judy, addressing negative self-images was crucial. Meg's early negative experiences were counteracted by a supportive classroom and new activities, leading to positive emotions. Judy, initially at risk of feeling like a failure, discovered her learning path through self-directed strategies. Socio-emotional learning (SEL) provided valuable insights for supporting these older learners. Prioritizing competencies like self-awareness, self-management, social awareness, relationship skills, and responsible decision-making was essential (Pentón Herrera & Martínez-Alba, 2021). The complex socio-emotional experiences of older learners were addressed through activities fostering self-reflection and self-care. Empowering these students to question limiting beliefs and recognizing their growth potential enhanced their well-being, contributing to a positive and fulfilling learning experience.

## **Final Thoughts**

In this article, I shared two stories from my EFL classroom, where older learners had to face their fears, reevaluate their beliefs, and be open to new experiences. These stories show that older learners, just like learners of any age, bring with them a rich combination of experiences, desires, and challenges. However, unlike younger generations, they also carry age-related stereotypes about their ability to learn. Moreover, their previous educational experiences often date back several decades, when teaching approaches, learning aids, and the position of students were markedly different.

In Meg's case, her lifelong beliefs, influenced by societal stereotypes and prior educational experiences, shaped her self-image as a learner. Addressing these misconceptions through positive classroom experiences was essential in her evolving positive attitude to language learning. Judy's journey shows the transformative power of personalized, self-directed learning strategies. Her initial perception as a lazy learner was reshaped using new methods, instilling a sense of agency and confidence in her abilities.

These narratives show that by creating an inclusive and supportive learning environment that encourages self-reflection, allows self-directed learning, and fosters socio-emotional growth, teachers can empower older learners to thrive in their language learning journey. By acknowledging the complexities of learning in late adulthood and combining it with openness, responsiveness, and understanding, we can build a supportive, inclusive classroom climate where students unlock their potential for growth.

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