

TEACHING ENGLISH TO OLDER LEARNERS: SOME REFLECTIONS BASED ON PRACTICE IN “AULA DE MAYORES” LIFELONG LEARNING PROGRAMME

M. Bryla

Universidad de Málaga (SPAIN)

Abstract

This paper is aimed at sharing personal reflections on teaching English to older learners (aged 55 and above) within the lifelong/U3A learning programme “Aula de Mayores” at the University of Málaga in Spain. First, the concept of lifelong learning, and particularly lifelong language learning, is explained in the light of its social benefits, such as inclusion, activating learner potential, as well as personal benefits, including the increase of self-esteem and a sense of agency. Second, the University of Málaga programme, “Aula de Mayores,” is briefly presented, taking into account its duration, membership and organizational characteristics. Finally, personal reflections based on teaching English to pre-intermediate and intermediate older learners are presented, with a particular emphasis on affective aspects of the teacher-student relationships. In addition to identifying specific learning difficulties and reflecting upon effective (and less so) teaching strategies to remedy them, this paper addresses such concepts as personal motivation, cultural beliefs, and self-concept as instrumental in shaping the older learner’s language learning experience and the teacher’s role in the reinforcement of those beliefs and personal narratives that may contribute to a positive learning experience. As this paper hopes to demonstrate, respect, understanding, empathy, and personalised encouragement lie at the core of a successful lifelong learning experience, increasing the chances of students’ continuing their language education and fostering a sense of satisfaction which the acquisition of linguistic and cultural knowledge, and practical language skills brings.

Keywords: Older learners, lifelong learning, U3A, English teaching, affective teacher-student relationships.

1 INTRODUCTION

The aim of this paper is to share some personal reflections based on teaching English to older learners (aged 55 and above) within the lifelong/U3A learning programme “Aula de Mayores” at the University of Málaga (Spain). The paper is divided into two parts. First, the concept of lifelong learning is conceptualised in the light of its social and personal benefits. Within the framework of lifelong learning, the international educational movement, the University of the Third Age or U3A, is briefly characterised, with particular emphasis on two main models: the French and the British one. U3A is then addressed in the Spanish context. Finally, the University of Málaga Aula de Mayores programme is briefly presented, taking into account its content and organizational characteristics. The second part of this paper is dedicated to my personal reflections based on teaching English to pre-intermediate and intermediate older learners. In addition to discussing such issues as motivation and personal interests as instrumental in structuring classroom activities, I reflect upon learning difficulties and address effective (and less so) teaching strategies to remedy them. I also discuss stereotypes and other affective barriers that may hamper the learning process and thus preclude a positive learning experience. I posit that respect, understanding, empathy, and personalised encouragement, in addition to a tailor-made teaching programme, lie at the core of a successful lifelong learning experience, increasing the chances of students’ continuing their language education and fostering a sense of satisfaction which the acquisition of linguistic and cultural knowledge, and practical language skills brings.

2 LIFELONG LEARNING

The concept of lifelong learning has received enormous academic and institutional attention in the last three decades and has thus appeared in a variety of contexts and discussions. Consequently, “lifelong learning” emerges as something of an umbrella-term used to denote very different educational settings and their outcomes. For instance, *The Five-minute Journal* [1], a popular self-help tool rooted in

cognitive behavioural therapy, is dedicated to “lifelong learners,” and it is clear that the designation has more to do with personal self-development than with the acquisition of specific knowledge that, say, learning a second language at the age of 60 may constitute. That said, a closer look at both educational contexts makes it clear that they share a common premise. In its essence, lifelong learning emphasises acquisition of knowledge and skills as a process that does not follow the timeline of obligatory formal education but, rather, lasts a lifetime and may take place under different conditions and in varied settings. As such, it does not have a fixed timeframe or depend on the learner’s age. The underlying idea is, therefore, that knowledge (of something but also of oneself, as is the case with the self-help tool mentioned above) and skills can be acquired at any moment in the learner’s life, which means that learning does not end when an individual enters the so-called “third age.”

The latter designation is worth unpacking. According to Robert S. Weiss and Scott A. Bass, the third age is “the life phase in which there is no longer employment and childraising to commandeer time” and which permits individuals to, “within fairly wide limits, live their lives as they please” [2]. The scholars define the third age through the concept of “freedom from” professional work and child rearing, but also “freedom to” pursue goals which could not or have not been fulfilled either entirely or partially earlier in life. One such pursuit may be the acquisition of knowledge and skills, or *lifelong learning*, which is associated with a number of social and personal benefits. In an oft-cited foreword to the Green Paper titled *The Age of Learning: A Renaissance for a New Britain*, David Blunkett, British Secretary of State for Education and Employment, observes that learning

Helps make ours a civilised society, develops the spiritual side of our lives and promotes active citizenship. Learning enables people to play a full part in their community. It strengthens the family, the neighbourhood and consequently the nation. It helps us fulfil our potential and opens doors to a love of music, art and literature. That is why we value learning for its own sake as well as for the equality of opportunity it brings. To realise our ambition, we must all develop and sustain a regard for learning at whatever age [3].

Blunkett speaks here about Great Britain, but his words can be extrapolated to other national, and in a broader perspective, also European and global contexts. Indeed, the significance of “learning at whatever age” has been recognised and promoted by policy makers through the “Active Ageing” framework (WHO 2002 [4], CEC 2002 [5]) which is concerned with the opportunities but also challenges that global ageing entails for individuals and societies. The European Union’s take on active ageing is aimed at “helping people stay in charge of their own lives for as long as possible as they age and, where possible, to contribute to the economy and society” [6]. Lifelong learning is thus understood as a tool for achieving the above. However, while lifelong learning may be used to boost the work potential of older people, allowing them, when possible, to remain in employment for longer, “learning for its own sake,” in Blunkett’s words, rather than for vocational reasons should not be underestimated, since it offers a number of benefits for the learner and their society. In fact, “[a]pplying active ageing to a mere economic or physical framework is problematic” since “such reduction contravenes the intention of the WHO (2002), which explicitly states that the word ‘active’ does not solely refer to the ability to be physically active or to participate in the labour force, but to continued participation in social, economic, cultural, spiritual and civic affairs” [7]. In a recent article, Miya Narushima et al. have observed that although lifelong learning does form part of the active ageing discourse of policy makers, it is nevertheless “mentioned far less often than topics like physical activities and paid and non-paid work” [8], despite an array of proven advantages it provides to older learners. According to their study, there exists “a clear association between continuous participation in the specific form of lifelong learning courses and the psychological wellbeing of older adults, even after controlling for age, gender, health state and vulnerabilities” [8].

Among the so-called “soft” outcomes of learning, there are self-confidence, self-efficacy, self-understanding, communication skills, civic engagement and a sense of belonging to a social group [9]. In turn, these psychosocial qualities may positively impact learners’ wellbeing and health. A 2014 study conducted in England reports a correlation between participation in informal learning and subjective well-being of adults between 50 and 69 [10]. The authors speculate that intrinsic interest in learning (or freedom to learn what one wants rather than what is practical or necessary), meeting people, and a sense of being receptive to new ideas all operate as important motivational force for older learners. Finally, “it is quite possible that continuous engagement in later-life learning activities can create a virtuous cycle to prevent or slow down the onset of diseases and physical deterioration,” providing a “conserving effect on wellbeing and health” [8].

It is noteworthy that the studies mentioned above have analysed informal learning, that is learning which is not aimed at obtaining qualifications and/or participation in formal education/training courses.

The underlying idea seems to be that when learning is pursued in a voluntary and selective manner, without a sense of obligation and the fear of assessment, it is more likely to bring a sense of fulfilment, satisfaction and, in doing so, positively affect the learner's sense of self and outlook on life, which is exactly the aim of U3A, or University of the Third Age.

3 U3A

Aula de Mayores learning programme at the University of Málaga in Spain seems to respond to this conception of lifelong learning as conducive to boosting the learner's wellbeing through personal improvement, acquisition of knowledge and skills from diverse disciplines, as well as socialising with people in a similar age range and, often, with shared interests. Structurally, the programme follows the French U3A model of lifelong learning, as opposed to the British model. A few words are due about the two models.

French U3A, established in 1973, evolved out of a successful gerontology course directed to retired learners at the Toulouse University of Social Sciences. Initially, it was open to anybody over retirement age for a small fee. In time, the type of education offered and the institutional characteristics of the programme would change, but the French U3A has remained, in its essence, a top-down model where the connection with a higher education institution is strong and the syllabus is decided by university authorities, while classes are taught by university lecturers. By the second half of the 1970s, the French model was exported to other European countries, including Belgium, Poland, Italy, and Spain, and The International Association of the Universities of the Third Age (AIUTA) was established [11]. In France, any U3A must belong to the French Association of the Universities of the Third Age (UFUTA) and to be a member of the UFUTA a U3A has to be affiliated with a higher education institution [12].

The British variation on U3A dates back to 1981 and despite sharing a common purpose with its French counterpart is differently organised and conceptualised. Essentially, in the British U3A "the term 'university' simply means people coming together to learn and share new things" [13] as the U3A is not linked or affiliated with a higher education institution the way the French model is, and classes take place in community centres or in the homes of the U3A members. Therefore, the British U3A may be said to follow a bottom-up methodology, where it is members themselves who decide the programme and may even act as teachers [13].

In Spain, the French model was adopted ten years after its original inception. As Feliciano Villar points out, the late 1970s witnessed significant changes for older people in Spain [14]. Article 50 of the 1978 Constitution made an explicit reference to the promotion of the well-being of older citizens through, among others, access to culture and education. In the same year, the National Institute for Social Services was created (INSERSO), currently known as the National Institute for Older People and Social Services (IMSERSO), which, in addition to the provision of health and social services, offers tourism programmes for senior citizens. Villar also points to the 1992 National Plan for Older People as instrumental in "promot[ing] actions aimed at integrating older people in their communities, using culture and leisure as facilitators" [14]. It is within this structural and political climate that U3A institutions developed around Spain in the 1980s and the 1990s.

Importantly, there are two types of U3A in Spain: university of extension classrooms and universities of experience [14]. Given its top-down approach, its direct connection with university, and organizational characteristics, *Aula de Mayores* of the University in Málaga is closer to the latter model. That said, this year an important structural change has taken place. Rather than enrol in an obligatory three-year, degree-like programme, students may now combine courses, seminars, and workshops to create a custom-made learning programme in accordance with their needs and interests.

4 AULA DE MAYORES PROGRAMME

Aula de Mayores is a joint lifelong learning initiative of the University of Málaga and the Junta de Andalucía (Regional Government of Andalusia). It is open to learners over 55, independently of their prior education, and aimed at providing them with a common space devoted to a cultural, social and scientific debate, as well as fostering inter-generational links [15]. Students can choose from the following activities: quarterly thematic courses (twice a week), seminars (once a week), workshops (once a week), as well as annual practical courses (twice a week) and workshops (once a week). Up to 6 activities can be selected out of the entire academic offer. There are also sport activities available, including swimming and dancing. There is a wide variety of thematic courses from diverse academic

disciplines, such as World Literature, Key Concepts in International Law and Economy, History of Music, or Biology in the 21st century. Students can also explore History of Opera, Geography, or Gender Studies through seminars, and make art and practise mindfulness in workshops, to mention but a few examples.

As for foreign language courses, currently two are taught: English and French. English courses last throughout the whole academic year (October-May) and take place on a biweekly basis, either on Monday and Wednesday, or Tuesday and Thursday. Classes are based on level-appropriate study materials, student's book and exercise book, and complemented with any other materials/activities that teachers consider necessary. Currently, there are seven language groups which correspond to five language levels: elementary, pre-intermediate, intermediate, upper-intermediate, and advanced. However, it is noteworthy that these levels do not correspond exactly to those established within the Common European Framework of Reference for Languages and are not measured by means of external assessment methods. Instead, they reflect the coordinator and teachers' hands-on experience in working with older learners, their prior knowledge of English, capacities, potential, and motivation. In this sense, they are tailored to the needs of our students, many of whom start their language education at the elementary level and move upwards. There are two ways of deciding where a student belongs on the level scale established by the teaching team. Existing students take a final test at the end of the academic year, which covers the content studied throughout the course, whereas prospective students are asked to sit a placement test which determines their current level of English. It is noteworthy that some students tend to underestimate their knowledge, often asking to be placed in the elementary level even if they have previously studied English in a formal educational setting (secondary school or *Escuela Oficial de Idiomas*). As a result, initial class composition tends to undergo modifications at the beginning of the academic year.

5 PERSONAL REFLECTIONS BASED ON TEACHING PRACTICE IN AULA DE MAYORES

My personal reflections which I would like to share in this paper span three academic years spent teaching English to older learners within the Aula de Mayores programme. I first started to work in Aula in 2016, teaching English to pre-intermediate students, and have since taught mostly pre-intermediate and intermediate levels. Although during these three years I have experienced both joys and challenges of teaching for lifelong learning, my overall experience is eminently positive and I am deeply grateful for having had the opportunity to work with my students and get to know them as individuals.

First of all, the students in Aula de Mayores English courses tend to be, and I am convinced that my colleagues would share this observation, extremely intrinsically motivated and thus appreciative of and responsive to the opportunity to study English. This translates into their, generally, eager participation in classes, volunteering answers and questions, as well carrying out any assigned work without complaint or delay. I will not exaggerate if I say that my students not only always do their homework, but sometimes even remind me to assign it. Moreover, many do not limit their learning process to classes and set homework, but voluntarily engage in additional activities aimed at improving their English. Most frequently, this involves either working on subsequent book units in advance or re-reading/listening to more difficult texts or recordings after class. However, there are also students who watch films with English subtitles, read in English (especially the abridged learners' editions of classic works of literature) or listen to English-language songs to then translate their lyrics into Spanish.

As far as motivation is concerned, Tatiana V. Savina enumerates the following language needs of older learners: travelling abroad; visiting relatives (mostly, children) abroad; surfing the Internet, and personal reward [16]. These needs seem to overlap with those reported by my students, many of whom are seasoned travellers and users of new technologies. Within Spain, many students take advantage of the subsidised holiday scheme offered by IMSERSO, but some choose also more distant and exotic destinations. A group of female friends who attended my classes visited together several European countries, but also, for instance, Canada. Therefore, "travelling abroad" seems to be indeed one of the major motivations for Spanish learners of English within Aula de Mayores programme. Like any other course within the programme, English course too provides the opportunity for students to socialise and make friends. Many of my students also think of language learning as good cognitive practice. As one of my students has put it, "it is just good for your mind, it keeps it working." A sense of self-satisfaction and self-actualization are equally important. For some students, English remains their "asignatura pendiente," a subject that they have not had time or opportunity to

take care of earlier, and now, when they are free to pursue personal rather than professional interests, they embrace it with gusto.

That said, learning a foreign language is not devoid of its challenges and difficulties. My students are generally good readers and, in many cases, also writers of English, but listening and, particularly, listening as challenging and even frustrating. This comes as no surprise since listening comprehension is considered to be one of the most difficult macro skills for learners of English as a foreign or second language [17]. Moreover, “teaching listening comprehension as a part of teaching a foreign or a second language is a relatively recent development whose history lies mostly in the last thirty years” [18]. It is possible that some older learners of English have never before been exposed to this type of activity to such an extent, and may thus find audio recordings excessively fast and thus hard to comprehend and work through. I know that many of my students replay the recordings that they find particularly difficult at home or listen to them with the script. To help remedy the feeling of frustration with some listening comprehension activities, I replay recordings several times and once the students have answered the questions individually, we go through them together, instead of asking specific individuals for answers. My students also respond well to short videos provided at the end of each book unit. Conveniently, these videos come in two versions: with and without subtitles. While I insist on using the latter for the primary activity, I always play the subtitled version once all the exercises have been done for students to see if there is anything that they might have missed.

This brings us to the question of methodology. It seems to be something of a misconception that older learners respond negatively to innovation in the classroom and prefer a more traditional grammar-oriented teaching style. While it is highly probable that their prior experience with language learning was largely focused on reading and writing, they realize the importance of oral communication in the globalized world and are motivated to partake in it. That said, preconceptions about the learning process, centred on the figure of an infallible teacher, together with students’ beliefs about their limited capacity to *produce* in English may negatively affect their willingness to take part in certain class activities, particularly those related to speaking. Such students will avoid expressing themselves in English more freely, that is beyond the ready-made structures in the course book [19]. It is my experience that dialogues (structured and less so), small-group work, and role playing, especially if practised on a regular basis, help students “tame” potential stress of speaking out in English, and prepare them for volunteering answers and comments in front of the entire class.

There are several topics which my students find particularly interesting. “Travelling” is definitely one such topic that I like to explore in the classroom beyond what the course book usually offers. Students generally tend to appreciate real-life scenarios, such as a conversation with a hotel or airport employee, because they find them eminently practical—they either might have experienced them in the past or are likely to do so during their future trips. The same is true for travel-related vocabulary which they willingly search for and share in the classroom. Similarly, cultural activities, with particular emphasis on art and music, and sports tend to provide much food for thought and conversation. My students are very interested in and knowledgeable about culture, which is why I often gain new insights for myself, especially as far as Spanish culture, which is not my native culture, is concerned. Short video clips, visual presentations, additional speaking activities, songs, and online quizzes may all add a little variety to a course book-based classes and further motivate students to explore English as a contemporary lingua franca. While it is true that “class activities which include large amounts of oral repetition, extensive pronunciation correction, or an expectation of error-free speech will [...] inhibit the older learner's active participation,” pair and group work, where understanding and production are encouraged and positive learning environment is created through reducing the focus on error correction and placing emphasis on progress over perfection, “can build learners' self-confidence and promote language learning” [20].

Equally important is adapting the level of complexity and speed of class instruction to the learners’ current ability to understand spoken English. Since I am a fast-talking person by nature, I need to make sure not to “overwhelm” and discourage students with too accelerated a speech. At the same time, I cannot slow down too much and thus create an illusion that “this is how people speak.” The same is true for the place of students’ native language and translation in the classroom. While I try to speak English as much as possible in class and resort to Spanish only at the express request of my students (or when translation is in place), I realize that rigid adherence to some ready-made conceptions of what teaching should look like, regardless of the students’ idiosyncrasies, have no room in any classroom. Therefore, I think of myself as a teacher who is still learning how to best respond to my older students’ needs, both in terms of teaching content and my own performance, while at the same time endeavouring to provide the best level of language instruction possible.

This in turn always entails striving for a delicate balance between responding to any affective barriers that may hinder positive learning experience, the biggest of which is the fear of failure based on a harmful stereotype of “the older person as a poor language learner” [20], and facilitating the learning process without “infantilizing” the student with lower self-confidence. In the Spanish context, the above stereotype is often accompanied by another, equally entrenched and slow-to-change one, that the Spanish are “bad at languages.” While U3A language courses help to modify such preconceived ideas by promoting regular and structured language learning, the teacher’s role in encouraging student progress through personalized attention, respect, and empathy are crucial for positive learning experience to take place.

Even though my students are not driven by external rewards, such as a better job or passing a language exam, this does not mean that they are not working towards a goal. At the same time, the fact that they learn English in a non-formal context means that they expect it, and rightly so, to be positive and uplifting, rather than daunting and frustrating. Clear instruction and constructive feedback, but also warm encouragement and appreciation of the learner’s progress together with genuine interest in the individual and what he/she has to offer are at the core of an affective bond between teacher and student which, to my mind, is indispensable in the context of lifelong learning of English by older learners. I harbour the hope that I have been able to establish such a bond with my students in the Aula de Mayores programme at the University of Málaga.

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