

# TEACHING FOREIGN LANGUAGES OF THIRD AGE STUDENTS IN POLAND

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## ABSTRACT

*The article tackles the problem of teaching foreign languages to seniors. The general trends in FL education for the third age learners are outlined. The institutions in which seniors can study foreign languages in Poland are enumerated. The psychological, physiological, methodological and social peculiarities of teaching a foreign language to the third agers are analyzed. Special emphasis is laid upon educational needs of the Third Age learners. Some language learning strategies which help seniors' foreign language learning are suggested.*

**Key words:** *foreign languages; language learning strategies; Poland; teaching; third-year students.*

## INTRODUCTION

According to World Health Organization (Beard *et al.*, 2005), the number of people aged 60 years and older will go up to about 2 billion in 2050 (soaring to 22% of the total global population). Moreover, there will be a considerable growth of people who are in their eighties and older. That is why, such a demographic shift can not be ignored anymore. Trying to cope with such a phenomenon, the Universities of the Third Age (U3A) and various educational institutions for the third agers have mushroomed all over the world, proposing a wide range of activities.

It should be stressed that a foreign language (FL) is one of the most popular subjects, the third agers want to study. There are different reasons for seniors' FL learning (FLL): for instance, they want to travel abroad and be understood, to visit their relatives in other countries, to postpone onset of dementia and to spend pleasant time with nice people.

However, there is still scarce research on how to teach a FL to the third-age learners. Mainly, the researchers are interested in psychological and physiological peculiarities of older adults' FL learning. As Pawlak (2017, p. 46) rightly comments, "methods of teaching elderly people, described in the scientific literature, are often overgeneralized and oversimplified". That is why,

the aim of the article is to analyze the general trends in teaching seniors foreign languages in Poland and to suggest some strategies which may help the third agers to enhance their FLL.

## BACKGROUND

First and foremost, it should be said that in Poland elderly people can obtain formal and non-formal education. If the formal education is proposed by the Universities of the Third Age, non-formal education can be taught in non-government institutions. According to Jaroszewska (2013), in the first decade of this century there were registered 12 000 foundations and 71 000 societies which represented Third Age sector in Poland. What is more, there are approximately 464 Universities of the Third Age in the country. According to GUS (Central Statistical Office of Poland, 2015), foreign languages are taught at 83% of Polish U3A (Grotek, 2017).

Furthermore, the general Polish questionnaire (Jaroszewska (2013, p. 95) showed that nowadays Polish seniors learn the following foreign languages: Russian – 87,69%, English – 53,66%, German – 46,90%, French – 19,44%, Italian – 7,09%, Latin – 6,43%, Spanish – 2,89%, Esperanto – 1,82% at different educational institutions. The choice of the language often depends on the place of living. In small educational institutions English, as a lingua franca, is mainly taught, although elderly people can study German, French and/or Italian. What is more, Russian and Spanish are more often taught these days. Moreover, the Universities of the Third Age suggest a wider range of languages in big cities, even such “exotic” languages as Japan, Chinese and Esperanto (Jaroszewska, 2013).

The analysis of educational institutions for seniors in Cracow revealed that there are the Universities of the Third Age at Pedagogical University of Cracow, the Jagiellonian University, The Pontifical University of John Paul II in Cracow, Jesuit University of Philosophy and Education Ignatianum, The School of Banking and Management in Cracow, Agricultural University of Cracow. But only at the Jagiellonian University older adults can learn foreign languages (English, Chinese, Italian, German, French, Russian or Spanish).

Speaking of Polish researchers, it is necessary to stress that there are scarce studies on the topic. Thus, among the first Polish scientists who researched teaching adults was Woytowicz-Neyman with her monograph “*Dorośli a nauczania języków obcych (Zagadnienia wybrane)*” (“Adults and teaching foreign languages. Selected problems” 1970), in which she presented her study conducted in 1955–1965. The researcher did the first attempt to analyze the way adults study; how age, memory, cultural background, education, the knowledge of native and other foreign languages can influence the process of FL learning (Jaroszewska, 2013). Surprisingly, despite the fact that her research was ground-breaking, it did not trigger immediate interest among Polish scientists and only in 40 years it became well-known (op.cit.).

It is also noteworthy to mention Jaroszewska’s monograph “*Nauczanie języków obcych w seniorów w Polsce. Analiza potrzeb i możliwości w aspekcie międzykulturowym*” (“Teaching foreign languages seniors in Poland. The analysis of the needs and possibilities of seniors in multicultural aspect”, 2013). After the impressive research (2145 participants), Jaroszewska (2013, p. 287–

292) summarized seniors' needs and expectations about a FL, dividing them into 3 main groups: *methodological needs of the older adult learners, their social and emotional needs; logistic and health needs*. As for the first group the respondents stressed that teaching methods and programs should be designed on the basis of the detailed analysis of their needs and interests. Moreover, there should be a textbook which could help to systematize the process of FL learning/ teaching and give an opportunity for self-studying after the lesson. Furthermore, special attention should be paid to the color and font of the textbook, the way the tasks are given, their gradation. It was emphasized that the educational material should embrace daily situations. The interviewees also highlighted that there should be "spiral" learning/ teaching with the increased frequency of reviews. The respondents stressed that the material should be taught in smaller blocks and in smaller groups. What is more, the respondents also emphasized that it was necessary to lessen the amount of writing and reading during the FL lessons but to increase speaking and listening (Jaroszevska, 2013, p. 287–288). As for *the social and emotional needs of the third age learners*, the respondents stressed on the necessity of the individual approach, motivation and support from the FL teacher, and rapport between a teacher and older adult students (Jaroszevska, 2013, p. 289–290). Furthermore, the interviewees had the following *logistic and health needs*: the location of the place, where the course took place, was very important for them. When they spoke about a FL course abroad, the seniors paid attention to the accommodation, the cost of living, meals and excursions (Jaroszevska, 2013, p. 288–292).

As for the other Polish researchers, an interesting study was conducted by Słowik (2016a), who investigated younger adults' (18–49) and older adults' (50–83) beliefs on using their mother tongue in the FL classroom. There were 4 groups: 2 groups (according to CEFR, A1, A2+) of the former and 2 groups (according to CEFR, A1, A2+) of the latter. The results showed that if the younger adults (A1) were positive about using L1 while teaching vocabulary or grammar, A2+ group of the younger adults were unequivocally against it. As for the older adults (A1, A2+), both groups felt more confident when L1 was used in learning process: for example, the use of mother tongue helped the seniors to understand new material better. However, the researcher highlighted some drawbacks of using L1 at the lessons: firstly, the seniors started using less English as it was easier to explain the idea in Polish; secondly, there was a tension between the younger adults who wanted to use L1 in the language classroom and those who were against it. Thus, Słowik (2016a, p. 12) came to the conclusion that using L1 by adults lessened with level, but escalated with age.

In her other research Słowik (2016b) compared beliefs of older adults, experienced teachers (who obtained CELTA and Delta certificates) and inexperienced teachers (who were third-year students at the University of Wrocław) on the necessity of L1 in the FL classroom. Similar to the previous study, the seniors pointed out that using their native language could facilitate the process of their FL learning. The group of inexperienced teachers also favoured the using the mother tongue while teaching FL third agers. However, experienced teachers would not like the idea of returning to Grammar-Translation Method. The researcher highlights that FLL may be more difficult if

teachers do not pay attention to seniors' needs to use L1 in the FL classroom (Słowik, 2016b, p. 13).

The other Polish researchers (Gabryś-Barker, 2017; Nizegorodcew, 2017) lay great stress on the necessity of organizing FL teachers' training courses on teaching FL to the third age learners. Moreover, according to the abovementioned researchers, such courses should be taught at the Universities. Thus, in 2016 Gabryś-Barker conducted a study on future teacher's awareness of how senior students should be taught. The results showed that there was no module on teaching FL to the third agers in the University programme. That is why, the respondents admitted that they did not know how to teach such age group (Gabryś-Barker, 2017). That is why, professor Nizegorodcew organized one-semester optional course "Teaching EFL to senior students" for MA students. This course consisted of theoretical part, students' observation of the classes taught by prof. Nizegorodcew, students' tutorials with third agers, their analysis and assessment of the course (Nizegorodcew, 2017). As a result, MA teacher trainees highly assessed the course, admitting that it was a challenge for them to prepare for such lessons and correct seniors' errors (because of senior learners' age) (Nizegorodcew, 2017, p. 173). They also suggested including more psychological information about peculiarities of teaching older adults and more practical recommendations how to teach FL to the third agers (op. cit., p. 172).

It should be also mentioned the studies of Grotek and Ślęzak-Świat (2017) who analyzed *Reading Comprehension in L2 in Late Adulthood*. The researchers' study was based on "the theory of selective optimization with compensation" which meant that the scientists wanted to enhance third agers' SLA and language learning by "focusing on their preferred skill" (= reading) (Grotek & Ślęzak-Świat, 2017, p. 92). They explained that elderly people read a lot, and they self-evaluate their Reading skills in FL as good. However, motion sickness (vestibular proprioceptive disorder) may lead to slowing down the reading comprehension in a FL. In the study two groups of the participants were compared (with and without motion sickness). As a result, the former really fulfilled reading tasks with a slower pace. To avoid it, the researchers suggest doing physical exercises to "maintain mental alertness" (Grotek & Ślęzak-Świat, 2017, p. 105).

The analysis of the methodologists' recommendations on a FL lesson for the third agers showed that the researchers (Grotek, 2017; Derenowski, 2017; Jaroszewska, 2013; Nizegorodcew, 2017; Pawlak *et al*, 2017, Słowik, 2016a, 2016b) lay special emphasis on the following issues:

1. *Physiological and psychological peculiarities of teaching a FL to the third age learners:*

a) *Teacher's speech and tempo:* as elderly people may have some problems with hearing, it is better to pace down a teacher's loud and clear speech, so students can see the educator's face and lips. It is suggested using shorter sentences and adjusting tempo to students' comprehension level. It is also important to get rid of background noise and pay attention to the acoustics in the classroom (Derenowski, 2017).

b) *Visual presentation:* As visual acuity declines with age, it is suggested using a larger font and minimizing different fonts on a page (Derenowski, 2017, p. 155).

c) *Using senses while teaching a FL*: multisensory presentation is recommended because many seniors are visual learners. Moreover, it is essential to adjust volume during listening, repeat it more than 2 times and use short videos (Derenowski, 2017, p. 150)

d) *Reduction of anxiety*: it is vital to highlight students' achievements (Derenowski, 2017).

e) *Motivation*: All the above-mentioned researchers stress the importance of encouraging students to learn a FL.

2. *Methodological peculiarities of teaching a FL lesson to the third age learners*:

*modifying programs, syllabi, lessons*:

- *FL teachers' training*: Unfortunately, nowadays there is scarce FL teachers' training for such age group. Hence, the researchers (e.g. Jaroszewska, 2013; Derenowski, 2017; Grotek, 2017; Niżegorodcew, 2017; Pawlak *et al*, 2017) emphasize the necessity to organize FL teachers' trainings specialized in peculiarities of teaching a FL to the third age learners.

- *The necessity of creating textbooks for the third age learners*: the shortage of textbooks and other educational materials tailored to the older adults' needs was highlighted by Jaroszewska (2013). The researcher underlines the importance of creating such a textbook, which could help the elderly people recollect the material at their own pace or listen to the recording several times at home.

- *Using LI in teaching a FL*: the researchers (Słowik, 2016; Pawlak, *et al* (2017) mention that third-age learners can benefit from using their native language;

- *Assessment*: As older learners are very vulnerable, a FL teacher should be careful with the assessment and error correction Derenowski (2017). Hence, the researcher recommends avoiding timed tests as they can give rise to older adult learners' negative emotions and can inhibit learning process.

3. *Social peculiarities of teaching a FL lesson to the seniors*: Derenowski (2017) highly emphasizes the necessity of creating pleasant atmosphere in the classroom and building a rapport between a teacher and the older learners.

## METHODOLOGY

### Research aim

The purpose of the small-scale study was to investigate the difficulties the third agers had while learning English as a FL and suggest some language learning strategies which could enhance seniors' ELL.

The research was carried out between February – June, 2018 in the non-government organization “Akademia pełni życia” (Cracow).

### Research Instruments

The quantitative data were collected with the help of preliminary Questionnaire One, conducted to gather demographic information about the respondents, their difficulties with acquiring English as a foreign language. Questionnaire Two, conducted after the study, was to define which language learning strategies the participants found the most helpful.

## Participants

All the participants agreed to volunteer in our research. There were 12 women (aged 68–83) and 3 men (aged 67–74). The mean age was 69.5, modes were 67 and 70 and median was 75.5. What is more, all the participants had higher education. It is worth adding that one man was a Doctor of Science. It is also necessary to add that according to CEFR, the respondents' level of proficiency was B2 and B2+ (Intermediate – 10 participants and Upper-Intermediate – 5 participants).

## Data Collection Procedure

The study consisted of 3 stages:

At the first stage the respondents were informed about the aim of the survey and asked to give a consent to participate in the study. After that, the preliminary information questionnaire, which was in Polish, was handed out to fill in.

The second stage contained the survey: after the detailed analysis of the respondents' preliminary Questionnaire, ten lesson plans were worked out on the basis of the participants' needs and expectations of an English lesson.

The analysis of their questionnaires showed that the main problem of the overwhelming majority of the participants (66.7%) was to remember new vocabulary and to retrieve it later. Moreover, the respondents wanted to speak English more during the classes. That is why, while designing the lessons for this group, the special emphasis was laid upon introducing some language learning strategies which could help to enhance their memorization. More attention was also paid to speaking and revision of the learnt material. Such implementation of the strategies lasted 10 classes (each once a week). What is more, after a strategy was implemented, there were different exercises to practice it. As above-mentioned, special attention was focused on Memory Strategies, especially memory techniques. For example, when the third-agers were studying the topic "Medicine", a mind map was drawn and the pros and cons of such mind-mapping were discussed. Later, the seniors were given homework assignment to draw their own mind maps which were analyzed at the next lesson.

It should also be stressed that at the first lesson the mini-presentation was made to highlight the importance of spaced revision. Moreover, Ebbinghaus' Forgetting Curve (Child, 2007, p. 123–125) was demonstrated and the effectiveness of Learning Pyramid (Lalley & Miller, 2006) was explained. After that, the strategy "Visualization" was introduced to them. Then they were asked to remember the words from the handouts using the strategy "Visualization": the seniors were given the handouts with 13 words (students knew 5 of them: *mirror, abstract, perspective, swan, increase* and they did not know 8 words: *gap, tranquillizer, squashed, spring, dwindling, angle, straw and smudge*) (See Kingsbury *et.al.*, 1992). After that the new words were explained with the help of pictures and translated into Polish. Then the third agers had some time to learn the new vocabulary. Finally, the seniors were given "clean" handouts and asked to write down the translation of the new words. The results showed that the seniors could recall 100 % of the words at once, 92.3 % in 20 min, 85 % in a week and 77 % in a month. It proved the fact that if the words are repeated with a certain frequency they are better remembered.

Table 1

**The use of strategies “visualization” and “spaced word revision”**

Strategy	Spaced revision			
Visualization	Immediate recall	In 20 min	In a week	In a month
	100 %	92.3 %	85%	77%

What is more, the homework assignment was given to the seniors to visualize some words from the topic which they were studying then. At the next lesson we analysed the participants’ drawings/schemes. By and large, they liked the idea of visualization, saying that it was easier to remember the word with a graphic representation.

Furthermore, the game “Jeopardy” was suggested to demonstrate that the revision of the vocabulary could be interesting. Moreover, the words from the topic “Travelling” were revised with the help of half-crossword which was evaluated by them as a good technique of vocabulary retrieval. But it is necessary to emphasize that a teacher should avoid giving a lot of words in such a crossword, otherwise the task will be tedious. In addition to these strategies, “Locis Method” was explained to the older adult learners, but frankly speaking, the respondents repudiated it at once, saying that it was not “their cup of tea”, only one person liked it.

At the third stage the results were analyzed and the conclusions were drawn.

**The results of the study**

The study of Questionnaire One and seniors’ work at our lessons showed that the level of their education and general background knowledge play an important role in their SLA (for instance, the doctors helped a lot with the terms and explanations during our classes when the topic “Medicine” was studied). It confirmed our assumption that previous education influences FL acquisition and FL learning.

What is more, the results of Questionnaire One show that 87% of the respondents did have problems with memorizing the vocabulary and retrieving it later. Moreover, the necessity of more frequent and extensive revision was stated by 93.3 % of the respondents. That is why, special emphasis was laid upon introducing memory strategies which could enhance seniors’ memorizing new vocabulary. What is more, this finding stands in line with, for example, Scheppegrell’s (1987), Jaroszevska’s (2013) and Grotek (2017) studies that it is necessary to define the impediments which the third agers have in order to tailor the syllabus/ lessons to their needs.

The second set of findings showed that it is necessary to explain Language Learning Strategies (LLS) to the third agers, as they could enhance their FLL. As a result, the participants found the most helpful the following LLS: “I use spaced word revision” (98.3%), “I use cognates in my study” (96.7%), “I remember a pictorial representation of the meaning of the word” (95%) and “I remember affixes” (93.3%).

**CONCLUSIONS AND PEDAGOGICAL IMPLICATIONS**

The analysis of the studies on the third agers’ foreign language learning revealed that the Polish researchers focus their attention on the following issues:

difficulties which can deter older adults from learning a FL (e.g. Jaroszewska, 2013; Derenowski, 2017); analysis of the work of educational institution for elderly people (e.g. Jaroszewska, 2013); special educational needs of older adult learners (Jaroszewska, 2013); seniors' expectations/ beliefs about a FL teacher (e.g. Grotek, 2017; Derenowski, 2017); trainees' viewpoints on teaching English to senior students (Nizegorodcew, 2017); multicultural aspects of teaching a FL to older adults (Jaroszewska, 2013); the necessity of using L1 in the FL classroom (Słowik, 2016); the use of compensatory strategies by seniors to learn English (Piechurska-Kuciel & Szyszka, 2017).

What is more, all the Polish *methodologists' recommendations* could be divided into 3 main groups: *physiological and psychological peculiarities of teaching a FL to the third age learners* (teacher's speech and tempo; visual presentation; using senses while teaching a FL; mobility; reduction of anxiety; minimizing distractions; motivation); *methodological peculiarities of teaching a FL lesson to the third age learners* (modifying programs, syllabi, lessons; the importance of relevant information; teaching adult learning strategies to the seniors; FL teachers' training; the necessity of creating textbooks for the third age learners; using L1 in teaching a FL; peer teaching; pair/ team work; individual approach; homework assessment) and *social peculiarities of teaching a FL lesson to the seniors* (creating pleasant atmosphere in the classroom and building rapport between members of the group, and between the FL teacher and the senior students).

The findings of the study also show that it is vitally important to teach VLS to learners. That is why, we completely agree with Nation (2006), who stresses that strategy training can broaden learners' strategic knowledge.

Based on the results of the study some implications can be suggested.

Firstly, it is necessary to stress that the third year students can not be taught the same way as young learners or adolescents, even younger adults. That is why, it is important to have a questionnaire to know the needs and aims of the participants. After that, it is necessary to make up the syllabus which is tailored to the elderly students' needs. It should be practical and result-oriented syllabus, where much attention was paid to the peculiarities of learning a FL by the Third Age people.

Secondly, it is important for a FL teacher to use seniors' previous, invaluable experience, their recommendations what is necessary to do and what to avoid doing while teaching. It is important to treat them as equals: they are not children to whom a teacher can impose his/ her own methodology; they are advisers and a teacher is a facilitator who enhances FLL process.

Moreover, based on the results of the study, it should be underlined that creating a text-book with recorded listening is of prime importance. It means that seniors could listen at home and revise/ learn the new material at their own space. It is good idea to design a disc with educational games with pronunciation at 3 different speed, so the older learners could listen to slow and distinct pronunciation, then the same information at a bit increased speed and finally at native-level/ natural speed.

Furthermore, bearing in mind the deterioration of seniors' memory, a special attention should be paid to the techniques of retention of new vocabulary. That is why, it is necessary to apply different methodologies to ease FLL process for the third agers.

Finally, it is important to prepare future / present teachers for working with such age group. So, it is essential to design special courses, lessons, activities.

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## **ВИКЛАДАННЯ ІНОЗЕМНИХ МОВ ДЛЯ СТУДЕНТІВ ТРЕТЬОГО ВІКУ В ПОЛЬЩІ**

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*У статті розглядається проблема викладання іноземних мов літнім людям. Окреслено загальні тенденції у навчанні іноземних мов студентів похилого віку. Перераховано установи, в яких пенсіонери можуть вивчати іноземні мови в Польщі. Проаналізовано психологічні, фізіологічні, методологічні та соціальні особливості викладання іноземних мов для студентів третього віку. Особлива увага приділяється освітнім потребам студентів похилого віку. У статті запропоновано стратегії вивчення мови, які, зокрема, сприяють вивченню іноземних мов літніми людьми. Автор підкреслює, що студенти похилого віку потребують інших підходів до навчання, ніж студенти молодших курсів. Для виявлення потреб та цілей учасників важливо проводити анкетування, що є основою для розроблення програми, яка пристосована до потреб студентів похилого віку. Це має бути практичний і орієнтований на результат навчальний план, де велика увага приділяється особливостям вивчення іноземних мов людьми похилого віку. У статті наголошено на важливості для викладача використовувати попередній досвід старших колег, їхні рекомендації, що потрібно робити, і що слід уникати під час навчання. Важливо розглядати студентів похилого віку як рівних: вони не діти, яким вчитель може нав'язувати свою власну методологію; вони є радниками, а вчителе має їх мотивувати та покращувати процес*

навчання іноземних мов. На підставі результатів дослідження автор підкреслює необхідність створення підручників з аудіо-записом та першочергове значення прослуховування. Це дає можливість студентам літнього віку слухати вдома і вивчати новий матеріал на своєму просторі. Необхідно також розробити диск з навчальними іграми з вимовою різної швидкості. Враховуючи погіршення пам'яті у літніх студентів, особливу увагу слід приділяти техніці збереження нової лексики та застосувати різні методики для полегшення процесу вивчення іноземної мови.

**Ключові слова:** іноземні мови; навчання студентів третього віку; Польща; стратегії вивчення мови; студенти третього курсу.

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