

Older Language Learners and What We Can Learn from Them

By Stephen Ryan, Featured Speaker at the 2019 KOTESOL Intl. Conference

We are all getting older. Although there may be times, perhaps in response to some early morning aches and pains or a poorly timed glance in the mirror, when we wish this were not the case, in my experience, most of us tend to be relatively content with the perspective that comes with age, and few of us would wish to return to our younger selves. This is just as well since more and more of us are living longer than ever before. Within the broader public discourse, these profound demographic shifts occurring across the economically developed world have been framed in terms of "Armageddon demographics," primarily concerned with the various crises likely to be caused by a rapidly aging population. Within the narrower field of foreign language education, these changes have barely registered.

In this short article, largely based upon my own personal experiences of teaching older language learners, I hope to first make the case for a more positive account of our aging society; more people are living longer, more-rewarding lives, and this is a cause for celebration. I will move on to argue that this is an area that demands serious attention from language educators, and finally, I will close by asking if there is anything that language educators in general, especially those involved with teaching foreign languages as a compulsory school subject, may learn from a consideration of older foreign language learners.

Early Experiences of Teaching Older Learners

Looking back at my own personal experience with older language learners, I can see that, certainly in my early days, I was guilty of bringing a deficit model into my classroom. As a relatively young teacher, I remember being asked to teach a "business English" class. It was a new challenge for me, and I prepared very enthusiastically. However, the fatal flaw in my planning was that all my efforts had been based on the assumption of a class full of dynamic, ambitious young professionals; I had not expected a room packed with retirees. I have to confess that I felt both frustrated and disappointed. Nevertheless, since I volunteered to teach the class again, I must have enjoyed it at some level, but this enjoyment was always qualified by a feeling that the class would benefit from a younger group of students. It took me a long time to realize that I was enjoying teaching this class because of the age of the students, not despite it.

There was a whole range of reasons for enjoying teaching these classes. Of course, much of the enjoyment was simply due to the novelty value of a fresh challenge. On the other hand, there were much more fundamental issues relating to my role and function as a language teacher. Interacting with these older learners forced me to rethink some of the assumptions I held about language teaching. Up to that point, I had seen language teaching very much in terms of preparing students for some future use of the language in the so-called "real world" outside the classroom, but listening to my older learners made me realize that they were in the class for very different reasons, and it was up to me to change my approach to teaching to take these reasons into account.

One of the biggest challenges for me was to understand how language acquisition fit this new teaching environment. Previously, I had adhered to a very simplistic model of language teaching in which developing language proficiency was paramount. However, my discussions with these older learners, and eavesdropping on their own conversations with each other, taught me that as a language teacher, I needed to move beyond language. When these learners discussed their learning, their discussions were rarely future oriented, and they hardly ever mentioned developing language proficiency. They referred to relationships with other people, they mentioned the challenge of accommodating their duties as language learners within the broader context of their lives, and they often discussed the difficulties of specific learning tasks. It was clear that for most of them these classes played a significant role in their lives, and the learners took them very seriously. However, it was not



immediately clear to me what benefits these people were deriving from the classes.

Benefits

If older learners are not strongly motivated by the prospect of gains in linguistic proficiency, what is it that motivates them to make such a commitment to language

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learning? As someone with a long-standing interest in language learner motivation, this strikes me as a fascinating and important question.

It is possible to separate the benefits of foreign language learning for older people into two broad categories: (a) **cognitive benefits**, such as intellectual stimulation through contact with new patterns of interaction and thought, and (b) **socio-affective benefits**, such as increased opportunities for meaningful communication and connectedness with other people. These two strands may help form the foundations of an exciting new direction in language education research, as at the present time there is almost no empirical data available to support our intuitions about the rewards of foreign language learning for older people. For example, many older learners express a belief in the value of language learning as a means of dementia prevention. If so, this is a remarkable discovery, but there needs to be coordinated systematic research before we can make any such claims. Older language learners appear to benefit from language learning in ways that go beyond the simple instrumental value associated with proficiency in the target language. Researchers need to know more about these benefits, and teachers need to know more about the pedagogic implications of this.

Learning from Older Learners

Earlier, I mentioned my awareness of the need to become a language teacher capable of moving “beyond language,” that developing linguistic proficiency was not the sole function of my teaching. Indeed, many times it was not even one of the primary purposes. I found that some of the lessons learned from this experience of teaching older learners to be of great value in my other role as a teacher of young people learning English principally because it is a required element

of the curriculum. Thinking of the individuals in my classroom as people, not simply as “language learners,” reinvigorated my teaching. One of the most pleasing consequences of this new outlook was that I was able to feel a greater sense of achievement as a teacher. After all, if I measured my success as a teacher solely by the gains in linguistic proficiency of my students, I think my career could possibly be described as an abject failure. Looking at the bigger picture and developing an awareness of some of the ways in which language classes were helping my students develop as people opened up a new dimension to language teaching. I found myself adapting my teaching to fit the lives of my students rather than trying to change their lives to fit the assumptions of foreign language education.

Summary

In both my talks at KOTESOL 2019, I hope to pursue some of the themes touched upon in this brief article. In my invited session, I intend to focus on the context of older learners, considering some of the lessons these learners may have for those of us involved in general language education. Nevertheless, I also have to hold up my hands and admit to an ulterior motive here: This is an

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exciting area that I have only recently begun to research seriously, and I am hoping my talk will encourage others to get involved. In my featured session, I plan to explore the idea of moving “beyond language.” As language teachers we are comfortable with language. Moving beyond language opens up a whole new set of risks, challenges, and opportunities.

The Author

Stephen Ryan has been involved in language education for over 25 years, and for most of that time, he has been based in Japan. He is currently a professor in the School of Culture, Media, and Society at Waseda University in Tokyo, and he is a featured speaker at this year’s KOTESOL International Conference.

