

SYLWIA NIEWCZAS

POSITIVE PSYCHOLOGY IN FOREIGN LANGUAGE
LEARNING AND TEACHING.
THE CASE OF POLISH OLDER ADULTS

INTRODUCTION

POSITIVE PSYCHOLOGY IN FOREIGN LANGUAGES PEDAGOGY

Positive psychology was proposed by Martin Seligman and Mihaly Csikszentmihalyi in 2000. The phenomenon focuses on the positive events and influences in life, including positive experiences (joy, happiness, inspiration, love), positive states and traits (gratitude, resilience, compassion), as well as positive institutions (applying positive principles within entire organizations and institutions). The trend emerged at the end of the 20th century in opposition to clinical psychology, which focused mostly on negative aspects of life. In developing a theory to address this, Seligman (*Flourish*) selected five components that people seek, because they are intrinsically motivating and they contribute to well-being. These elements are pursued for their own sake and are defined and measured independently of each other (Seligman, “PERMA” 5). The five components are positive emotion, engagement, relationships, meaning and accomplishments.

Throughout the years the concept of positive psychology gained popularity not only in psychology, but also in other social sciences, and later on in education. Positive education began to flourish, focusing on educating students in a way that would support their well-being (Seligman, “PERMA” 295). Studies conducted in the field of positive psychology in education can

SYLWIA NIEWCZAS, KUL Doctoral School, Institute of Linguistics, John Paul II Catholic University of Lublin, al. Raławickie 14, 20-950 Lublin, Poland; e-mail: sylwia.niewczas@kul.pl; ORCID: <https://orcid.org/0000-0002-7349-5679>.

be divided in two stages: the early period (2012–2015) and the current period, which started in 2016 (the flourishing of positive psychology in education). The possible use of positive psychology in foreign language learning and teaching was proposed by MacIntyre and Gregersen in 2012. Their postulates were based on the assumption that teachers may have influence on both positive and negative emotions of the learners through the use of various techniques and exercises (e.g. developing imagination, creativity, using relaxation). In their research, MacIntyre and Gregersen proved that positive emotions and positive atmosphere can facilitate the language learning process. Positive psychology aims to develop practical interventions facilitating personal growth (Peterson 25). Positive Psychology Interventions (PPIs) are attempts to “cultivate positive feelings, behaviors and cognitions” (Sin and Lubomirsky 468). Positive psychology characteristics such as perseverance, strengths, hope, optimism, courage are likely to play an important role in language learning as the process usually takes a long time, occurs in diverse contexts and requires such elements as motivation, self and identity. Therefore, there is clearly a need to develop interventions based on positive psychology at various levels (McIntyre et al. 270).

The “PERMA” model of well-being created by Seligman has been modified by Rebecca Oxford, who, taking its implications for language learning and teaching, adapted it into a model called “EMPHATICS”, which stands for: empathy, meaning and motivation, perseverance, agency and autonomy, time, hardiness and habits of mind, intelligences, character strengths and self-efficacy, self-concept, self-esteem and self-verification. Oxford’s model gathers many of the themes from prior research, integrating them within contemporary theoretical framework and adds both to the literature on positive psychology and Second Language Acquisition (Oxford 35).

LANGUAGE LEARNING AND THE OLDER ADULTS IN POLAND

For many years, foreign language learning research focused on teaching children and adults in general. However, it should be noticed that populations around the world are aging. According to WHO, the number of people aged 60+ will soon reach 2 billion. Because of that, it is essential to search for ways and methods of maintaining cognitive functioning of older adults. Learning a foreign language is seen as one of the most effective exercises of the brain (Antoniou 2691). What is more, in the light of recent interdiscipli-

nary research learning a foreign language may also increase the well-being of older adults (Escuder-Mollon 515; Klimova and Pikhart 7).

However, there seem to be many definitions of an *older adult* as the onset of the retirement varies in different countries. In this article *older adult* is defined as aged 55+, as in literature (concerning sociology and pedagogy of Polish older adults) this is often the moment when people start being less active on the job market and they search for ways of retiring earlier (Szukalski 11). In addition, according to Adamczyk, Poland has one of the lowest average of the retirement age among European countries (Adamczyk 42). Therefore, in response to this trend many language courses offered by various Universities of Third Age (U3As) in Poland accept students from the age of 55.

First studies on foreign language geragogy (foreign language learning and teaching of seniors) in Poland were published in the second decade of XXI century (Gębal 383). Grotek and Kiliańska-Przybyło (“Rola czynników”, “Społeczne aspekty”), Jaroszevska (*Nauczanie języków*), Kic-Drgas, Janowska and Fiema, Klimczak-Pawlak and Kossakowska-Pisarek, Słowik-Krogulec have all conducted research on foreign language geragogy of Polish older adults. Language learning needs and abilities of older adults, the role of the teacher, teaching materials, the relationship with other learners are among the most important findings of the research of the last decade. Learning in a positive and a pleasant atmosphere are strong motivating factors for older adults, and postulates of foreign language geragogy are in line with positive psychology. Therefore, language courses for third-age learners should be organized in a way that ensures a positive learning environment and enhances older adults’ well-being.

RESEARCH STUDY

RESEARCH GOAL

The research goal of the present study was to investigate older adults’ subjective feeling of well-being connected to foreign language learning as one of the most important ways of improving their quality of life. Many studies have shown that foreign language training may be a way of improving cognitive functions (Bak; Bak and Long; Antoniou et al.) but it has also been proved that various forms of learning may increase the well-being of healthy older individuals (Pikhart and Klimova 2020). As most European societies are aging really fast, it is essential to create strategies that would fa-

facilitate successful aging. After the literature review, two main research questions were formed that guided the study:

1) Is the subjective feeling of well-being among older adults connected to foreign language learning?

2) Can foreign language learning be used as a positive psychology intervention influencing seniors' subjective feeling of well-being?

PARTICIPANTS

The research involved 46 participants. They were all found within the professional network of the author. Language teachers of older adults were contacted and requested to distribute the survey among their students. The questionnaire was then passed on to the participants of language courses at three U3As in Poland (Kraków, Warsaw, Lublin). Within the group of participants, there were 44 women and 2 men. This came as no surprise as according to the statistics over 85% of U3A students are women (GUS).

RESEARCH TOOL AND PROCEDURES

The survey was conducted in December 2021 as an online questionnaire distributed to the participants via Google Forms. The survey consisted of a modified version of a well-known questionnaire widely used for testing satisfaction with language courses. It was originally created by Woll and Wei and was used by the author of this paper in the past to test satisfaction of the language courses among her students (Polish seniors). However, the current research utilized only 9 questions connected to subjective feelings of the well-being of the participants of the language courses. The questionnaire was then supplemented with three open-ended questions from the author of the study to find out about seniors' motivations to learn languages and their general associations with learning languages as well as 12 closed questions with the focus on the preferred way of learning of seniors, the role of the teacher or the preferred content of the course. Altogether the tool designed for this research consisted of 24 questions.

Moreover, it was decided to distribute the questionnaire in an online form to allow for the participation of seniors from various places in Poland; also, it was more feasible during the pandemic, as it limited personal contact with participants. All the data collected through this form were anonymous. A 5-point Likert scale was used in the questionnaire, offering options *strongly*

agree, agree, I don't know, disagree, and strongly disagree. Descriptive statistics were used for closed questions, while open-ended questions were content-analyzed (to search for some recurring themes in participants' answers). Additionally, open-ended questions permitted a more qualitative approach.

RESULTS

This section of the article presents the results of the study. The answers to open-ended questions are discussed first. There were three open-ended questions in the survey:

- 1) What language are you currently studying?
- 2) Why did you decide to learn this language?
- 3) What do you like most about learning a language in late adulthood?

The languages the respondents were studying were typically English (70%), Spanish (25%) or Italian (5%). In the past, they would have mostly studied Russian at school. When it comes to their motivations to learn a particular language, 4 categories were identified within the answers: 40% admitted they learn mostly for travelling, 35% because they have a family abroad, 20% chose the language because of its usefulness worldwide, and 5% of them were learning a foreign language to exercise the brain. It is interesting to notice that almost half of the respondents use the language for travels. This might be connected with the fact that once retired, they have now more time to travel and they want to feel confident and communicate fluently abroad. When it comes to the last open-ended question: "What do you like most about learning a language in late adulthood?" after analyzing seniors' answers, they were put into 4 categories: satisfaction when getting to know new vocabulary, general language progress, meeting new people and exercising the brain. Some answers were: "I like broadening my horizons and exercising the brain when I learn new words and phrases", "I feel much younger and I meet many interesting people", "I like the satisfaction of successful communication with foreigners", "General progress, very good rapport with the teacher and the way classes are conducted in late adulthood".

The results of the closed questions have shown that seniors generally have very positive attitude towards learning a foreign language in late adulthood as more than 70% of answers in question 3 ("Learning a foreign language is pleasant for me") were "strongly agree" and "agree". What is more,

they agreed that learning a foreign language gives them satisfaction (almost 80% of “strongly agree” and “agree” answers), helps them with travels (again, almost 80% of “strongly agree” and “agree” answers), helps them find new friends (more than 60% of “strongly agree” and “agree” answers) or helps them find a new purpose in life (when retired)—almost 70% of “strongly agree” and “agree” answers. Respondents admitted they hoped learning a foreign language would be useful for them in the future (80% of “strongly agree” and “agree” answers). Additionally, they seem to be aware of the cognitive benefits of learning a foreign language in late adulthood such as improvement of memory, attention, creativity and exercising the brain. For questions connected to these aspects positive answers prevailed too.

In addition, it was decided to include questions about the role of the teacher and its importance in the foreign language learning process (question 16, “When I don’t understand what the teacher said, I ask her in foreign language for explanation”; question 17, “Relationship with the teacher is very important for me in language learning process”; question 18, “It is important for me to be praised by the teacher regularly”) as some previous studies in the field of foreign language geragogy had underlined it (e.g. Słowik-Krogulec 196). The responses from the survey confirmed the significance of the teacher (from the perspective of the learners) as almost 70% of respondents admitted asking the teacher for clarification, the need for frequent praising and almost 90% stated that the relationship with the teacher was very important to them. This might be surprising, but it also shows to what extent the teacher can shape the language learning process among seniors, including the atmosphere in the classroom, the relationship between the students and in this way the teacher can also influence seniors’ well-being. What is more, as over 85% of seniors in question 17 confirmed the importance of the relationship with the teacher, it can be assumed that the teacher can influence and enhance the subjective feeling of the well-being connected with attending a language course with other seniors. It was also interesting to observe that seniors prefer to learn in a group (compare question 13, “Learning a foreign language in one to one classes is enjoyable for me (I prefer this way of learning)” and question 14, “Learning a foreign language in one to one classes is enjoyable for me (I prefer this way of learning)”). Perhaps learning with other seniors is pleasant for the respondents and so the social aspect of learning a language and attending a language course may influence seniors’ well-being. The last 4 questions aimed at investigating negative emotions connected with foreign language learning. However, a discrepancy

might be observed between answers to questions focusing on positive emotions (mostly 1–14) and questions focusing on negative emotions. Respondents strongly disagreed that learning a foreign language does not bring any benefits to them. They partly agreed that learning a foreign language is stressful (but at the same time they still enjoy it) and takes a lot of time (around 45% agreed with this statement) mostly because they need to revise the material many times.

DISCUSSION

After analyzing the responses to the survey, four key areas of benefits connected to foreign language learning and subjective feeling of well-being might be indicated among Polish seniors: 1) positive emotions and pleasure of learning, 2) social aspects of meeting new people, 3) help with travelling, and 4) motivation to learn (both the language and generally acquiring new knowledge). This shows that all these aspects may influence seniors' well-being and language learning can improve their subjective feeling of well-being, if conducted in an appropriate way. Another important finding was that seniors mostly disagreed with negative statements in the survey, which shows that positive feelings about learning a foreign language are dominating among them.

Crucially, the data collected in the research proves that seniors are quite aware of the benefits of learning a language in late adulthood, but it equally shows that the reasons for learning are various among the research group and so are the aspects they enjoy about the learning process. For some respondents, the social aspect of participating in a language course is the prevailing one, whereas for others it's gaining the new skills in the language and visible progress or the general awareness of doing some exercises for the brain.

It should also be underlined that older adults learn foreign languages mostly to be able to communicate when travelling, maintain cognitive skills and meet new people, and what is even more important, all these aspects seem to improve general satisfaction and happiness of seniors learning a foreign language.

PEDAGOGICAL IMPLICATIONS

The findings of this study revealed that foreign language learning contributes to the subjective feeling of well-being of Polish older adults. This may be observed by positive feelings expressed in their answers with aspects like happiness, satisfaction, sense of belonging to the group and rapport with the teacher emerging in most responses. It can be argued that the natural process of aging, with many accompanying negative aspects does not have to negatively affect the seniors' quality of life when supported and facilitated by various activities, including language learning. What is more, learning new skills, such as a foreign language can be an effective intervention that may contribute to older adults' subjective feeling of well-being. Foreign language learning can, thus, be considered another intervention method towards improved quality of life and well-being of seniors along with other already well-accepted and documented methods such as playing musical instruments, various community activities, and other forms of lifelong learning.

LIMITATIONS

There are, however, a few limitations to this study. The first limitation was a small scale of the research and a small research sample. This is caused by difficult access to the research group and a general unwillingness of seniors to fill in surveys (online ones in particular) at the time when the research was conducted. The research on well-being of older adults (especially connected to foreign language learning) is scarce, so still further research is needed in the field in order to generalize the results and enable further discussion.

The issue of factors influencing seniors well-being in reference to foreign language learning is an intriguing one, which could be explored in further research by conducting a detailed factor analysis of the issue. What is more, it would be a fruitful idea to conduct a comparative study among older adults learning a foreign language and attending other forms of classes/courses. A comparative study on the influence of foreign language learning on the well-being of older adults and younger adults could also shed light on this matter and show whether there are any different factors for younger and third-age learners.

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THE CASE OF POLISH OLDER ADULTS

Summary

This article joins the discussion about the role of positive psychology in foreign language learning. The aim of this paper is to present the results of a quantitative study conducted among a group of Polish older adults (aged 55+). The research goal of the present study was to investigate older people's subjective feeling of well-being connected to foreign language learning as one of the ways of improving their quality of life. The research used a questionnaire as the research tool, which consisted of a modified version of a questionnaire widely used for testing satisfaction with language courses. The findings of the research clearly show that foreign language learning has an irreplaceable role as one of several non-pharmacological strategies utilised to improve the aging process and promoting positive aging. The results also indicate that seniors' overall satisfaction and subjective feelings of well-being can be greater when attending foreign language classes at an older age. Foreign language learning, therefore, creates an environment that can enhance the quality of life of older adults.

Keywords: foreign language geragogy; positive psychology; well-being; seniors

PSYCHOLOGIA POZYTYWNA W NAUCZANIU/ UCZENIU SIĘ JĘZYKÓW OBCYCH
– KONTEKST UCZENIA SIĘ POLSKICH SENIORÓW

Streszczenie

Artykuł włącza się w dyskusję nad rolą pozytywnej psychologii w nauce języków obcych. Jego celem jest prezentacja wyników badania ankietowego przeprowadzonego na grupie 46 polskich seniorów (osoby 55+). Badanie miało na celu sprawdzenie subiektywnego odczucia dobrostanu w sytuacji uczenia się języka obcego w wieku późnej dorosłości z uwzględnieniem poprawy jakości życia. Narzędziem badawczym był zaadaptowany na ten cel kwestionariusz służący badaniu satysfakcji z kursu językowego. Wyniki pokazały, że nauka języka obcego odgrywa niezwykle istotną rolę dla pokolenia senioralnego jako jedna z nefarmakologicznych strategii wspomagających proces starzenia się, a sprzyjająca pozytywnemu starzeniu się. Okazało się również, że dzięki uczęszczaniu na kurs językowy zazwyczaj wzrasta poczucie dobrostanu u seniorów. Na tej podstawie można stwierdzić, że nauka języka obcego stwarza środowisko sprzyjające poprawie jakości życia osób starszych.

Słowa kluczowe: glottogeragogika; pozytywna psychologia; dobrostan; seniorzy