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## Teaching Foreign Languages to Older Adults: The Development of Geragogical Foreign- -Language Didactics in Slovenia

**Abstract:** Older adults frequently participate in non-formal foreign-language programmes. Despite the wide range of courses offered by various institutions in Slovenia, it remains unclear whether the specific characteristics, learning needs and potential obstacles of older learners are adequately considered in course design and implementation. The review of literature reveals lack of both quantitative and qualitative research on the motives and barriers influencing older adults' participation in language courses, both in the Slovenian and the wider European contexts. This paper aims to address the gap between the diverse educational offerings available and the actual needs of older learners. Drawing on pluralistic approaches to languages and cultures, as well as on the principles of foreign-language teaching in the post-method era, whilst taking into account the target group's educational needs in light of the emerging field of geragogical foreign-language didactics, we propose a set of guidelines to enhance the quality and effectiveness of language teaching for older adults.

**Keywords:** foreign languages, education of older adults, teaching older adults, geragogical didactics

## Podučavanje starijih osoba stranim jezicima: razvoj geragogijske didaktike stranih jezika u Sloveniji

**Apstrakt:** Starije osebe često učestvuju u neformalnim programima učenja stranih jezika. Uprkos širokoj ponudi kurseva koje nude različite institucije u Sloveniji, i dalje nije dovoljno jasno da li se prilikom osmišljavanja i realizacije nastave u dovoljnoj meri uzimaju

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u obzir specifične karakteristike, obrazovne potrebe i potencijalne prepreke sa kojima se suočavaju stariji polaznici. Pregled literature ukazuje na nedostatak kako kvantitativnih, tako i kvalitativnih istraživanja motiva i barijera koji utiču na pohađanje kurseva stranih jezika od strane starijih osoba, kako u slovenačkom, tako i u širem evropskom kontekstu. Ovaj rad ima za cilj da doprinese prevazilaženju jaza između raznovrsne obrazovne ponude i stvarnih potreba starijih polaznika. Polazeći od pluralističkih pristupa jezicima i kulturama, kao i od načela nastave stranih jezika u postmetodskoj eri, te uzimajući u obzir obrazovne potrebe ciljne grupe u svetlu razvoja geragogijske didaktike stranih jezika, u radu predlažemo skup smernica za unapređenje kvaliteta i efikasnosti nastave stranih jezika namenjene starijim osobama.

**Ključne reči:** strani jezici, obrazovanje starijih osoba, podučavanje starijih osoba, didaktički pristupi u obrazovanju starijih

## Introduction

Learning foreign languages is one of the most popular areas of education among older adults,<sup>3</sup> as evidenced by the schedules of various educational institutions in Slovenia, including Universities of the Third Age, day activity centres, adult education centres and the Faculty of Active Wisdom at the University of Ljubljana. The belief prevails that older adults have reduced abilities to learn foreign languages. However, in accordance with the Common European Framework of Reference for Languages (CEFR) (Council of Europe, 2011), the goal of language education is not merely to achieve balanced mastery of individual languages, but also to develop a language repertoire in which all linguistic competences have their place. Previously acquired knowledge and experiences are therefore not negligible factors in foreign-language learning; on the contrary, they contribute significantly to its effectiveness. An individual's communicative competence is built upon their cumulative linguistic knowledge and experience. Since these are typically rich and diverse among older adults, it is important to actively incorporate them into foreign-language teaching for this target group. Research on the use of pluralistic approaches in language education has so far focused mainly on primary and secondary education.

The aim of this paper is to address part of the gap between the wide range of educational offerings in foreign languages and the understanding of the actual educational needs of older adults. Drawing on a review of the literature, this paper outlines the key motives and barriers shaping older adults' participation in foreign-language courses, critically examines pedagogical approaches used with

<sup>3</sup> In this chapter, older adults are defined as individuals over the age of 65 who are no longer part of the active workforce.

this group and proposes a set of guidelines for high-quality instruction grounded in the emerging field of geragogical foreign-language didactics.

### **Foreign-Language Learning among Older Adults**

Older adults often include participation in non-formal educational programmes among their leisure activities. Foreign-language learning is frequently one of their choices. The various factors that influence an older adult's decision to participate in an educational programme include their gender, age, level of education, attitude toward learning, as well as motives and barriers, which will be the focus of the following discussion (Chang & Lin, 2011).

### **Motives for Participation in Language Courses**

Understanding the motives that lead older adults to participate in educational programmes is essential for educators, given that these motives, together with the learners' needs, beliefs and values, inform the selection of appropriate strategies for planning educational provision (Findsen & Formosa, 2011, p. 118). According to Krajnc (2016), older adults typically cite personal interest as the main reason for engaging in such educational programmes.

Findsen and Formosa (2011, p. 120) summarise Houle's typology of adult learning motives, categorising learners into three groups: the first includes goal-oriented learners who view learning merely as a means to achieve a final objective; the second comprises those motivated by the activity itself, including social interaction and the learning process; and the third includes those motivated by the acquisition of knowledge, skill development and personal growth.

Research has identified certain dominant motives for older adults' participation in educational programmes, including language courses. These motives include, notably, learning driven by personal interest, which determines the relevance of an educational programme to an individual's needs, a factor that educational programme planners should consider (Duay & Bryan, 2008). Another notable motive is participation for social inclusion within the programme, highlighting the importance of maintaining or establishing social connections among older adults (Åberg, 2016; Boulton-Lewis & Buys, 2015). Findsen and McCullough (2007) also note that life transitions in older age can act as a motivational factor.

Beyond general motives for participation in educational programmes, specific motives for attending language courses warrant attention. Within the

European research context, a study in Poland explored foreign-language learning among older adults. Klimczak-Pawlak and Kossakowska-Pisarek (2018) included 54 participants in an English course, aged 50 to 59, who, while not strictly categorised as older adults, were undergoing the transition to later adulthood and retirement. The study identified their key motives for learning English through questionnaires and semi-structured interviews. The participants highlighted the necessity of acquiring active English skills, although only a small share (6%) explicitly mentioned practical use during travel. Another important motive was communication with family and relatives abroad, alongside maintaining activity and cognitive alertness. The authors also note the social pressure arising from the ubiquitous presence of English in society (Klimczak-Pawlak & Kossakowska-Pisarek, 2018, p. 259).

In Slovenia, early research on older adults' motives for language-course participation includes the study by Zavrl and Radovan (2016, p. 13), which identifies love of the language, travel, active leisure, general interest in learning and communication in the target language as key motives for learning Spanish. Miklič (2018, p. 62) likewise highlights the importance of acquiring new knowledge, enhancing existing skills and maintaining cognitive function. Lah and Lamy-Joswiak (2025, pp. 190, 196) report that participants in French courses at the Faculty of Active Wisdom at the University of Ljubljana enrolled primarily due to a desire to renew and extend their knowledge, interest in languages and culture, social connections and family ties abroad, confirming that intrinsic motivation is central among older learners.

Overall, research indicates that older adults predominantly pursue courses out of personal interest, fascination with the language and culture, the need for active communication in a foreign language and the desire to maintain an active lifestyle and/or cognitive function. The programme planners must, however, also consider the barriers that discourage participation. Limited research, dating back only to the previous decade, highlights the scarcity of data in the field of geragogical foreign-language education in Slovenia and underscores the need for further study and development, as language courses are widely offered by various providers of educational programmes for older adults in Slovenia.

### **Barriers to Participation in Language Courses**

As noted, older adults' decisions to participate in educational programmes are shaped by a range of factors, among which educational barriers play a particularly important role, as they may discourage participation altogether. The most

frequently identified barriers are situational in nature and include economic, social, locational and family-related factors. Older adults are less likely to enrol in educational programmes if they are coping with the loss of a loved one, have a low income, live far from the place where the programme is offered, or lack time (Kump & Jelenc Krašovec, 2010; Tam, 2016; Wang et al., 2016). Loneliness can further reduce older adults' willingness to participate, as they are more inclined to engage in new activities in the company of friends, partners or acquaintances and are less likely to join unfamiliar activities on their own (Hu, 2023, p. 49).

In addition to situational barriers, dispositional barriers also play a significant role. They are rooted in negative prior educational experiences in formal or non-formal settings, as well as in beliefs about one's own (in)ability to learn later in life (Kump & Jelenc Krašovec, 2010, p. 26). Another characteristic barrier for this group is the presence of chronic health conditions, as highlighted in Hu's qualitative study (2023, p. 46).

Finally, institutional barriers are those over which programme providers have complete control. These include ensuring adequate accessibility of programme locations, adapted schedules and the appropriate selection of teaching methods and content (Kump & Jelenc Krašovec, 2010, p. 26). Hu (2023, p. 50) adds that some providers do not even assess the needs of older adults, which is fundamental for programme planning. Even a high-quality programme will not be attended if information about it does not reach the target group, a finding supported by Menéndez et al. (2018, p. 602), who note in a systematic review of higher-education offerings for older adults that many studies highlight the lack of information available to the intended participants. The information gap reflects a mismatch between the diverse educational offerings available and the understanding of older adults' needs and barriers. Effective communication requires a good understanding of the target group's characteristics, expectations and potential obstacles, enabling appropriate message adaptation and choice of communication channels.

Owing to the limited number of studies examining barriers to older adults' participation in language courses, it remains difficult to fully identify the factors that hinder their engagement, despite clear evidence that such barriers exist. Hubenthal (2004) explored barriers to learning English as a second language among older Russian migrants living in the United States. The qualitative study included ten participants over 64, seven of whom were women. The study identified several barriers specific to older learners, including memory-related difficulties and the perception that language learning requires greater effort at an older age, even though the participants believed that learning a new language later in life was still possible (Hubenthal, 2004, pp. 115–116). Given the study's focus on

migrants, feelings of shame also emerged as a significant barrier, as participants perceived their language progress as insufficient. This often led to frustration when attempting to construct more complex sentences or engage in conversations with native speakers and ultimately influenced their willingness to participate in English language courses.

Health issues, whether acute or chronic, affecting either the learners themselves or their close relatives, can further discourage continued participation in language learning (Hubenthal, 2004, p. 116). Hubenthal also notes that course proximity and accessibility were not adequately adapted to the needs and preferences of older adults.

### **Role of the Foreign-Language Educator through the Eyes of Older Adults**

The role of the educator for older adults is crucial in the field of geragogical foreign-language education, which has only begun to develop in recent years in the Slovenian academic context. Duay and Bryan (2008, p. 1078) highlight the importance of the educator in a qualitative study examining the characteristics of the educational experience valued by older adults when participating in educational programmes. One of the key co-creators of the learning experience is the educator, who, according to older adults, should be enthusiastic, professional, open-minded, recognise the value of older adults' experiences, use simple expressions and create a pleasant atmosphere within the group (Duay & Bryan, 2008, pp. 1076–1079). Duay and Bryan (2008) observed that older learners favour educational environments that differ from traditional school settings with fixed deadlines and rigid expectations, since their engagement in learning is motivated mainly by personal interests.

Grotek (2018, pp. 131–132) also investigated the characteristics of foreign-language educators for older adults in a qualitative study involving 87 participants enrolled in language courses in Katowice. Over 90% of the participants were women, aged between 58 and 83, who attended language courses between three and five years (Grotek, 2018). Grotek (2018, p. 133) categorises the desired educator characteristics into five groups. The participants emphasised (1) the educator's professional competence in preparing learners for clear communication in the target language. Older adults in the study preferred focus on active language use, including speaking and/or listening comprehension and correct pronunciation, while grammar knowledge ranked lower on their priority list (Grotek, 2018, p. 135). As mentioned, social engagement and the importance of

well-being within the group is one of older adults' motives for participating in educational programmes. The participants accordingly identified (2) creation of a pleasant and relaxed group atmosphere as another essential skill of the foreign-language educator (Grotek, 2018, p. 136). They also highlighted select personal qualities, such as friendliness, empathy, patience and calmness. Even when a learning group includes participants with considerable differences in language proficiency, learners emphasise that it is the educator's responsibility to identify points of connection that foster group cohesion. Participants in the study also highlighted the importance of (3) a diverse range of tasks, learning materials and resources that accommodate memory-related difficulties and allow for repeated practice. Learning topics should be connected to everyday life and personal interests, while both materials and instructional delivery should be adapted to the specific needs of the group (e.g. increased repetition, slower speech and the use of larger fonts) (Grotek, 2018, p. 137). Acknowledging age-related changes in memory, the participants expressed a preference for opportunities for (4) repeated practice, including through homework and emphasised (5) the importance of feedback. They also noted that formal assessment can provoke stress and negative emotions, wherefore the educator should provide constructive feedback in alternative ways (Grotek, 2018, pp. 138–141). Therefore, the educator's role is to reduce anxiety and strengthen the older adults' sense of self-efficacy in language learning, an aspect that may have been undermined by earlier negative educational experiences or by beliefs about declining learning abilities in later life.

## Foreign-Language Teaching for Older Adults

### *Pluralistic Approaches to Languages and Cultures*

The reference framework for pluralistic approaches to languages and cultures defines them as didactic approaches that incorporate several (i.e. more than one) varieties of languages or cultures in pedagogical/learning activities (Council of Europe, 2017, p. 14). Pluralistic approaches thus stand in contrast to communicative didactic approaches, which consider only one language or culture, treat it in isolation and prohibit translation or the incidental use of the first language when teaching additional languages (Council of Europe, 2017, p. 14). However, if the goal of language education, according to the CEFR, is not merely balanced mastery of individual languages but to develop a language repertoire in which all linguistic competences have their place (Council of Europe, 2011), then pluralistic approaches are essential in foreign-language teaching.

The numerous and diverse prior experiences and already developed learning strategies of older adults are cited by many authors as an advantage in language learning (see Grein, 2013; Grotjahn, 2016; Miklič, 2018; Stiel, 2011). It is precisely on these prior experiences of learners that tertiary-language didactics is built. According to Hufeisen (2003, p. 9), previously acquired experiences allow the teaching of a second foreign language to begin at a higher level, enabling faster progression and more challenging content. Transfer applies to both knowledge and skills, as well as to learning strategies. However, as Miklič (2018, p. 58) notes, a problem may occur when a strategy in the foreign-language learning process proves less useful. Adult learners' educational biographies can also pose challenges in terms of routines and strategies. Vogt (2016, p. 203) notes, for instance, that a learner's phonetic inventory can make the acquisition of new sounds more difficult.

Drawing on Baltes and Baltes, Berndt (2004, p. 28) highlights the principle of selection, optimisation and compensation (SOC), which enables individuals to minimise losses and maximise gains. Choosing specific areas of activity (selection) and transferring and acquiring certain abilities (compensation) leads to successful functioning and learning in older age (Berndt, 2004).

### *Principles of Foreign-Language Teaching in the Post-Method Era*

Grein (2013, p. 23) notes that the use of unfamiliar teaching methods is more challenging for older adult learners and that the principles of modern foreign-language teaching are often unfamiliar to them. Stiel (2011, p. 33) observes that today's generations of older adults learned foreign languages during their schooling using the grammar-translation method and therefore expect teacher-centred instruction, frontal teaching, numerous grammar exercises and individual work – practices that are contrary to the goal of communicative competence. Nevertheless, a study by Miklič (2018, p. 63) among participants of the University of the Third Age in Ljubljana showed that the desire to improve communicative competence is also a priority for older adults.

In the contemporary, post-method<sup>4</sup> era, teaching is guided by didactic-methodical principles. As Klippel (2016, p. 315) notes, there is no consensus in general or foreign-language didactics regarding the definition, type or number of didactic-methodical or methodical-didactic principles, as these depend on the

<sup>4</sup> Funk (2012, p. 299) points out that although this commonly used term may not be the most precise, it reflects the actual situation in the field of language teaching and language-education research, as the era of macro-methodological approaches has come to an end.



prevailing didactic concepts and guidelines and have evolved throughout the history of education. Key didactic-methodical principles of contemporary teaching include competence orientation, action orientation, learner autonomy and authenticity (Klippel, 2016, pp. 317–319). Grotjahn and Kleppin (2013, p. 26) additionally highlight promotion of autonomous learning, learner-centredness, interaction, intercultural and plurilingual orientation and task-based approaches.

One of the didactic-methodical principles of modern foreign-language teaching is its plurilingual orientation, which involves building on the learners' existing communicative and linguistic experiences. Most learners have previously studied a foreign language, which can help them recognise certain structures of the target language more quickly and infer word meanings (Goethe-Institut, 2013). Modern foreign-language teaching thus opens the way for pluralistic approaches.

Tertiary-language didactics also relies on this principle, using the learners' prior knowledge and experiences for further learning, with transfer occurring at three levels: (1) knowledge of language teaching and learning, (2) knowledge of foreign-language learning strategies, and (3) knowledge of language, culture and forms of behaviour and communication (Pilypaitytė, 2013, p. 147). Its key principles – which must, of course, be adapted to the specific characteristics of each learning group – are summarised by Neuner (2003, pp. 27–32) as cognitive learning, understanding as the foundation of learning, content and text orientation and economisation of the learning process. Cognitive learning is defined as the development of declarative and procedural knowledge, including the comparison, discussion and conscious activation of all linguistic knowledge and prior language-learning experiences of learners. Cognitive procedures familiar from the grammar-translation method are therefore welcomed in tertiary-language didactics.

Further, in line with the CEFR postulate, action orientation is a central didactic-methodical principle of contemporary foreign-language teaching. According to this principle, teaching prepares learners for language use, simulating it in the classroom or course by offering authentic language situations and materials (Goethe-Institut, 2013). Action-oriented teaching emphasises the learners' activities and personal responsibility, providing relevant (experimental) engagement in authentic situations with real objectives, albeit with structure and preparation but less direct guidance (Roche, 2016, p. 469). The CEFR defines its approach as action-oriented because it considers language users and learners as “social agents”, i.e. members of society who must perform specific tasks under the given circumstances, in a particular environment and within a concrete field of action (Council of Europe, 2011, p. 31). Closely related is the contemporary didactic-methodical principle of task orientation, where learners primarily engage with

tasks that are connected to their lives or introduce future language tasks; new vocabulary and grammatical rules may play a role in this context, but are not the focus of attention (Goethe-Institut, 2013).

### *The Four-Strands Model*

How, then, can seemingly contradictory principles – cognitive learning and plurilingual orientation, as well as action orientation and task orientation – be reconciled? A solution is offered by the Four-Strands Model, which, instead of the traditional four skills of reading, writing, speaking and listening (with vocabulary and grammar as separate components), introduces four learning domains: work with meaningful content (learning through listening, reading and watching recordings), work with language forms (learning focused on linguistic forms), meaningful expression (learning through oral and written expression) and fluency training (in oral and written expression, listening, reading and watching recordings). Learning activities across an entire course or academic year should cover all four domains equally to ensure balanced competence development (Funk et al., 2014, p. 23).<sup>5</sup> As Funk et al. (2014) emphasise, the available time should be spent on activities that learners should later be able to perform independently, since reading is learned through reading, speaking through speaking and fluent expression in a language can only be achieved through practice.

### *Guidelines for Teaching Older Adults Foreign Languages*

Berndt emphasises the following principles that educators should observe when working with older adults in foreign-language teaching (Berndt, 2004, pp. 29–34):

- Learner-centredness, considering the learners' conditions, needs, experiences and expectations;
- Autonomy, which requires teaching learners how to learn, enabling them to find their own learning paths;
- Explicit repetition;
- Clarity (structuring content and lessons, as well as error correction);
- Slowness; and
- Choice (of skills and topics).

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<sup>5</sup> As Funk (2012, p. 303) notes, the model is not intended for the sequential application of classroom procedures following the clockwise direction.

Learner-centredness and the promotion of autonomous learning are established didactic-methodical principles of contemporary teaching, while multilingual didactics and tertiary-language didactics make targeted use of the learners' existing knowledge and prior experiences. Given the older adults' typically ample and diverse prior experiences and knowledge, as well as their learning characteristics, educational needs and barriers and considering the modern didactic-methodical principles of action orientation and task orientation, geragogical foreign-language didactics should be founded on the principles of tertiary-language didactics. The Four-Strands Model offers a way to simultaneously implement cognitive learning (as a principle of tertiary-language didactics) and plurilingual orientation, action orientation and task orientation (as contemporary didactic-methodical principles) through its four domains: work with meaningful content, work with language forms, meaningful expression and fluency training (Funk et al., 2014). Based on these concepts, we propose the following guidelines for teaching older adults foreign languages (they will be refined through further research):

1. Before starting instruction with an older adult group, administer a questionnaire on their prior knowledge or create learning biographies or language profiles during one of the first joint meetings.
2. Consider potential barriers for older adults, especially hearing and vision difficulties; ensure proper lighting and acoustics, clear audio recordings and, for written materials, use sans-serif fonts of appropriate size with increased line spacing.
3. Effective foreign-language teaching for older adults involves engaging cognitive processes while also providing sufficient repetition to support automatisisation.
4. Introduce situations that confirm learning success (e.g., initial vocabulary learning connected to both the target and previously learned languages; new structures practiced initially in a protected mode to avoid errors).
5. Allocate sufficient time for each activity in the lesson, avoiding time pressure.
6. Frequently employ collaborative teaching methods, such as pair and group work, to encourage interaction among the learners.
7. Allow the learners to participate in the selection of topics and contents, facilitating their co-design of the programme.
8. Sensitise educators planning to work with older adults to the characteristics, learning motivations, barriers and advantages of this target group.

## Conclusion

The limited number of studies on the motivations of older adults to participate in language courses in Slovenia, most of which were conducted in the previous decade, highlights the need for further research and development in this field, as language courses are among the most widely offered areas of education for older adults that are provided by various institutions. Literature review also indicates a lack of both quantitative and qualitative research on the motives and barriers of older adults with regard to enrolling in language courses across Europe. Psychological and sociological factors, which directly or indirectly influence older adults' participation in language courses, should not be overlooked and are equally important to explore in the Slovenian context. Relying on a review of selected sources, this paper aimed to address part of the gap between the diverse educational offerings available and awareness of the barriers and actual needs of older adults, specifically in relation to the planning and implementation of foreign-language teaching for this target group.

Since older adults typically possess rich and diverse prior knowledge and experiences, which significantly enhance the effectiveness of foreign-language learning, it is crucial to actively incorporate these resources into language instruction for this group. Multilingual and tertiary-language didactics rely on the learners' existing linguistic knowledge and experiences. When combined with an understanding of older adults' learning characteristics, educational needs and potential barriers, as well as with contemporary didactic and methodological principles such as action and task orientation, these approaches provide a strong foundation for the development of geragogical foreign-language didactics. Building on these insights, we have developed a set of guidelines for teaching older adults foreign languages, which will be further refined through future research.

The educator plays a central role in the geragogical didactics of foreign languages. As both the planner and facilitator of language programmes, the educator must be adequately prepared to work with older adults; this includes understanding their characteristics, learning motivations, barriers and the advantages of learning in later life. To achieve this, geragogical foreign-language didactics should be integrated into teacher education programmes for future language instructors, while practicing educators should have access to continuing professional development programmes tailored to this target group.

Despite the wide availability of language courses for older adults offered by various institutions in Slovenia, little is known about the (geragogical) didactic approaches employed by educators in these courses. Further research will contribute significantly to establishing comprehensive guidelines for the high-quality

teaching of older adults in light of the emerging geragogical didactics of foreign languages and will help address their educational needs more effectively within the available language courses.

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