



## **AGE AND LANGUAGE LEARNING - HOW TO TRAIN THE AGING BRAIN**

*Vesna Kovačević<sup>1</sup>*

**Summary:** *What exactly is the relationship between age and language learning? There are numerous myths and misconceptions about the relative abilities or inabilities of language learners of different ages. Adults may learn even more efficiently than children. Furthermore, there is no loss of language ability or language learning ability over time. Age is not a detriment to language learning, and by all accounts, learning a second (third etc) language keeps the older language learners' mind active. People of all ages can benefit from learning languages. When we talk about older adults researches have shown that there is no decline in the ability to learn as people get older; the age is not a major factor in language acquisition; the context in which adults learn is the major influence and older adults can be good foreign language learners. Here, we are going to discuss four main issues: Aging and learning ability, Older learner stereotypes, Age related factors in language learning, Classroom practices and How to train aging brain*

**Key words:** *age, learning, brain, foreign languages, train*

## **STAROSNA DOB I UČENJE (STRANOG) JEZIKA**

**Rezime:** *Kakva je tačno veza između starosnog doba i učenja jezika? Ima brojnih mitova nerazumevanja o mogućnostima i nemogućnostima koje postoje vezano za učenje jezika u različitim životnim dobima. Odrasle osobe mogu da nauče strani jezik čak sa boljim rezultatima nego deca. Sta više, nema gubitka sposobnosti da se nauči jezik što je čovek stariji. Starosna dob nije prepreka za učenje stranog jezika, i posebno učenje drugog (ili trećeg) stranog jezika održava um aktivnim u svakom pogledu. Ljudi svih starosnih doba samo mogu da imaju koristi od učenja stranih jezika. Istraživanja su pokazala da ne postoji opadanje sposobnosti za učenje stranih jezika sa godinama; godine nisu glavni faktor kod usvajanja znanja iz oblasti jezika - već kontekst u kome odrasle osobe usvajaju znanja iz oblasti jezika ima najveći uticaj na učenje, tako da i starije osobe svakako mogu da budu uspešne u učenje stranih jezika. Ovde ćemo razmatrati 4 glavne oblasti: Starosna dob i sposobnost učenja, Stereotipi vezani za učenje odraslih osoba, Faktori koji su povezani sa starosnom dobi i učenjem jezika, Prikladan način rada u učionici sa starijim osobama i Kako vežbati mozak koji stari.*

**Ključne reči:** *starosno doba, učenje, mozak, strani jezici, trening*

---

<sup>1</sup> Vesna Kovačević, B.A., ESP teacher, Technical faculty, Čačak, University of Kragujevac, Serbia,  
E-mail: [nucleus@eunet.rs](mailto:nucleus@eunet.rs)

## 1. INTRODUCTION

What exactly is the relationship between age and language learning? There are numerous myths and misconceptions about the relative abilities or inabilities of language learners of different ages. Adults may learn more efficiently than children. Furthermore, there is no loss of language ability or language learning ability over time. Age is not a detriment to language learning, and by all accounts, learning a second (third, etc.) language actually keeps the older language learners mind active. People of all ages can benefit from learning languages. When we talk about older adults researches have shown that there is no decline in the ability to learn as people get older; the age is not a major factor in language acquisition; the context in which adults learn is the major influence and older adults can be good language learners.

- Here, we are going to consider 5 main issues:
- Aging and learning ability
- Older learner stereotype
- Age related factors in language learning
- Classroom practice
- How to train aging brain

## 2. AGING AND LEARNING ABILITY

**MENTAL WORKOUT** – Keeping the mind active is as important as physical workouts. Research has proved that learning foreign languages is one of the most effective ways of giving your self a mental workout. It helps the brain form new connections among nerves. Research has also shown that these persons who study foreign languages score higher in many other skills.

**MEMORY AND COGNITION** – Learning foreign languages improves memory and cognitive abilities. You can lead an active life well into old age and keep diseases like Alzheimer's at bay. Since learning foreign languages involve memorizing thousands of new words and sentence patterns, you can benefit a lot from it. Recent scientific research has proven that bilingualism can slow down the aging by boosting brain performance and particularly delay the onset of dementia or A's by five years on average. Bilingual people are found to be able to cope with the disease for longer. The more the brain is stimulated, the better the cognitive reserve gets and manages to keep you going for longer. Regular switching between two languages seems to do exactly that – strengthen your brain potential.

Learning foreign languages should be considered as a life-long component of our daily exercise. As the human body begins its natural decline in old age, bilinguals seem to maintain better cognitive function.

In terms of starting language learning in middle or old age, the likelihood of becoming truly fluent in a new tongue is low, but it seems the every little bit helps in preventing cognitive decline. Some researches show that:

- There is no decline in the ability to learn as people get older;
- Except for minor considerations such as hearing and vision loss, the age is not an

obstacle in language acquisition;

- The context in which adults learn is the major influence on their ability to acquire the new language.

The greatest obstacle to older adult language learning is the doubt – in the minds of both learner and teacher – that older adults can learn a new language. Adults actually learn languages more quickly than children in the early stages. Studies on aging have demonstrated that learning ability does not decline with age. Adults learn differently from children, but no age-related differences in learning ability have been demonstrated for adults of different ages.

### **3. OLDER LEARNER STEREOTYPE**

**Can an old brain learn, and then remember what it learns?**

**Is this old brain that should be in ‘school’?**

Over the past several years, scientists have looked deeper into how brains age and confirmed that they continue to develop through and beyond middle age.

Many long held views, including the one that 40% of brain cells are lost, have been overturned. The brain as it traverses middle age gets better at recognizing central idea, the big picture. More recent research in neurology has demonstrated that language learning in childhood and adulthood are different because of developmental differences in the brain; **IN IMPORTANT RESPECTS ADULTS HAVE SUPERIOR LANGUAGE LEARNING CAPABILITIES**. The advantage for adults is that neural cells responsible for higher-order linguistic processes such as understanding semantic relations and grammatical sensitivity develop with age. Especially in the areas of vocabulary and language structure, adults are actually better language learners than children. Older learners have more highly developed cognitive systems, are able to make higher order associations and generalizations, and can integrate new language input with their already substantial learning experience. They also rely on long-term memory rather than the short-term memory function used by children and young learners.

If kept in good shape, the brain continue to build pathways that help its owner recognize patterns and, as a consequence, see significance and solutions much faster than a young person can.

The trick is finding ways to keep brain connections in good condition and to grow more of them.

‘The brain is plastic and continues to change, not in getting bigger but allowing for greater complexity and deeper understanding’ says professor at St. Mary’s College of California. As adults we may not always learn quite as fast, we are set up for the next developmental step.

### **4. AGE RELATED FACTORS IN LANGUAGE LEARNING**

Health is an important factor in all learning, and many chronic diseases can affect the ability of the elderly to learn. HEARING LOSS affects many people as they age and can affect a person’s ability to understand speech, especially in the presence of the background

noise. VISUAL ACQUITY also decreases with age. (Hearing and vision problems are not restricted exclusively to the older learner, however.) It is important that the classroom environment compensate for visual or auditory impairments by combining audio input with visual presentation of new material, good lighting, and elimination of outside noise.

## 5. CLASSROOM PRACTICES

Certain language teaching methods may be inappropriate for older adults. (Methods which rely primarily on good auditory discrimination or oral drills and memorization which rely on short-term memory, speed and fast-paced drills and competitive exercises and activities may not be successful with the older learner) The adult learns best not by rote, but by integrating new concepts and material into already existing cognitive structures.

Three ways in which teachers can make modifications in their programs to encourage the older adult language learner include eliminating affective barriers, making the material relevant and motivating, and encouraging the use of adult learning strategies.

Affective factors such as motivation and self-confidence are very important in language learning. Many older learners fear failure more than their counterparts, maybe because they accept the stereotype of the older person as a poor language learner or because of previous unsuccessful attempts to learn a foreign language. When such learners are faced with a stressful, fast-paced learning situation, fear of failure only increases. The older person may also exhibit greater hesitancy in learning. Thus, teachers must be able to reduce anxiety and build self-confidence in the learner.

Class activities which provide opportunities for learners to work together, focusing on understanding rather than producing language, and reducing the focus on error correction can build learners' self-confidence and promote language learning. Teachers should emphasise the positive focus on the good progress learners are making and provide opportunities for them to be successful. This success can be reinforced with more of the same.

Older adults studying a foreign language are usually learning it for a specific purpose: to be more effective professionally, to be able to survive in an anticipated foreign situation, or of other instrumental reasons. They are not willing to tolerate boring or irrelevant content or lessons that stress the learning of grammar rules out of context. Adult learners need materials designed to present structures and vocabulary that will be of immediate use to them, in a context which reflects the situations and functions they will encounter when using the new language. Materials and activities that do not incorporate real life experiences will succeed with few older learners.

Older adults have already developed learning strategies that have served them well in other contexts. They can use these strategies to their advantage in language learning, too. Teachers should be flexible enough to allow different approaches to the learning task inside the classroom. Effective adult language learning/training programs are those that use materials that provide an interesting and comprehensible message, delay speaking practice and emphasize the development of listening comprehension, tolerate speech errors in the classroom, and include aspects of culture and non-verbal language use in the instructional program. This creates a classroom atmosphere which supports the learner and builds confidence.

Teaching older adults should be a pleasurable experience. Their self-directedness, life experience, independence as learners, and motivation to learn provide them with advantages in language learning.

## **6. HOW TO TRAIN AGING BRAIN**

The adult's maturely-developed brain has the superior ability to understand the relationship between semantic and grammar. The adult's brain is more mature in its ability to absorb vocabulary, grammar structures, and to make more 'higher order' generalizations and associations. The adult learner's better developed brain is better at putting together all the pieces with a more developed long – term memory. As adults have brain pathways built up, they need to look at their insights critically – that is the best way to learn and train your brain and remain sharp.

Researches have shown that education often has compensatory features for older learners e.g. making up for missed opportunities; meeting people and maintaining or developing social contacts. Many people attend language learning courses simply to have their brain stimulated, a process in which language learning is seemingly effective.

Scientists claim that there is a place for information, but older adult learners need to move beyond the stuff they already know and challenge the perception of the world, wrestle with established brain connections and scientists also say that such stretching is what best keeps a brain in tune: advice is -get out of the comfort zone to push and nourish your brains – learn a foreign language!

**‘IT’S NOT THE YEARS IN LIFE THAT COUNT, IT’S THE LIFE’**

**‘IT’S IMPORTANT TO HAVE A TWINKLE IN YOUR WRINKLE.’**

## **7. REFERENCES**

- [1] <http://www.> Old age and learning
- [2] <http://www.> Aging and learning
- [3] <http://www.> How age affects learning
- [4] <http://www.> Age and language learning
- [5] <http://www.> The relationship between age and learning ability
- [6] <http://www.> Age-related declines in general cognitive abilities
- [7] <http://www.> Cognitive benefits of language learning
- [8] <http://www.> The science of aging brains
- [9] <http://www.> How to train aging brains