

Developing motivation in the foreign language classroom among senior learners

Rozwijanie motywacji osób starszych w klasie językowej

Key words: senior, language learning, motivation, lifelong learning, senior education.

Abstract. The world is aging and life expectancy is extending among world societies. These phenomena undoubtedly create new challenges and result in transformation of the world as we know it. One of the spheres that needs a new approach is education which has to adjust to senior learners who are over 55 years old. Lifelong learning is not a new concept, as it originates from ancient Greece. However, new type of students require new approach and modifications in the educational process. For senior learners education often has compensatory features, e.g. making up for missed opportunities; meeting people and maintaining or developing social contacts. Many seniors attend education in older age simply to have their brain stimulated. Furthermore, older learners may have already developed learning strategies that have served them well in other contexts. The article presents the concept of lifelong learning and selected issues related with senior education in foreign language learning context. The study included in the article aimed at investigating motivational and demotivational factors in senior education. The obtained results point to affective (e.g. anxiety, self-esteem) and social (e.g. opinion of other learners, public performance) factors as the dominating factors in motivational process.

Słowa kluczowe: senior, uczenie się języka, motywacja, uczenie się przez całe życie, edukacja seniorów.

Streszczenie. Świat dookoła nas się starzeje, a średnia długość życia zwiększa się w wielu krajach na całym świecie. Te zjawiska niewątpliwie stwarzają nowe wyzwania i wymuszają transformację świata, jaki dzisiaj znamy. Jedną ze sfer, która wymaga zmian, jest edukacja, która musi dostosować się do seniorów (55+). Co prawda uczenie się przez całe życie nie jest całkowicie nowym konceptem, ponieważ mówiono o nim już w starożytnej Grecji. Jednakże, nowy rodzaj uczenia wymaga nowego podejścia i modyfikacji w procesie edukacyjnym. Dla seniorów edukacja ma często charakter kompensacyjny, nadrabianie straconych okazji, spotkanie nowych osób, podtrzymywanie społecznych kontaktów. Wielu seniorów rozpoczyna naukę dla lepszej stymulacji mózgu. Co więcej, starsi uczniowie prawdopodobnie wykształcili strategie uczenia się, które pozwalają im radzić sobie efektywnie w innych kontekstach. Artykuł opisuje pojęcie uczenia się przez całe życie i wybrane aspekty uczenia się seniorów w kontekście nauki

języka obcego. Badanie przedstawione w artykule skupiało się na czynnikach motywacyjnych i demotywacyjnych w edukacji seniorów. Uzyskane wyniki wskazują na afektywne (lęk językowy, pewność siebie) i społeczne (opinia innych uczestników, publiczne wystąpienie) czynniki, które mają decydujący wpływ na proces motywacyjny.

Introduction. As Jaroszewska (2013) writes in the introduction to her monograph: „since the end of the second world war, modern Europe has been constantly evolving” (p. 10). A phenomenon which is closely related to the evolution of our continent and brings about deep transformations in almost every sphere of our existence, is the continuous aging of the European societies (Thieme, 2008; Kowalewski and Szukalski, 2008; Weinke, 2009; Jaroszewska, 2011a). A similar opinion has been presented by Giannakouris (2008), according to whom, ageing is one of the greatest social and economic challenges to European societies in the 21st century. It will not only affect all Member States, but it will also intersect nearly all European Union policy domains. By 2025 more than 20% of Europeans will be 65 or over that age, with a particularly rapid increase in the number of citizens over 80 years old. Life expectancy at birth is over 80 now in thirty-three countries. Japan has an older population of more than 30 per cent, however, by 2050, 64 countries are expected to join Japan with an older population of more than 30 per cent (<http://www.helpage.org/silo/files/ageing-in-the-21st-century>). In one of the documents, issued by the United Nations, one can read that: „with one in nine persons in the world aged 60 years or over, projected to increase to one in five by 2050, population ageing is a phenomenon that we can no longer ignore”. Furthermore, increasing longevity needs to be perceived as one of the humanity’s greatest achievements and the opportunities that a socially and economically active, secure and healthy ageing population can bring to society, seem to be infinite.

It has important and far-reaching implications for all aspects of society since around the world, two people celebrate their sixtieth birthday every second – an annual total of almost 58 million sixtieth birthdays. One of the social domains influenced by these changes is undoubtedly education which today has been presented with new challenges such as how to adapt older generations to new, dynamic living conditions. What is more, since the world around us is becoming smaller due to technological inventions, elder members of the society should be provided with the opportunity to develop their intercultural, linguistic, as well as technological competences. These competences are the foundation for intercultural dialogue, which with time, transformed from political statement into indispensable and anticipated dimension of contemporary reality (Jaroszewska, 2013).

Keeping the above in mind, it seems natural to assume that educational institutions which aim at teaching senior students (55+ years old or retired) need to address their courses to the exact target group that is probably not aiming to get a degree or to improve their career opportunities. Therefore, such approach requires application of different methodologies and creating specially designed courses, activities and materials. If one assumes that the main aim of senior education is to increase senior learners' well-being

and quality of life, teaching should be perceived as a socio-educational activity where more formal, non-formal and informal activities are blended. The knowledge students acquire is important, but other skills, attitudes and aims should not be forgotten such as socialization, integration with society, active citizenship, etc. (Escuder-Mollon and Esteller-Curto, 2013, pp. 7–8). A similar opinion is presented by Berndt (2000), who claims that foreign language education often has compensatory features for older learners, e.g. making up for missed opportunities; meeting people and maintaining or developing social contacts. Many seniors attend in older age simply to have their brain stimulated.

The concept of lifelong learning. The philosophy of learning throughout life is anything but modern since „ancient societies all over the world have emphasized the need to learn from the cradle to the grave” (Medel-Añonuevo, Ohsako and Mauch, 2001). Lifelong learning was firmly embodied in the works of the ancient Greeks, such as Plato and Aristotle, who described a process of learning for philosophers which extended over a lifetime. The Greek notion of a *paideia* comprised the development of dispositions and capabilities which motivated a person to permanent scholarship. However, within the context of the Greek philosophers, lifelong learning was reserved for the elite social class and it was not associated with occupation or 'making a living', but rather with the engagement in philosophic speculative inquiry. Furthermore, Plato recommended that every adolescent should study mathematics as groundwork for abstract thinking. Moreover, he felt the study of philosophy might best begin at about the age of fifty. Down through the ages, the idea that the person would be self-motivated to seek a life of continuous learning and would be empowered to be his or her own teacher has been a theme among a long line of educational thinkers and reformers (Bosco, 2007, p. 3).

A similar approach to obtaining knowledge and experience may be found in ancient Japan where in 1716, Yamamoto Tsunetomo wrote *Hagakure – the code of the samurai*. It is a manual which consists of a series of short anecdotes and reflections for the samurais. One of the entries in that book reads:

A certain swordsman in his declining years said the following: “In one’s life, there are levels in the pursuit of study. In the lowest level, a person studies but nothing comes of it, and he feels that both he and others are unskillful. At this point he is worthless. In the middle level he is still useless but is aware of his own insufficiencies and can also see the insufficiencies of others. In a higher level he has pride concerning his own ability, rejoices in praise from others. This man has worth. In the highest level a man has the look of knowing nothing. These are the levels in general. But there is one transcending level, and it is the most excellent of all. This person is aware of the endlessness of entering deeply into a certain Way and never thinks of himself as having finished. He truly knows his insufficiencies and never thinks that he has succeeded. Throughout your life advance daily, becoming more skillful than yesterday, more skillful than today. This is never-ending (Tsunetomo, 1716).

Three centuries have passed and today lifelong learning has become a worldwide issue. In 1990 Japan established the *Promotion of Lifelong Learning Law and a National Learning Council*. In 1996, the Organization for Economic Cooperation and Development (OECD) initiated a research and development program which was intended to make lifelong learning a reality for all and in UNESCO's International Commission on Education for the 21st Century made lifelong learning its core unifying theme. In June of 2006, at a Moscow meeting of education ministers held in conjunction with the Russian presidency of the G8, the ministers issued a communiqué with 18 points, one of which focuses specifically on the need to develop comprehensive systems of lifelong learning, from early childhood through adulthood (Bosco, 2007, p. 3).

Medel-Añonuevo et al. (2001) state that in the beginning of the 21st century European Union (EU) and its member states, the Organization of Economic Cooperation and Development (OECD) and even the World Bank advocate the need to learn throughout life. Given their ideological, political and economic dominance vis-à-vis the rest of the world, it is not surprising that they are gaining adherents in other regions of the world. Asian countries have followed this line of thinking and have developed modern policy discourses on lifelong learning, transforming in the process their own traditional philosophies (e.g., Confucianism, Buddhism) which have for centuries promoted continuous learning. The predominantly economic interpretation of lifelong learning in the last ten years, however, has become problematic for many educators and practitioners who have come forward with such terms as *Lifelong (L) Earning* and *Learning to Earn* as their succinct criticism of the way the term is being promoted. What is understandable, is that the context of lifelong learning has changed significantly and necessary guiding and organizing principle of education reforms need to be introduced. It is recognized today as an indispensable tool to enable education to face its multiple current and emerging challenges. As information and communication technologies (ICTs) infuse our societies and communities, the role of the individual learner is highlighted. Globalization has produced outcomes and processes which make the learning of new skills and competencies of paramount importance. In the past, however, a more holistic interpretation of lifelong learning has been promoted, as can be seen in the Faure Report: *Learning to Be*, from 1972. These report sought to institutionalize the concept of lifelong education, advocated for the right and necessity of each individual to learn for his/her social, economic, political and cultural development (Medel-Añonuevo, Ohsako and Mauch, 2001).

The above mentioned report acknowledged the existence of lifelong education practices in diverse cultures and emphasized that lifelong education needs to be enshrined as the basic concept in educational policies. The authors of the Faure Report claimed that every person must have the opportunity to keep learning throughout his or her life. Furthermore, the concept of lifelong learning should be seen as the keystone of every learning society as it encompasses every aspect of education, embraces everything in it, with the whole being more than the sum of its parts. For the authors of the report lifelong learning is not just an educational system but „the principle in which the over-all

organization of a system is founded, and which accordingly underlies the development of each of its component parts” (Medel-Añonuevo, Ohsako and Mauch, 2001, p. 2).

Recent research has shown the importance of lifelong learning (as a psychosocial activity) for better quality of life. Learning can be seen as an activity that keeps individuals active, but also enables them to increase their creativity, personal development, personal skills and life satisfaction. Lifelong learning is therefore a powerful tool that is frequently part of the personal development dimension (Shalock and Verdugo, 2002). It promotes the development of knowledge and competences that will enable adaptation to the knowledge-based society and also valuing all forms of learning. Lifelong learning concerns acquiring and updating all kinds of abilities, interests, knowledge and qualifications from the pre-school years to post retirement (Soni, 2012).

Senior language education. According to Nizegorodcew (2016), the strengths and weaknesses of senior learners with respect to foreign language relearning “(...) depend not only, and not primarily on how old they are, but on their study objectives” (p. 90). When it comes to foreign language education, it seems that the greatest impediment to senior language learning may be the doubt that older adults can learn a new language. Such thought may exist in the mind of the teacher and the learner as well. Most people may follow a well-known concept that the younger the learner is the better. However, studies comparing the rate of second language acquisition in children and adults have shown that although children may have an advantage in achieving native-like fluency in the long run, adults actually learn languages more quickly than children in the early stages (e.g. Krashen, Long, and Scarcella, 1979). These studies indicate that attaining a working ability to communicate in a new language may actually be easier and more rapid for the adult than for the child. Studies on aging have demonstrated that learning ability does not decline with age. If older people remain healthy, their intellectual abilities and skills do not decline. Adult learners learn differently from children, but no age-related differences in learning ability have been demonstrated for adults of different ages (Schlepppegrell, 1987). However, if one decides to compare older learners with their younger counterparts some advantages of senior learners may emerge such as:

They may be able to plot their new language on to concepts about the world which they already possess from their first language. This can help greatly in vocabulary acquisition, c.f. Ausubel, 1964, and in making inferences as to meaning. Younger learners by contrast may have to acquire these concepts as well as learn how to express them in both their first and their additional languages.

They may be more experienced in handling the discourse of conversations and other language activities, and thus may be more adept at gaining feedback from native speakers or teachers and in negotiating meaning (e.g. Scarcella and Higa, 1982).

They are likely to have acquired a wider range of strategies for learning, e.g. note-taking, use of reference materials, searching for underlying pattern. This, allied to their established literacy in their first language, may help them become more efficient learners.

They may have a clearer sense of why they are learning an additional language and may therefore be able to work purposefully towards objectives of their own choosing. (Johnstone, 2002, p. 12).

Study. Contradicting the existing stereotypes, seniors can be successful language learners. Unfortunately, one major obstacle that hinders them from taking up language education is their low self-esteem concerning their learning abilities. Obviously, old age carries some limitations, which may be overcome by proper adaptation of classroom context. Furthermore, positive classroom atmosphere has fundamental significance on the learners' self-confidence and their willingness to participate actively in the foreign language process. Such statement undoubtedly concerns senior learners. Therefore, senior language learners should learn in a friendly and anxiety-reducing environment. They should feel continuous support and trust from the foreign language teachers throughout the whole foreign language process.

Aim of the study. Having said the above, the predominant aim of the study was to find out more about motivational and demotivational factors which have direct or indirect influence on senior learners' efficient learning process.

Participants. The participants of the study were 7 learners, 5 females and 2 males, recruited on a voluntary basis from two groups attending courses in English as a foreign language. They were enrolled in the first semester and were taught by two teachers of English, who differed considerably with respect to their experience in teaching English. All of the participants could be described as 'senior language learners' taking into account the criteria adopted for the purpose of this study (i.e., 55 years of age or older), with the precise breakdown being the following: three learners between the ages of 55 and 60, two students between the ages of 61 and 65, and one student at the age of 67. As regards to their education, five participants claimed to have graduated from a university and two participants claimed to have graduated from a university. When it comes to their command of the target language, they self-assessed themselves with the average of 2.6 on a six-point scale which may indicate that they were not very confident about their command of English. The participants were also asked whether they knew languages other than English, with four of them pointing to Russian, which should not be surprising since learning of Russian had been mandatory when they had been attending primary and secondary school. Two learners mentioned French and four German.

Instruments and procedures. The data were collected during two group interviews conducted during the period of one week. Each of the interviews lasted ninety minutes and has not been recorder due to the participants' negative feedback. During both interviews the researcher could only make notes. Although, participation in both interviews was completely voluntary all the senior learners attended each of them. Furthermore, for the convenience of the participants the interviews have been conducted in Polish and did

not have any fixed format; therefore, the participants could freely express their opinions. In the preliminary stage of each discussion the researcher initiated a general exchange of ideas and after some time the discussion was directed towards the topic of motivation. Sometimes the exchange of the opinions was stimulated by the researcher who asked general questions, such as: 'What motivates or demotivates you to study?' or 'What motivates you to study English?'. However, the participants have been very active and the interviews did not require frequent interventions. No other instruments apart from interviews have been used during the study due to the reluctance of the senior learners who explicitly refused to fill in questionnaires, be observed, or write journals.

Results and discussion. When the senior students were asked about their motives for joining the third age university and starting their education all over again they pointed to social factors such as their family members' encouragement, the chance to leave the house for few hours and meet people in their age, introducing changes in their lives, as well as, general change in their lifestyle. These answers are mirroring those that were uncovered in previously conducted studies (i.e., Jaroszewska, 2013; Niżegorodcew, 2016).

Additionally, the obtained results clearly indicate that the participants did not pursue any specific, clearly-defined aims in learning English. Senior students most often expressed the opinion that learning English was predominantly considered as a hobby and stressed the fact that it constituted a way of staying active and mentally agile, practicing their memory and developing new skills. Majority of the respondents pointed to social factors as those which were considered as the most motivating for them while deciding to participate in a language course („I have contact with other people. I made new friends”). These factors included having family members abroad and the possibility to travel abroad with skills allowing to communicate effectively with members of other cultures („I managed do get by during my trip to the USA. I am proud of myself”). Other participants claimed that they always wanted to learn English or expressed the necessity to know English as lingua franca of the contemporary world. However, there were also answers related to the course itself such as: high level of classes or friendly and well prepared teacher. Among other, course related motivating factors, the respondents pointed to friendly atmosphere, appraisal from the teacher or other students, as well as well written test. Furthermore, some senior students emphasized the significance of socio-affective issue such as cooperation with other students as a motivating factor.

However, almost every participant taking part in the study talked about the feeling of satisfaction and fulfillment resulting from foreign language learning. Some of their opinions are presented below:

„I didn't believe I could learn a language at my age. I am motivated and I already know a lot”.

„Assuming that I had contact with English in such an advanced age I consider myself to be successful and not give up my language learning”.

„I took up a challenge and I signed up for the course, met new people. Now I feel great”.

„I feel younger because I am still studying and I made new friends”.

„I overcame my weaknesses and met new people my age”.

Overcoming personal apprehensions and increase of self confidence seem to be prevailing motives among senior learners who want to prove to themselves and others that they are still competent enough to successfully embark on new educational challenges. In these comments one can easily detect joy and satisfaction resulting from the fact that seniors are still proficient members of the society. Unfortunately, the written text does not show the mimics and the tone of the voice which was present during interviews with senior learners. When commenting on their achievements, senior learners were explicitly satisfied and their faces and voices were full of delight and happiness. The reason for such contentment stemming from participating in educational process may result from the fact that in contemporary, European societies it has become common to distinguish emotional and social loneliness (Drennan et al., 2008; Dykstra and Fokkema, 2007). Following Weiss (1973), emotional loneliness is missing an intimate attachment, such as a marital partner, and is accompanied by feelings of desolation and insecurity, and of not having someone to turn to. Therefore, the problem of social loneliness and lacking a wider circle of friends and acquaintances may be overcome by joining educational process which can provide a sense of belonging, of companionship and of being a worthy member of a community.

The respondents also pointed to demotivating factors in their English language learning, such as the most often mentioned during the interviews, too fast pace of the lesson and too many words to memorize. These answers seem not to be surprising since the cognition of people is fully developed at the age of 25 and from middle-age it starts to decline. All aspects related with cognition demonstrate losses with similar trajectories as people age. Furthermore, serious decline in memory functions is usually a sign of a distinct dementia and depression. Therefore, senior learners should know that their memory skills can be exercised and their activities should be adjusted to their motivation and positive learning atmosphere. The optimal level of cognition requires enough sleep, a good level of nutrition and physical exercise (Suutama, 2010).

Additional demotivating factors such as 'mistakes made in the presence of other students' and 'being the only student who does not comprehend' seemed to be interconnected with the students' anxiety caused by the way they are perceived by others. Since language learning is predominantly associated with social context it seems natural that senior students are anxious when their positive public image is being threatened. This further depends on their self-perception and whether they see themselves as active designers of their own environment or as powerless victims of their fate (Schmidt, 2010; Friebe & Schmidt-Hertha, 2013). Finally, the respondents pointed to situations during which they have to speak English in front of the other students in the group or during language tests.

Conclusions. Contradictory to some existing stereotypes, senior learners can not only successfully participate in a foreign language learning process, but maybe even more importantly, increase their self-esteem, make new friends, develop a sense of belonging, and prove themselves capable of achieving personal goals. Seniors are efficient foreign language learners provided they are surrounded by friendly and supportive atmosphere. Therefore, educators should pay attention to affective factors while working with senior learners. Positive reinforcement and constant support may result in increased participation and well-being of the senior learners. Learners should be encouraged to freely express their opinions, since their experience and knowledge of the outside world undoubtedly surpasses other age groups.

Educators working with senior learners should bear in mind that class activities should include large amounts of oral repetition, extensive pronunciation correction. Furthermore, providing opportunities for learners to work together, focusing on understanding rather than producing language, and reducing the focus on error correction can build senior learners' self-confidence and promote language learning. Educators need to emphasize the progress learners are making and provide opportunities for them to feel successful.

Finally, it needs to be remembered that senior learners have already developed efficient learning strategies that have been used in other contexts. Therefore, educators should be flexible enough to allow different approaches to the learning task inside the classroom. However, sometimes older learners with little formal education may need to be introduced to strategies for organizing information. At the same time, many successful strategies used by senior learners have been identified and may be incorporated into foreign language learning programs, in order to provide a wide range of possibilities for senior learners.

Having said that, it would be helpful to conduct more research on affective and cognitive strategies used by senior learners in educational context. The obtained data would provide a valuable insight into older learners behaviors and their approach towards themselves and the learning process. It seems also advisable to consider introducing changes in teacher training and devote more time to focus on senior education and adjusting the educational process to specific expectations of senior learners.

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