

University of the Third Age Older Adult English Language Courses During the Pandemic of COVID-19

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Abstract:

The pandemic of COVID-19 created unexpected challenge to the whole educational system and reintroduced the topic of distance learning and its importance. The society reacted to epidemiological restrictions in social contacts by transferring the education into the virtual space but older adult English language learners in general benefit from social contacts and are usually limited in digital skills.

The article analyses the situation in the Czech Universities of the Third Age (U3A) and their English language courses between March 2020 and July 2020. The text is based on literary review and questionnaires to the U3A organisers, and leads to the conclusion that the university of the third age older adult English language learners were left only with limited opportunities of their English language development at that time.

Key words: university of the third age older adult English language learner, distance learning, pandemic, COVID-19

Introduction

English as a second/foreign language (ESL/EFL) learning start moved closer to the birth to very early childhood despite the heated debate whether such shift is necessary to mastering English language successfully or not. The Critical Period Hypothesis by Penfield and Roberts (1960), reviewed by Lenneberg (1960) (both in Howatt and Widdowson, 2004) defined as “sharp decline in learning outcome with age” by Chiswick (in Chiswick and Miller, 2008) has not been proved or disproved.

Different life stages in connection to English language learning (ELL) are, however, researched not to the same extent. Especially some age groups are constantly left out or researched only marginally. The group which “suffers” from this lack of interest most, is the group of older adult English language learners. The problem lays in many aspects, one of them being the fact that older adults in many cases do not want to be labelled as old/older, do not see themselves as a separate group and therefore do not create the (necessary) pressure on experts to follow their needs specifically. Geragogy as a discipline of older adult education is still young in comparison to other areas of education research. English language methodology research combined with geragogy research does not exist, or is extremely scarce.

The pandemic of COVID-19 in 2020 brought new topics to the society and health care but also to education research, especially the topic of distance learning – its tools, effectivity, accessibility, and its necessity in the crisis periods. In general, distance learning is connected with digital literacy and that is the critical point for many older adults. Moreover, one of the huge benefits of learning in older adulthood is maintaining social contact, staying a part of a community, being socially active.

Research Methodology

The following text maps the Czech Universities of the Third Age (U3A) older adult English language courses during the pandemic of COVID-19, i.e. in the period between March 11th and ca June 2020, the period when schools (including universities) were closed down for face-to-face learning due to the epidemiological restrictions.

In the theoretical part the demographic situation of the world's population will be shown graphically in order to describe in numbers and in its importance the age group of older adults. Secondly, the older adult English language learner and the university of the third age older adult English language learner as specific target groups will be described, i.e. geragogy research findings will be combined with English language teaching (ELT) methodology findings for the specific type of older adult education which are the universities of the third age. Thirdly, the distance learning tools will be discussed.

The theory will be supported by empirical research among Czech U3As and their English language courses in which the answers to two questionnaires combined with interviews results and internet search will be reflected.

The research question asked is: *Were the university of the third age older adult English language learners left out from English language learning at the Czech U3As during the pandemic of COVID-19?*

Research Results

The demographics

The problem in specifying how numerous the group of older adult learners, older adult English language learners, or the university of the third age older adult English language learners is, lays firstly in unclear and diverse definition of being old, and in case of the U3As in varied entrance age. Some U3As accept people 50+. Not saying that 50+ means old but indicating how many people worldwide are discussed about, the following chart is depicted.

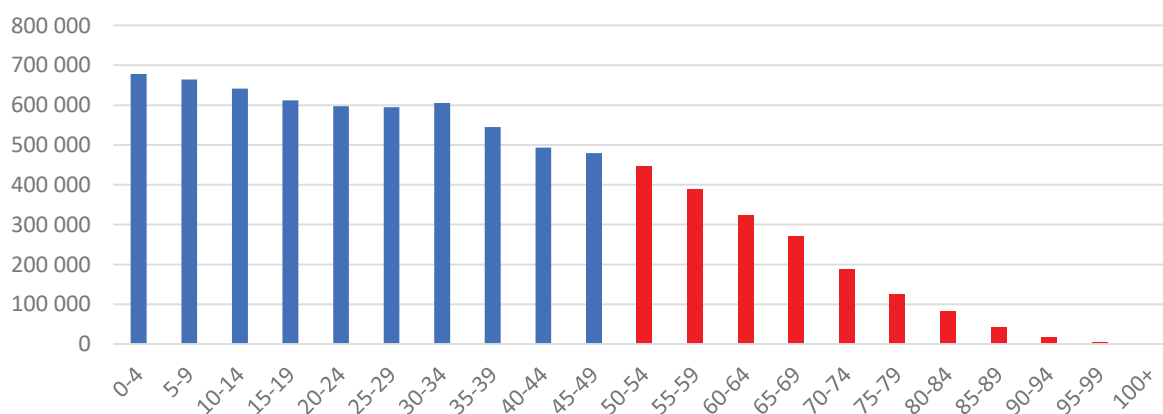


Fig. 1: Population in five-years age groups. Source: WHO (World Health Organisation), 2019

Data taken from the World Health Organisation (2019) show that in 2020 the prospects are 1, 833, 370 people over 50 out of 7, 794, 799, i.e. slightly over 24% of the world's population will be over 50 in 2020.

The target group – older adult English language learners

The number of potential older adult English language learners is even harder to define than the total numbers of older adults.

The other problem is that older adult foreign language learning/teaching and older adult English language learning/teaching is represented only scarcely in experts' literature. In Koutská (2015) the following texts are suggested: Gruneberg and Pascoe (1996), Hubenthal (2004), Joiner (1981), Kormos and Csizér (2008), Kürten et al. (2012), Mackey and Sachs (2012), Marinova-Todd et al. (2000), or Ondráková et al. (2012).

Other suggested texts can be Andrew (2012), Gabryś-Barker (2017), Gómez (2016), Mayo and Lecumberri (2003), Muoz (2006), Murad (2009), Neigert (2019), Singleton and Lengyel (1995), Singleton and Ryan (2004), or Thornton (1992).

As Šerák (2009) in Koutská (2020) says: *"The main characteristic of the age group is that there are big differences among its individual members... performance level and efficiency does get lower with age but these processes are highly individual. The efficiency normally cannot "vanish" completely. The deterioration is not irreversible, cognitive capacities can be trained and deterioration can be stopped or postponed, or an individual can improve their cognitive abilities."*

Ondráková et al. (2012) in Koutská (2015) (in English adapted by Koutská, 2020) sum up the specific aspects of foreign language learning as in Tab 1.

Tab. 1: *Specific aspects of learning in older adulthood*

area	example
performance	older adults need more time to fulfil a certain task but they tend to fulfil this task well
thinking	older adults use different parts of brain for learning a foreign language, they can have a higher ability to use abstraction and logical thinking; it takes longer to process information
concentration (span)	concentration is relatively easily distracted by excessive stimuli because older adults cannot filter these; they can have problems also with dividing and transferring concentration; the ability to concentrate, alertness and vigilance can be (does not have to be) lowered
memory	ageing has a negative impact on most memory functions; long-term memory and its function is relatively stable but the speed of information coming to mind is lowered, there are changes in short-term memory and therefore also in processing new learning content
ability to learn	there is no difference between younger and older people in their ability to learn, however, the reaction time is longer by older adults
spatial orientation	spatial orientation can get worse as well
learning strategy	older adults can master new learning strategies, but they tend to use such strategies that lead to “the only correct answer” and that subsequently leads to mistakes and stress as opposed to younger generations whose mistakes are usually caused by inaccurate estimate
motor skills	the speed of motor skill is lowered with age as well as the decision speed
vocabulary	vocabulary level stays relatively stable (most of the time)
motivation	the interior motivation is more involved in learning with age (children are more easily externally motivated)

Source: Ondráková et al. (2012) in Koutská (2015), English translation by Koutská (2020)

Looking more closely at specific aspects of foreign language learning, including English language learning at older adulthood, especially at the target group of the university of the third age older adult English language learners, the summary in Tab. 2 was done by Koutská (2015, 2020).

A similar chart can be drawn for language skills, see again Author (2015) – Tab. 3.

Tab. 2: Summary of chosen positive and negative factors in foreign language learning, including English language learning by older adults, especially the U3A participants – language system

aspect	advantages	disadvantages
all elements of a language system	life long experience and long experience with learning	mental, health and social situation
	possibility of having longer contact with the target language	negative interference (negative influence and use of the mother tongue)
	previous linguistic experience	negative perception of one's own abilities, especially the ability to learn, to remember; negative self-evaluation and self-perception
	deep routed grammar-translation method, or a habit to use/to be taught by indirect methods and drill activities, translation activities and extensive homework	
	the possibility to use dictionaries or reference books (knowledge of "how to use the reference books")	
	a high number of exercise types known (if digitally literate they can use also online exercises for homework)	
pronunciation	global change of the importance of the "correct" pronunciation towards intelligibility	articulatory organs are set and this can cause (in)ability to articulate foreign language phonemes
		speech disorders (inborn disorders, gained problems after e.g. a stroke, a vocal cords surgery, etc.)
		pathological ear (term by Zajícová, 2002) – the learner hears the foreign language through his/her mother tongue and interprets phonetic nuances on the basis of mother tongue rules
orthography	the ability to match graphic, orthographic and phonematic features with phonetic orthography grows with age	graphic, orthographic and phonematic features of the target language do not correspond with the mother tongue (especially with English where spelling is not phonetic)
	ability (and habit) to use printed materials	
(to be continued)		

Tab. 2: (continued)

grammar	abstract thinking ability (especially when the task is staged into smaller consecutive steps)	tendency to require “correct” knowledge and use of grammar
	possibility to use such grammar structures that are already known to the older adult language learner from previous learning experience or that are similar in the mother tongue	negative perception of grammar – seen as a potential for mistakes and stress factor (block while practice and production of grammar structure)
		extremely negative perception of one’s own ability to learn grammar (especially due to memory problems and deterioration)
		diagnosed but more often undiagnosed disorders (such as dysorthography) – current problems falsely attributed to age
vocabulary	content knowledge of many topics that enables better context vocabulary learning	too strict requirement for a literal translation, knowledge of every single vocabulary item
	better possibility to grasp concepts due to life long experience	vocabulary comes to mind slower and worse and therefore it is more difficult to revise the learnt
		negative perception of the ability to learn new vocabulary (especially due to declared memory problems and deterioration)
		fear of “unknown and ignorance” – worse ability to use compensation techniques
		problems to grasp different concepts (concepts that differ in the target language and culture and the mother tongue language and culture)

Source: Author (2015), English translation by the author in Author (2020).

Tab. 3: Summary of chosen positive and negative factors in foreign language learning, including English language learning by older adults, especially the U3A participants – language skills

aspect	advantages	disadvantages
all language skills	life long experience	physical, mental and social situation negative interference (negative use of the mother tongue)
	previous linguistic experience	
	the ability to anticipate the content (to build presumptions)	
	easier semantic analysis and comprehension (due to extensive content knowledge)	
	positive transfer (positive use of the mother tongue)	
listening	the possibility to use devices like hearing-aid	hearing quality deterioration
		hearing impairment
		lower ability to register foreign language phonemes
		lower ability to distinguish foreign language phonemes (especially minimal pairs)
		noise, worse acoustics and other disturbance can greatly influence the listening process
		pathological ear (see Zajícová, 2002) – filter based on the mother tongue according to which the learner hears and interprets the phonemes of the target language
speaking	strong motivation for oral production	articulatory organs are set for the mother tongue for a long time
		inability to articulate or having life long speech disorders and problems like stammering, mumbling, speaking with a lisp, suffer from rhoticism; the speech disorders and problems can be caused also by health problems like a stroke, etc.
		lower quality (and strength) of voice, phonation problems or respiratory problems
(to be continued)		

Tab. 3: (continued)

reading	individual working pace	eyesight problems and disorders
	the possibility to use dictionaries and reference books (knowledge of “how to use the reference books”)	insufficient lighting (too much light, too low light, uneven lighting)
	reading literacy gained through life long experience (learnt reading strategies)	the necessity to adjust texts graphically (bigger letters, clearer layout and design)
	advantage in learning languages with the same or similar letters	diagnosed and often undiagnosed dyslexia (general public knowledge about dyslexia was low in the past and people were often labelled as “stupid”)
	the ability to use devices or aids like glasses, magnifiers, etc.	identification problems with foreign language graphemes (and subsequently lower ability to recall the graphemes)
		detailed reading (literal translation, declared necessity to know every single word)
		problems with languages with a different type of system of writing
writing	individual working pace	eyesight problems and disorders
	the possibility to use dictionaries and reference books (knowledge of “how to use the reference books”)	insufficient lighting (too much light, too low light, uneven lighting)
	the possibility to use methods of their own choice (to compare, to consider, to judge, to choose and to use methods that old adult learners know/are used to work with)	diagnosed and often undiagnosed dysgraphia (general public knowledge about dysgraphia was low in the past and people were often labelled as “stupid”, specific educational needs were not reflected)
		problems with languages with a different type of system of writing

Source: Koutská (2015), English translation in Koutská (2020).

As said above many characteristics of the groups of older adult learners, older adult English language learners, respectively the university of the third age older adult English language learners are not valid for all its members, and the same applies for digital literacy.

The distance learning and older adult English language learners

Digital literacy is e.g. in Buckingham (2015) defined as *“a minimal set of skills that will enable the user to operate effectively with software tools, or in performing basic information retrieval tasks”*.

Williams (in Buckingham, 2015) proved that *“over half of the sample of adults was found to be at “entry level or below” (that is, not yet at Level 1) in terms of practical skills ... Level 1 defined as understanding of common ICT terminology; the ability to use basic features of software tools such as word-processors and spreadsheets; and the ability to save data, copy and paste, manage files, and standardise formats within documents.”* Study done by Livingstone (ibid) stressed that *“adults’ ability to use search engines for basic information retrieval, for example, is distinctly limited”*.

But as Martínez-Alcalá (in Martínez-Alcalá et al., 2018) emphasize *“as information and services are becoming more and more decentralized and they are often available in the cloud, an increasing number of older adults are expected to use Internet-based services.”*

Which is exactly what happened during the lockdown of schools due to the epidemiological restrictions caused by the pandemic of the coronavirus SARS-CoV-2. Learning moved to a virtual space because no contacts were allowed and there was a general expectation that this shift will be easy. The reality was different. Large groups of population were suddenly out of the schooling system due to many barriers (no computer, not enough computers – people on home office, no internet connection, not enough strong/fast internet connection, no/low digital skills, etc.).

The problems with distance learning for older adults, including older adult English language learners and the university of the third age older adult English language learners, are the same: (no/inappropriate) technology equipment (hardware, software, internet connection) and (lack of) digital literacy. Datta (in Datta et al., 2019) compared digital (i)literacy of India and Norway and identified the following problems for “bridging the digital divide” (term used by Datta et al., 2019, expressing digital literacy X digital illiteracy gap) and these are *“1) absence or lack of affordable smartphones and Internet access, 2) difficulty in navigating browser-based user interfaces, 3) inability to penetrate complex authentication processes and secure access to information, and 4) lack of locally relevant content and services in local languages”*.

On the other hand, with the technology tools everywhere older adults get highly motivated to use them and to learn how to use them, see e.g. González et al. (2015) who say: *“contrary to popular belief, older people respond positively to using computers, leading to favourable changes in their interests and confidence due to the recognition of these technologies as beneficial tools.”*

Martínez-Alcalá (in Martínez-Alcalá et al., 2018) define the main reasons for promoting digital literacy at the older adulthood as *“Promoting autonomy: older adults must be the protagonists of their own learning, and fostering social inclusion: the knowledge acquired should offer older adults the possibility of expanding communication channels through the web with their relatives and friends, either close or distant”*.

To sum up, the advantages of distance learning and ICT (Information and Communication Technology) use at the older adulthood are e.g. in Agudo-Prado et al. (2012) as follows: *“Both in normal aging and in exceptional cases, ICT allow us to design cognitive training programs relating language, attention, memory and reasoning, and specific programs for speech therapy. ICT enable interactivity and feedback, offer security to the users due to their consistency, and many possibilities for expansion through their versatility, allowing users to enjoy a wide variety of visual and auditory stimuli.”* Juncos, Pereiro and Facal (2006), see *ibid*, add *“that in the normal aging process access to computers and the Internet can contribute to the development of new social links, new windows on to the world and new tools of communication and activities of cognitive stimulation; it can also permit access to culture and permanent education and involvement in activities of social cooperation.”*

The summary done for the disadvantages of distance learning at older adulthood, the disadvantages can be grouped according to the following factors: (lack of high quality) technology equipment, digital (i)literacy, social contact loss, time, motivation loss, high demand on autonomy, or need for family support and help.

Some other barriers and limits can be found. These, however, should not be the reason not to move older adult education (including older adult English language courses, respectively the university of the third age older adult English language courses) to a virtual space, especially when some unpredicted situation occurs as it happened with the pandemic of the coronavirus SARS-CoV-2, spreading of COVID-19 and connected epidemiological restrictions in social contacts that lead to lockdown of schools.

Empirical research

The case study of the Czech U3As was chosen to illustrate whether the older adults were/were not left behind the English language learning opportunities during the time of schools/universities closure.

To find out whether the English language courses at the Czech U3As were organised despite the pandemic or not, in what form and with what evaluation and feedback from the participants a questionnaire was distributed online. The questions were either open questions, multiple-choice questions with one possible answer, or multiple-choice questions with several possible answers. (see <https://my.surveio.com/J705L706G4Q8K2N3H0V9/designer>). Another questionnaire (with open questions only) was set up by the Association of the Universities of the third age. The following data combine both questionnaires, interviews and internet search.

English language courses at the Czech U3As

Firstly, it is necessary to say that some U3As organise their courses under one department (one entry) and some by various departments/faculties/institutes/branches (several entries for one university). If public universities as a whole are counted, then 25 universities form the respondents. If individual entries are counted that 92 “institutions” form the respondents, out of which 19 answered the first questionnaire and 39 the AU3A (Association of the Universities of the third age) questionnaire. The rest of data comes from interviews and internet search (see resources for websites).

Secondly, out of 92 “institutions” only 5 do not organise courses specifically for older adults (U3A courses). Most of the “institutions” organise U3A courses, but only a small percentage organises English language courses. Out of 92 in total only 18 offer English language courses, so the number of researched U3As is relatively low.

The main positive aspects of participating in the U3As courses (English language courses included) published in Koutská (2015) which resulted from a questionnaire answered by 394 representatives were as in Tab. 4:

All statements above are valid for face-to-face as well as for distance teaching/learning but the extent is debatable (the advantages and disadvantages of distance learning for older adults discussed above).

English language courses at the Czech U3As during the pandemic

During lockdown of universities, i.e. during the period between March 11 and ca July 2020 when no face-to-face teaching was possible, 21 “institutions” out of 92 organised at least partially some U3A courses.

The English language courses were at least partially organised only by 2 of the above mentioned 18 “institutions” that organise English Language courses under normal circumstances. (For some the data is not known.)

Tab. 4: Positive aspects of participating in courses of U3As

statement	NA ¹	TA ²	average (ϕ)	ϕ 0–49 years	ϕ 50–54 years	ϕ 55–59 years	ϕ 60–74 years	ϕ 75–89 years
meaningful spending of leisure time	44	349	1,36	1,42	1,44	1,23	1,22	1,33
possibility to meet new people (gain new contacts/friends)	51	342	1,61	1,53	1,40	1,50	1,68	1,78
effective tool of further (life long) learning	53	340	1,81	1,87	1,76	1,70	1,56	1,56
possibility not to lose contact with current events/world	51	342	1,68	1,70	1,56	1,60	1,53	1,89
convenient routine	54	339	2,18	2,21	2,00	2,00	1,87	3,00

¹ – no answer; ² – total number of answers

Source: Koutská (2015), English translation by the author

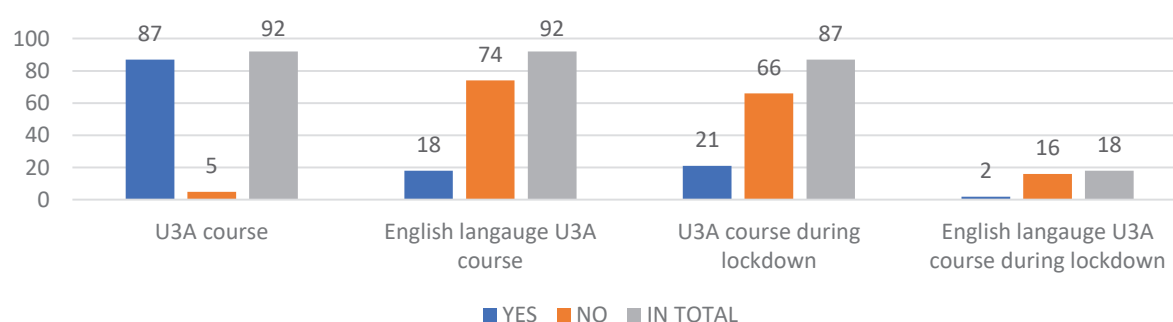


Fig. 2: Organisation of U3A courses (including English language courses) during lockdown

Source: questionnaires, interviews, internet search

The majority either shifted the courses to the winter term, tried to consult individually via e-mail, posted some materials on-line, or other, but did not organise any distance learning/virtual university of the third age. Because only two institutions declared that they did indeed shift their English language courses to a virtual space, to comment on the form would be irrelevant in global.

Conclusions

Older adults, older adult learners, older adult English language learners and the university of the third age older adult English language learners are very numerous and yet very heterogeneous groups. Some characteristics are valid for the majority of older adults, but some are individual.

To find characteristics that influence English language learning at older adulthood we need to look at general developmental areas such as brain capacity (including memory skills), concentration, motor skills and so on. We need to characterise our learners' health situation, socio-economic situation, as well as their experience with learning, language learning and English language learning, their limits and barriers as well as their strengths in the ability to learn language system and language skills.

The universities of the third age represent only one possible organiser of education in older adulthood, one possible organiser of older adult English language courses. The specifics that apply to the U3As participants can but do not have to apply to the other adult education providers (English language courses included).

U3As had to assess older adults' digital skills very quickly during the lockdown. The advantages and disadvantages of older adult distance learning, and older adult English language distance learning had to be weighed. As without adequate digital literacy level, the shift to online (distance) learning would be unthinkable. However, the situation around the pandemic of COVID-19 and subsequent epidemiological restrictions was unpredictable and showed the society how unprepared we are to react quickly, with quality and comprehensively, not forgetting anyone in the process, and therefore the U3As mostly did not offer any English in that "new normal".

Suggestions for solution

There are several areas of suggestions:

The suggestion number one is simple: do not be afraid of limits connected to distance learning in older adulthood, use life long experience and strong inner motivation as a driving force for the university of the third age English language courses. The pandemic is taking longer than anyone expected, and the time should not go wasted.

The suggestion number two is more complex: use the interindividual variability and heterogeneity of the older adult English language learners to your benefit, do the needs analysis and ask about their feelings, experience, online learning difficulties and pleasures. You can be "surprised" by their digital literacy having facebook, instagrams, twitters, communicating now everyday due to social contact restrictions via WhatsApp, Messenger, etc. Why not "leading" an U3A English language course in a WhatsApp group instead of via Google Meet, Zoom, Discord or whatever other platform you find out your older adult learners are not familiar with?

The suggestion number three is the most complex as the suggestion goes towards older adults, older adult learners, older adult English language learners and the university of the third age older adult English language learners themselves. The groups need to see the potential in separating themselves. Only if the group is constituted, the specifics can be researched and appropriate solutions can be found. The U3As are the providers of older adult English language learning, now with the pandemic still on without any other possibility of the course organisation than in an online mode. The U3As do their best to adapt to the situation. However, it is necessary that the university of the third age older adult English language learners stand out and “fight” for their right to continue in their English language learning development. The group needs to voice their wishes and be ready to overcome barriers that any (language) learning and any distance (language) learning regardless the age bring.

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