

Foreign language learning anxiety in adults and their coping strategies

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Abstract

It is widely known that language proficiency has become essential in today's competitive world, but learning a foreign language in adulthood causes anxiety. The purpose of this work is to study the approaches and methodology applied when teaching adults, to determine a foreign language learning anxiety and to select effective teaching strategies. Research methods, such as observation, questionnaire survey, interview, focus group, experiment and analysis, were used in this study. The experimental results included the methodology of forming a group of learners, selection of teaching and assessment methods, and differentiated approaches in teaching. Consequently, the level of anxiety significantly decreased and learning outcomes were improved. Speaking skills were enhanced considerably. Although foreign language teaching centres/courses apply different teaching methodologies, they do not consider the age and individual characteristics when grouping students or selecting teaching methods that have a great effect on both the quality of learning and the learners' emotional state.

Keywords: Adults, languages, anxiety.

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1. Education, culture and intercultural encounters of individual potential

Mastering a foreign language, especially English as an international language, represents one of the most significant challenges to the modern world, and Georgia as well. The necessity of it is conditioned by various reasons and the most important ones are employers' demands, immigration, and migration, the need for moving to another country for a job or study purposes, mobility, academic activity and participation in exchange programmes (Dekanoidze, 2018). In most cases, there are no age limits to the desire or necessity of mastering a foreign language. However, the fear and anxiety related to foreign language acquisition increase along with the age (Gardner, 2011; Horwitz, 2010; Liu & Huang, 2011), which is caused by some stress factors, such as problems with memorising, lack of time, feeling embarrassed and inhibited, the difference in age, level of language, education, employment, socioeconomic and other factors (Dewaele, 2011; Namaziandost et al., 2020; Oxford & Ehrman, 1995).

When acquiring a foreign language, a person often refers to the word 'anxiety' to express their emotional state. However, it is the feeling of fear which lies in the phenomenon of anxiety. According to scientists, anxiety represents the reflection of the most common phenomenon called stress. It is known that the change in the level of anxiety is as personal as its influence on the efficiency of the learning process. Some people, as a result of the increasing anxiety, improve the quality of their homework. Others, who are a majority, change it for its worth (Namaziandost, Imani & Ziafar, 2020).

In 2005, having signed the Bologna Declaration, Georgia took responsibility for the implementation of the major principles of the Bologna Process, and Lifelong Learning and Continuing Education are one of the most vital conditions for integration in the Common European Educational space (Bologna, 1999; Darchia, 2009). The number of programmes launched for this purpose is not just a few, among which the biggest attention was drawn to foreign language teaching courses. In 2011–2012, with the support of Adjara Autonomous Republic, 'Adjara Education Fund' started free foreign language teaching courses for adults conducting English, German, French, Turkish and Russian language classes in Batumi and in all municipalities of Adjara (Khelvachauri, Kobuleti, Keda, Shuakhevi and Khulo). Moreover, from 2016 to 2017, special courses aiming at enhancing language competency skills have been offered to professors and teachers by the Batumi Shota Rustaveli State University.

Almost all foreign language teaching centres in the region provide classes for adults, helping them acquire a foreign language; however, the approaches and methods are different, which determine the course duration, quality, outcomes and future perspectives of the language use – especially communicative skills. In addition, there are various sources of learning a language in adulthood, such as special language centres, private tutors, foreign language learning online courses or independent learning with the help of family members, dictionaries, TV programmes and movies. Due to their desires, necessity and motivation, the learning process becomes enjoyable for some adults. However, for the majority of adult learners, the learning process turns out to be quite unpleasant, hindering the foreign language acquisition and encouraging them to turn to an 'escape strategy', one of the most well-known strategies of coping with stress when a person rejects all the ways of dealing with stress and diverts his or her attention to another activity (Wariyo, 2019; Ennis, 2020).

The purpose of this work is, first, to study and compare the approaches and methodology applied by foreign language centres/courses for adults; second, to determine whether foreign language acquisition causes stress and anxiety in adults and its impact on mastering a foreign language; and third, to identify teaching strategies to cope with these issues efficiently (Yavas Celik & Yavuz, 2020).

1.1. Hypothesis

Foreign language teaching centres/courses do not give sufficient attention to the age and individual characteristics of adult learners in selecting teaching methods or making groups. They do not apply

various teaching methods and differentiated approaches that can have a great effect on both the learning process and the learners' emotional state.

2. Methodology and data analysis

This research problem has been studied in various countries. However, in recent years, no researches have been conducted in the Adjara region in relation to the level of foreign language learning anxiety in adults and its influence on the quality of foreign language acquisition (Winch, 2020).

To determine the attitude of adults, for whom it has become necessary to acquire a foreign language, we carried out a survey with 277 respondents above the age of 30, among which 180 people were 30–45 years old and 97 people were above the age of 45. The maximum age of the survey participants turned out to be 70 years old (5 respondents). About 77% of the research participants were city residents, while 23% were from other municipalities, 78% were female and 22% were male representatives. About 57% of the respondents had a higher education, whereas 29% had a general education.

Learners from 11 language centres (62%) took part in the survey, as well as those who took private lessons with tutors (28%), other citizens (5%) and participants of higher educational institutions and schools (Table 1).

Table 1.

Age		Sex		Place of residence		Education			Means of acquiring a language		
30–45 years old	Above - 45	Male	Female	City	Other municipality	Higher	Professional	General education	Language centre	Private tutor	other
64.98%	35.018%	22%	57%	23%	78%	57%	14%	29%	62%	28%	5%

3. Research methods

The survey was conducted by employing quantitative and qualitative methods. The results of the quantitative survey were obtained with the help of the questionnaire, while the results of the qualitative survey were compiled with the help of the interview, focus group and the analysis of the gained outcomes.

3.1. Research process and results

The survey was carried out in two stages. Initially, the questionnaire and the interviews were conducted. Quantitative indicators were counted with the help of gained statistical procedures, and the reliability index was defined. Moreover, the gained results were analysed, tendencies were defined and conclusions were drawn. The stable and valid correlation of data was made. The majority of the people, 78%, questioned were female participants and 22% were male participants. The qualitative research proved that knowing a foreign language was as necessary for male adults as for females. However, it appeared that female participants were ready to achieve the results despite the challenges they faced, whereas male participants tried to tackle the problems by avoiding the difficulties they encountered. About 77% of the survey participants were city residents, while 23% were from other municipalities. It was relevant since there are more opportunities to get employed in cities rather than villages. The age range of participants is worth mentioning as well. The majority of the participants—65% interested in acquiring a foreign language in adulthood—were above the age of 35–45. Additionally, 57% of the participants had a higher education, 14% had a vocational education and 29% had a school education. As expected, none of the participants had a Ph.D. degree. The answers to the question, what circumstances made them decide to learn a foreign language, were expressed as follows: 32% expressed necessities in the workplace, 30% expressed employment, 20%

expressed leaving for foreign countries and 18% expressed no specific reasons. About 31% of the employed first started learning language at the age of 30–35, 23% at the age of 35–40, 24% at the age of 40–45, 12% at the age of 45–50 and 10% started above the age of 50. As it is obvious from the statistics, the necessity of acquiring a foreign language is equally important at any age. It is worth mentioning that the data related to the foreign language learning styles were preferred by adult learners. Even though respondents in their comments relate the most number of problems to the language centres, 62% of the interviewed emphasised the language centres, 28% emphasised the tutors and 5.5% emphasised on online courses and learning the language independently. It is worth mentioning that all of them—100%—confirm that neither language centres nor tutors conducted surveys to find out individual needs before studying (not including the language level tests. The survey participants consider the organisation of the learning process (time and schedule, less number of cancelled and delayed lessons, etc.) as language centre priorities, as well as more opportunities for better involvement, diversity of teaching/learning methods and assessment. However, they recommend such language centres that select teaching methods taking into account the age and language level of the target group. They named the weak sides of them as well. Particularly, they mentioned the number of learners in the group, their age characteristics, different skills, capabilities, interests, motivation of learners and frequency of homework; 50% of the questioned participants, despite the place in which they learned the language, preferred Callan’s method due to less homework and more emphasis on developing speaking skills. Those interviewed considered writing (62%) and speaking skills (74%) as their weak points with which they struggled with most. Some of the learners give up learning just at the beginning of their studies when these skills are not well developed. Despite the duration of the process, they result in acquiring more reading and listening skills rather than speaking. When asked if differentiated approaches were applied in teaching, they unanimously answered that such approaches were non-existent, which bring out the negative feelings related to learning the language: shyness, fear, stress and anxiety were even more notable. Only 23% of the questioned participants mentioned that they enjoy the process of learning and the rest 77% stated shame, 21% stated fear related to failure in achieving the results and 60% stated anxiety. The obtained results can be considered statistically reliable if we rely on the researchers’ opinion that emotion is the reaction of a person to a situation he or she cannot tolerate.

4. Discussion and findings

As a result of the survey, we can conclude that foreign language centres/courses do not conduct surveys to determine the individual needs of learners beforehand. They do not consider the age and individual characteristics of the target groups when grouping the students or selecting the methods of teaching that have a great effect on both the quality of learning and the learners’ emotional state. This was confirmed by the survey conducted to determine the level of anxiety in adult learners.

In the second stage of this research, to facilitate the process of learning in adult learners, we conducted the experiment. We offered a special methodology for grouping learners according to their age (above the age of 30–40, 41–50, 51–60 and 60). It was offered to two language centres with different approaches and methods of teaching, and each centre formed two target groups. We also offered special methods for knowledge assessment and evaluation; the methods were acknowledged and approved by Andragogy to help adults cope with fear and stress related to foreign language acquisition in the experimental groups. Several differentiated tasks were given as well. The teachers were asked to incorporate different methods, approaches and techniques of teaching to make the learning process a more engaging and enjoyable experience for adults. To determine the outcomes, different methods were applied: observation, questionnaires, individual interviews and focus groups; and the given results were analysed.

Since one of the most important goals of the learning process is the individual development of learners, the basis of which represents differentiation and individualism, we set a primary goal of the experiment to appropriately use differentiated learning in the control/target groups and to observe the gained results for further response.

The developmental process in adulthood is different from that of children and adolescents, as it depends on cultural, social, personal and other factors. Education and experience affect the cognitive development in adults.

According to Rogers, adult learning/training is based on the following basic principles:

- Genetically, human beings have great potential to learn;
- Learning is effective when the content of the course is relevant;
- Adults study most by doing;
- A person is fully engaged in learning; and
- Self-criticism and self-esteem promote creativity, independence and self-confidence.

(Spielberger, Sydeman, Owen & Marsh, 1999)

According to the Pedagogical Guidebook, in the adult learning process, new teaching material should be linked to and based on previous experience. It is significant to offer convenient speed of learning and conditions by meeting their expectations regarding the content of the learning.

Adult learning should achieve consistency in teaching goals, content, form of activity, teaching and assessment methods; interactive learning is a more effective way of working with adults rather than reading and passive listening. Involving them in activities gives them a chance to demonstrate their knowledge and experience; practice and relevant feedback is essential for gaining appropriate skills in adulthood. Depending on the different approaches of the adult to learning, it is necessary to adapt teaching to different styles of learning using different forms of activities. To reach the desired level of knowledge and skills, adults need to develop a critical approach to their abilities, ability to see strengths and weaknesses and objective self-assessment. (Spielberger et al., 1999)

To master the teaching–learning process efficiently, we should take into consideration the seven kinds of intelligence that humans have. They are verbal, (linguistic), logical–mathematical intelligence, musical intelligence, spatial intelligence, bodily kinesthetic, intrapersonal and interpersonal. (Ennis, 2020) People with developed verbal (linguistic) intelligence have the ability of thinking with words, like writing and reading books, playing with words, retelling some stories, they need audio-recordings, dialogues, debates, etc.

People with a developed spatial (visual) intelligence think with icons, they like making projects, such as pictures and visualisation. They need illustrated books, slides, movies, videos, imagery games, labyrinths, excursions and so on. People with a kinesthetic intelligence give preferences to thinking through somatic (touching) feelings, such as dancing, touching softly, gestures, need more movement, role plays, drama performances and practical teaching. People with a developed musical intelligence think by means of rhythms and melodies, such as listening, singing and playing musical instruments is essential.

People with a developed interpersonal intelligence think by means of sharing others' ideas. They appreciate the status of being the leaders and organisers, also team games and social events are necessary for them. Those who have a strong intrapersonal intelligence are good at being aware of their emotional states, feelings, they tend to enjoy self-reflection and analysis, including day dreaming and a cosy atmosphere, exploring relationships with others and assessing their strength (Spielberger et al., 1999). The above-discussed pedagogical attitudes give the teachers of experimental groups several recommendations about working with adults, including the following aspects to adapt the teaching process to the learners' needs; to create an adequate physical and emotional atmosphere due to their actual and perspective developed zone; to practice the various methods, activities, and

resources in the same group with different individuals or in small groups and to consider the learners' psychological individualisms, in addition to a recommendation about how to choose target activities including the context (they should be aware of) and the process, considering the learners' readiness and interests; to modify them according to their needs and adjust them to some individuals or groups; moreover, to offer the tasks which aim not only at demonstrating accumulated factual knowledge but to put it into practice to enhance knowledge and to gain the ability of assessing the ideas depending on learning environment. It is without a doubt that learner's feelings mostly depend on the learning environment.

Here we meant the environment, wherein the learners and teachers feel like partners, they take into account the learners' experiences, interests, and differentiation; they are concentrating on learners' gained knowledge, skills and attitudes on expectations and wishes; and moreover, they outline the learners' intellectual types, also influencer factors on their motivation, in order to give them timely feedback on achievements through intensive monitoring.

We represented the methods with peculiarities of assessing and checking the knowledge as well as teaching, approved by Androgogy. These methods comprise the following: to establish and plan teaching processes based on an individual learner; cooperative teaching methods, such as working in groups or pairs (shifted members in groups); and also the opportunity of choosing the strategy of preparing the tasks among learners (i.e., the learners choose for themselves the most convenient ways to deal with tasks), using developmental assessment tools based on learners' achievements in order to enhance and boost their progress.

We reckon that all our methods and approaches represented earlier would encourage the adults to master the language easily and efficiently and would help to diminish the negative emotions related to foreign language acquisition (especially, embarrassment, anxiety and stress). For the experimental group learners, differentiated tasks were offered taking into account their needs, learning styles and the level of readiness. To determine the outcomes, different methods have been applied (observation, questionnaire, interview individually and for focus group); and the obtained results have been analysed.

4.1. The analyses of research outcomes

The experiment proved that the basic priorities of differentiated teaching in the process of mastering the new language among the adults are enhanced motivation among learners, boosted interest, high level of involvement, the feeling of self-effectiveness and progress achieved in all language skills. To measure the decreasing level of negative emotions in adults when learning a foreign language, we measured their level of anxiety; 'The State-Trait Anxiety Inventory' was conducted. (The test was created by famous a American Psychologist, Professor Charles Donald Spielberg. It comprises two parts with 20 questions in each. The first part measures situational anxiety and the second one measures personal anxiety.) In order to measure the learning outcomes, we used an observation method in the learning process and comparative analysis of the results of current, midterm and final assessments (Onwuegbuzie, Bailey & Daley, 1999).

Detailed information about the gained results in the control and experimental groups is presented in Table 2.

Table 2. Research results determining the level of adult anxiety and academic performance of foreign language learners in the control and experimental groups

Target group	The number of participants	Indicator	Anxiety level		Level of academic achievement (learning outcome)	
			Control group	Experimental group	Control group	Experimental group
I–II groups 30–40 years old and 41–50 years old.	24	high	36%	22%	17%	26%
		medium	38%	28%	34%	48%
		low	26%	50%	49%	26%
III–IVV groups 51–60 years old and 31–60 years old	20	high	32%	24%	14%	22%
		medium	42%	30%	29%	39%
		low	26%	46%	57%	39%

Our survey has proved the common idea that not only emotional reactions but also specific emotional activators tend to get altered along with the ageing process. One and the same emotion might cause different reactions among people according to their age, social maturity and certain circumstances. As it is illustrated in the Table 2, the experiments we conducted in four groups of two different language centres, considerably decreased negative feelings, such as anxiety in learners and enhanced learning outcomes of learning a foreign language. However, the following circumstance should be taken into consideration. The age group between 20 and 40-year olds revealed higher academic indicators and less emotional background in comparison to others. Obviously, along with the ageing process the fear of achieving success is still dominant that has an impact on the learning outcomes. Therefore, it should be taken into account that basic academic achievements, such as speaking and writing skills, represent one of the most insuperable obstacles that have a great influence on adult motivation and can increase interest in learning a foreign language. The second point that should be considered is that the influence of anxiety on cognitive processes depends not only on the problem that needs to be solved but also on the individual characteristics of the person.

It is known that in adults, effective learning is ensured not only with the help of the approved methods, but also with the motivational factors leading the learning activities. The emotions which are connected to stress should be found in motivation. The interconnection of emotion and stress represents such a significant issue that it is impossible to cope with stress and anxiety in the learning process without solving it. To enhance the motivation of adult learners, teachers might turn to various strategies. One of the most important ones is to ensure adults' active involvement in the learning process; to determine the factors affecting the motivation growth and, on the contrary, helping them to achieve their goals, to teach them how to learn and succeed in their studies, to avoid fierce competition among learners, to build the learning process taking into account students' interests and abilities, to give them a chance to make preferences, to praise them when achieving success and in failure, to give developmental comments and, most importantly, to take into account learners' characteristics and learning styles.

5. Conclusions

1. The necessity of mastering a foreign language is equally important in any age.
2. The majority of adults interested in learning a foreign language are between the age of 25 and 45.
3. The necessity of foreign language acquisition is equally important for men and women. Although, despite all the difficulties, women tend to display more eagerness and face this challenge more easily in comparison to men.
4. City dwellers find it more important to learn a foreign language due to more job opportunities in the cities.
5. The majority of adults wanting to acquire a foreign language give preference to language centres. They consider the organisation of the learning process (fixed time, schedule, less number of cancelled/postponed lessons) and more opportunities of active involvement in group work as the major priorities of the language centres.
6. According to the adults, the weak sides of the foreign language teaching centres represent the number of students in the groups, less attention to the difference in age among group members, different skills and abilities and interests and motivation level. Moreover, the frequency of homework, the ways of coping with difficulties of speaking in a foreign language and developing speaking skills are some weak points.
7. Foreign language teaching centres/courses do not carry out surveys aimed at defining the individual needs of the learners. They do not take into consideration the age and individual characteristics of the target groups when grouping learners or selecting teaching methods that have a negative impact on the quality of learning, as well as the emotional state of the learners and learning outcomes. As a result, students tend to quit learning and turn to an 'escape strategy' at the very beginning of their studies.
8. Differentiated teaching is the best means of enhancing the quality of learning and learning outcomes. It boosts learners' motivation, interests and involvement and increases results related to all the skills of learning a foreign language. It dramatically decreases negative emotions, such as anxiety and stress among learners.

6. Recommendations

1. The learning process in the centres of foreign languages/courses should be organised according to the teaching principles tailored for adults.
2. In the assessment and evaluation process, learners' age, language level and interests should be considered.
3. In order to overcome the fear of speaking, particular attention should be paid to developing speaking skills.
4. In order to teach adults efficiently, it is vital to find out which factors determine the motivation growth in adults and to teach them some learning strategies and the ways of achieving success in learning; to get rid of fierce competition among learners; and to give them more chances of making choices on their own.
5. Activities incorporated in the teaching process should aim at enhancing students' motivation and active involvement, not leaving space for fear and anxiety.
6. With the purpose of enhancing the quality of learning a foreign language, differentiated approaches taking into account students' abilities and different learning styles should be included in the learning process based on the prior research.
7. Short-term training courses in the principles of teaching adults/andragogy ought to be developed. It should become obligatory for the courses to be conducted by professionals dealing with adults.

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