

Learning a Second Language: A Source of Wellbeing for Seniors

Mariane Gazaille, Ph D

Universite du Quebec a Trois-Rivieres, Quebec, Canada

Abstract

Background: Life expectancy and population projections show that the share of older adults aged 65 or over is increasing and that it will continue to increase rapidly. Consequently, new challenges are emerging for older adults, their families, and societies. Being directly associated to longevity, seniors' quality of life (QoL) has become a growing individual, familial, and societal challenge; it has also shown a genuine increase in scientific interest. Seniors' QoL can be improved by acquisition of new skills or competencies, one of which is foreign language learning (FLL) (Steptoe, Deaton, & Stone, 2015). It has also been observed that "ICT has a positive effect on the QoL and well-being of older adults" (Nedeljko, Bogataj, and Kaučič, 2021, p. 650).

On the one hand, elderlies could benefit from ICT use, since ICT affects social support, social connectedness, and social isolation (Chen & Schultz, 2016; Nedeljko, Bogataj & Kaučič, 2021). As such, ICT serve as a mean to help seniors remain connected to others and to the world (Nedeljko, Bogataj, & Kaučič, 2021), and improving seniors' digital health literacy may improve their QoL (Liu, Wang, He, Ren, Kong & Luo, 2023). On the other hand, FLL has been identified as one of the popular activities among the elderly (Kaceti & Klímová, 2021; Matsumoto, 2019). Being related to subjective positive feelings, FLL contributes to the overall wellbeing of seniors (Klímová & Pikhart, 2020).

Over the past year, scientific interest in senior digital literacy (e.g., Liu, Wang, He, Ren, Kong & Luo, 2023) and adult language acquisition has grown (Klímová & Pikhart, 2020; Viktorova, 2020). Yet, while more research on the effectiveness of ICT interventions for elderly people need to be conducted (Chen & Schlutz, 2016), to properly teach senior learners a foreign remains an issue (Kaceti & Klímová, 2021). Gazaille (2023, 2024) found that synchronous remote oral tutoring was an appropriate approach to teach senior learners a second language, the latter unanimously reporting a positive learning experience. The objective of this paper is to examine the effects of synchronous ESL e-tutoring on senior learners' subjective wellbeing.

Theoretical Background: Popularly referred to as happiness or satisfaction, subjective well-being has been associated with good health and longevity, better social relationships, work performance and creativity (Diener, Oishi & Tay, 2018). Subjective wellbeing is a multifaceted concept including psychological, social, emotional, and spiritual facets (Harvard University, 2023).

ICT enables connection between people, reducing social isolation and feelings of loneliness (Chen & Schultz, 2016; Nedeljko, Bogataj, & Kaučič, 2021, p. 645). Four mechanisms contribute to alleviating social isolation: connecting to the outside world, gaining social support, engaging in activities of interests, and boosting self-confidence" (Chen & Schultz, 2016).

Seniors learning a new language experience significant boosts in subjective well-being. In fact, learning a new language can bring joy, purpose, and increased self-confidence, thus contributing to one's wellbeing (Klimova; Pikhart, Dziuba, & Cierniak-Emerych, 2021). Even though, adult learners may find a structured approach to teaching/learning a new language more comfortable – as they have mainly experienced explicit teaching during their schooling –, this does not mean that they will fail learning a second or foreign language with other methods. In terms of subjective wellbeing, it is actually through the fulfilling of oneself and achievement of personal goals that the learning of a new language contributes to wellbeing.

Intervention: A ten-week English-as-a-second-language (ESL) course was offered to four groups of heterogenous levels of English at a francophone third-age university located in two francophone cities in Québec, Canada. The course (2 hours/week) adopted both a structured and ludic approach. Parallel to the course, 46 senior L2 learners enrolled in a distance synchronous oral ESL tutoring program, whose aim was to develop the oral and ICT skills of senior ESL learners. Once a week, senior learners met with their tutee for 45 minutes to speak in English. The tutors were university students enrolled in an ESL teacher training program or in a Translation (French to English) degree. As this was a third-age university course, no exams were associated with it.

Tool: Wellbeing can be assessed from one's cognitive judgments and affective experiences (). In line, a questionnaire was created to evaluate the e-tutoring program on a range of linguistic, socio-affective, and ICT aspects. At the end of the course, the senior ESL students were asked to evaluate. Responses were scored on a 5-point Likert scale. Validity and reliability were supported by empirical studies.

Results: The results support the idea that e-tutoring is an appropriate pedagogical approach for teaching a FL to senior learners (Gazaille, 2023, 2024). Learner satisfaction with the e-tutoring program can be explained in terms of knowledge of the FL, development of oral skills, and motivation to learn the FL.

Keywords

Senior learners, second language learning, ICT intervention, synchronous distance tutoring, quality of life, wellbeing.