



SWOT Analysis of the English Language Learning Process in Senior Learners

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ABSTRACT

We live in a globalised and highly technological world, where the importance of knowing a language is a social need, regardless of the age. Nowadays, senior learners demand educational spaces where they can improve their social and personal development to remain active and integrated in the society. The main objective of this study is to analyse the factors that affect the English language learning process of adult learners. To do that, a SWOT analysis has been carried out. The results point out that despite certain physical and cognitive weaknesses and some language and social threats, this language learning process promotes a huge increase in their intrinsic motivation. They highlight the personal satisfaction as one of the key aspects.

Keywords: SWOT analysis, adult learners, learning factors, lifelong learning, English language learning process.

Análisis DAFO del Proceso de Aprendizaje del Inglés en Personas Mayores

RESUMEN

Vivimos en un mundo globalizado y altamente tecnológico, donde la importancia de conocer un idioma es una necesidad social, independientemente de la edad. Hoy en día, las personas mayores demandan espacios educativos para mejorar su desarrollo social y personal y mantenerse activos e integrados en la sociedad. El objetivo principal de este estudio es analizar los factores que afectan el proceso de aprendizaje de la lengua inglesa de la tercera edad. Para ello, se ha llevado a cabo un análisis DAFO. Los resultados señalan que, a pesar de ciertas debilidades físicas y cognitivas y de algunas amenazas lingüísticas y sociales, este proceso de aprendizaje del idioma promueve un gran aumento de su motivación intrínseca. Los estudiantes destacan la satisfacción personal como uno de los aspectos clave.

Palabras clave: análisis DAFO, estudiantes mayores, factores de aprendizaje, formación permanente, proceso de aprendizaje del inglés.



1. Theoretical Framework

1.1. Globalisation and Foreign Language Learning

We live in a globalised, highly technological and changing world, where the importance of knowing a language at a communicative level is a social need, regardless of the age (Madrid, 2006). In fact, recent research supports the promotion of second language learning for various reasons, one of them is linked to the benefits of the bilingual brain (García-Sierra et al., 2016), the promotion of intercultural competences (Corral-Robles et al., 2017; European Commission, 2011) or the delay of cognitive decline (Bialystok et al., 2012).

These last two benefits are particularly important in one of the sectors of the population, the elderly. They are an increasingly representative sector within our society, as life expectancy has progressively increased. They feel the need to continue learning throughout their lives, demanding different educational spaces that allow them to improve their social and personal development in order to remain active and integrated (Solórzano & De Armas, 2019).

Numerous socio-demographic studies show a general increase in the number of older people worldwide. Longevity is a characteristic of today's society. Consulting data from the Spanish National Statistics Report (National Institute of Statistics, 2019), it can be said that there are 9,057,193 elderly people. The ageing process together with demographic indicators point towards a change in the population pyramid. Thus, education and inclusion of senior learners has become extremely important nowadays.

The new approach to education is based on four basic ideas (Delors, 1996):

1. Social Respect. Education provides the means to form a more conscious and active citizenship.
2. Constant desire to learn new things. Education provides tools for understanding and for mastering the acquisition of knowledge. At the same time, it provides the purpose of enjoying, the pleasure of understanding, learning and discovering.
3. Action. Training is not limited to professional training, but extends to achieving personal and social competences, which involve the ability to communicate, to work in a team and to solve conflicts.
4. Consolidation of the personal entity. It involves knowing oneself, the global development of a person in its different manifestations: intelligence, sensitivity, responsibility, autonomous and critical thinking, imagination, creativity, discovery, experimentation, art, culture and sport.

As Abellán et al. (2018) state active ageing is related to the development of life skills, and to the participation in social contexts. Growing older means facing personal changes and adapting to a society where accelerated advances take place (Martín et al., 2021; Tur, 2018). Older people need to have learning opportunities to achieve their individual and social demands through the exchange of experiences. These educational opportunities will help them to develop their skills and knowledge improving their quality of life.

1.2 Lifelong Learning for Seniors

The world's population is undergoing active ageing, which means that after retirement, senior learners still want to remain integrated in the society (Abellán et al., 2018). Numerous studies in the Spanish context show that our elders have a great interest in continuing to learn throughout their life cycle. This learning process helps them to keep their motivation, to prevent numerous illnesses

and to maintain a high self-esteem (Baumgartner, 2001; Espinar-Reondo & Ortega-Martín, 2015; Pincas, 2007; Renzi et al., 2022).

Spain, along with other countries such as Finland, Germany, Uruguay and Colombia, conceive lifelong learning as a strategic objective that leads older people to a comprehensive higher education without aiming at a labour market performance (Cruz & Pérez, 2006; Guerrero-Ceh, 2020; Valle-Aparicio, 2014; Varela & Gallego, 2015).

In Spain, in order to meet the educational needs of older people, there are various training proposals (Mogollón, 2012; Ricoy & Álvarez-Pérez, 2016). In fact, there are various educational models aimed at this population, such as universities for senior learners (Aburto, 2022; Montero, 2015). A clear example of this type of training is the Open Lifelong Learning Centre (university programme for adult learners) of the University of Granada, characterised by its social function. This Open Lifelong Learning Centre is a space that allows the development of education for seniors and tries to preserve their active role in society (Martínez-Heredia & Bedmar, 2016).

The university programme for adult learners aims at contributing to the improvement of the personal and social skills of the students through an educational and social service. For this reason, a coherent teaching curriculum is designed and adapted to their needs. The academic programme includes compulsory and optional subjects, as well as workshops and seminars. Among them, as a special elective, is the teaching of English at instrumental and cultural level.

According to Henter (2014), there are many factors that can affect the process of learning a foreign language: cognitive factors (language aptitude, learning strategies), affective factors (attitudes, motivation, anxiety), metacognitive factors, social factors, among others. Therefore, in this study a SWOT analysis, that stands for Strengths, Weaknesses, Opportunities, and Threats, is going to be developed distinguishing both internal factors (in relation to the physical and cognitive level) and external factors (in relation to the linguistic and social level) in the foreign language process of elder people.

2. Methodology

2.1. Objectives

The main objective of this study is to analyse internal factors (physical and cognitive strengths and weaknesses) and external factors (language and social threats and opportunities) that affect the English language learning process of adult learners in order to provide them with educational offers adapted to their needs and their reality.

2.2. Specific objectives

From this general objective, we set out the following specific objectives:

SO1. To analyse the English language proficiency of the participants of the study.

SO2. To know the internal factors (physical and cognitive weaknesses and strengths) that influence their English learning process.

SO3. To know the external factors (language and social threats and opportunities) that influence their English learning process.

2.3. Research Design and Participants

A purposive sample was chosen for data collection, in which the participants in the study are those who meet these three requirements:

1. Geographical location in the rural or urban context of the city of Granada and Melilla. The University of Granada also has campuses in Ceuta and Melilla, Spanish enclaves placed on the northern shores of Morocco's Mediterranean coast.
2. Be part of the Open Lifelong Learning Centre (or OLLC), a university programme for adult learners.
3. Be enrolled in the English subjects of the OLLC.

All participants in this study, 34 in total, met these criteria. They are 10 men and 24 women, aged between 59 and 74 years, with the majority being in the 63-68 age range.

It should be noted that at the Granada campus the students are divided into three groups of levels ranging from high basic to low intermediate according to the Common European Framework of Reference or CEFR (Council of Europe, 2001), while at the Melilla campus there is only one group made up of students of different levels. These levels correspond to the subjects *English I*, *English II* and *English III* at the Granada campus and the *Traveling English* course at the Melilla campus, carried out during the 2021-2022 academic year.

2.4. Instruments

In order to respond to the three specific objectives proposed, two data collection instruments were used. For the first specific objective, a reduced version of the standardised test was used, known as the Cambridge KET (*Key English Test*) corresponding to a basic level, A2 level of the CEFR (Council of Europe, 2001). Despite the different levels of the different groups at the Granada campus, none of the students exceeded level B1, being the reason to choose this test.

This test measures the language proficiency of the participants in the English language and tests four of the six language skills: *speaking*, *listening*, *reading* and *writing*. According to the CEFR, if the A2 level is achieved, this means that the user can communicate in English in simple, everyday situations.

The KET test is scored out of 23 points: 6 points for the speaking and conversation part, 7 points for the reading part, 5 points for the writing part and 5 points for the listening part.

As for the content of each section, for the speaking and conversation part, six open-ended questions were posed regarding basic information about the student, as well as questions about hobbies and pastimes. For the reading comprehension part, a text was presented, which they had to read carefully and then choose the correct answer to seven questions. For the written expression part, a situation was presented, and the participants had to write a short email (around 25 words). Finally, for the listening comprehension part, they had to choose the correct answer in five questions corresponding to five audios about everyday situations.

Similarly, to respond to the second and third specific objective, an interview with four sections was used. However, for the purposes of this study, we will only focus on two sections. The first section collects the socio-demographic data of the participants: age, gender, subject, class level group, education, years of studying English and other languages known. The second section consists of a series of open-ended questions to identify internal and external factors in the use of the target language. These questions are taken from a questionnaire adapted from the Attitude/Motivation Test Battery (AMTB) for the use of English as a foreign language, whose author is Gardner (2004).

2.5. Procedure

The data collection process was conducted by a researcher together with the teacher in charge of each of the groups. This process took around 90 minutes. The ethical considerations pro-

posed by the Ethics Committee on Human Research (CEIH) of the University of Granada, such as informed consent, were also followed.

2.6. Data Analysis

The process of analysing the data can be divided into two phases. The first phase corresponds to the data obtained with the administration of the first instrument, i.e., the Cambridge A2 KET (*Key English Test*) and the second phase corresponds to the data resulted from the interview mentioned above.

For the analysis of the Cambridge A2 KET (*Key English Test*) data, we proceeded as follows: for the analysis of reading comprehension (*reading*) and listening comprehension (*listening*), each question was marked as correct or incorrect, while for the analysis of *speaking*, individual performance was evaluated taking into account overall grammatical performance. As for *writing*, the correction was carried out taking into account an analytical rubric consisting of the following criteria: grammar and vocabulary, textual appropriateness and, finally, overall performance, where the level was marked from 0 to 5.

The results were measured on a scale from 0 to 23 points, being 23 the highest score and 11.5 points, being considered as a passing grade. For the transformation of the data, a descriptive analysis was elaborated summarising the data in a few values.

The second phase of the data analysis was conducted through a qualitative content analysis achieved in the individual interviews of the learners, as it is crucial to capture essential aspects of the social phenomenon presented from the perspective of the participants of the study (Souza et al., 2017). This analysis allowed us to understand, through the experiences expressed by the participants, the presence of internal and external factors in the use of the target language.

This process was accomplished through a categorisation and coding process using the qualitative analysis software *N-Vivo* (version 12), following a deductive-inductive approach. The literature reviewed was the main data source to create the main categories. Meanwhile, the students' interviews were analysed inductively, allowing the creation of the emerging subcategories.

This categorisation, and subsequent coding, was executed by consensus of three qualitative research experts. This was carried out according to the criteria of coherence, relevance, clarity and significance, ensuring the credibility of the analysis process (Holloway et al., 2003).

The Table 1 presents the final category system:

Table 1.
Final category system.

	Categories	Subcategories
EXTERNAL FACTORS	Language and social threats	Language threats
		Social threats
INTERNAL FACTORS	Language and social opportunities	Language opportunities
		Social opportunities
INTERNAL FACTORS	Physical and cognitive weaknesses	Physiological aspects
		Cognitive aspects
	Physical and cognitive strengths	Physical and cognitive strengths
		Cognitive strengths

3. Results and Discussion

This section presents an overview of the results of the two phases above mentioned and supported by the existing literature in this field. In order to present these results and the discussion

in an organised way for better understanding, two lines of action were drawn. These lines correspond to the two data collection instruments employed in this study. Firstly, the results achieved in the Cambridge A2 KET (*Key English Test*) that respond to the first specific objective will be presented. Secondly, the results obtained in the open-ended question interview, which cover the second and the third specific objectives as mentioned above.

Thus, the first part of the results and the discussion correspond to the overall results obtained in the A2 KET Cambridge test as it can be seen in Table 2. It shows the number of students who passed the test and those who did not pass the test, as well as the percentages in relation to the total number of students ($n=34$) can be seen in the following Table 2.

Table 2.
Number and percentage of passing and failing students.

Students who passed	Percentages	Students who have failed	Percentages
22	64.71%	12	35.29%

As can be seen in Table 2, a very high pass rate was obtained at both sites, with a total of 64.71%, which almost two thirds of the sample.

Table 3 shows the comparison of the number of students who passed the different tests with those who did not pass those tests. The oral expression test was the one with the highest percentage, a total of 70.59%. The test with the lowest percentage was the listening comprehension test, 52.94%. These results coincide with their testimonies, regarding the skills they found most difficult. This is described in detail below.

Table 3
Students who have passed and those who did not

	Students who passed	Percentages	Students who have failed t	Percentages
Reading Comprehension	22	64.71%	12	35.29%
Listening Comprehension	18	52.94%	16	47.06%
Speaking	24	70.59%	10	29.41%
Writing	19	55.88%	15	44.88%

Table 4 shows the average overall score per skill. This Table 4 shows both the average over the maximum points of each test and over 10 points in order to see more clearly the comparison between the results of the different skills.

Table 4
Average overall score per skill

	Reading Comprehension (<i>Reading</i>)	Listening Comprehension (<i>Listening</i>)	Oral Expression (<i>Speaking</i>)	Written Expression (<i>Writing</i>)
On the maximum points for each test	4.06/7	2.5/5	4.18/6	2.65/5
10 as maximum	5.80/10	5.00/10	6.96/10	5.29/10

These results confirm that the most difficult skills are listening comprehension (5 out of 10), followed by writing (5.29 out of 10), reading comprehension (5.8 out of 10) and speaking (6.96 out of 10). In the study conducted by Domingo (2018) on the English Proficiency of the Senior High school students of Visayas State University, she corroborated the result of the present study. It was found in her study that the students are varied in their proficiency level in using the English language. That the overall results based on the mean scores show that students are competent in speaking, and writing, but they are not that good in listening.

Having presented the results of the first phase corresponding to the Cambridge A2 KET standardised language proficiency test, we will now present the data corresponding to the open-ended questions asked individually to each of the participants at both campuses. As mentioned above, a qualitative content analysis was carried out to process the data and to respond the second and third specific objective.

The categories and subcategories resulted contribute to a better understanding of the SWOT analysis which is related to internal factors (strengths and weaknesses) and external factors (threats and opportunities) of the language learning process of the participants. The examples provided belong to the senior learners; however, to respect their privacy and to cover their rights, codes have been assigned distinguishing the location and level.

3.1 External Factors in Learning English

As mentioned above, external factors are divided into two categories: language and social threats, and language and social opportunities.

Category 1. Language and social threats

This category is made up of two sub-categories 'language threats' and 'social threats'. The former refers to those language threats that learners may perceive and observe in the development of their English language learning progress. Social threats can be the external factors such as fast pace of life, new ways of interacting, new technologies among others. Both language and social threats can influence their language learning process. Learning a language can be motivating, but it is also a great challenge for them (Traña & Larenas, 2014).

As can be seen in the following testimonies, the participants are aware of their language limitations in the target language. These threats undoubtedly create feelings of frustration, especially in combination with the insecurity they feel when they are in front of their peers.

E4GA: [I have had little practice in conversation, and it is difficult for me to create sentences].

E10GI: [I'm too embarrassed to say it wrong (which is most of the time)].

E9GB: [I feel insecure as I don't have much vocabulary].

E6GB: [I think I have a low level; thus, I get a bit overwhelmed when I have to talk].

Older people want to learn new things to feel more confident (Cisterna & Díaz, 2022; González-Peiteado & Rodríguez-López, 2017). However, in the process of learning a language, they are exposed to situations of stress and anxiety, as it is well observed in the above testimonies. The studies presented above (Martín, et al., 2021; Tur, 2018) confirm that growing older means facing personal changes and adapting to a society where accelerated advances take place. These situations undoubtedly obstruct their learning and their attitude towards themselves, triggering the development of other social-affective factors such as loss of self-confidence. This can undoubtedly create insecurity and

seriously impair the learning process (Fontanella & Sandmann, 2011; Steber & Rossi, 2021).

It is therefore essential to create a comfortable and trusting environment in which, despite any possible language threats or limitations, they do not feel challenged in their abilities and feel free to experiment with the target language they are learning (Enriquez & Valotta, 2006).

Similarly, in relation to the subcategory 'social threats', it was found that learners have various difficulties in being able to continue their learning process outside the English class. This can be seen in the following testimonies where the space of their classroom is considered to be their safe space for learning languages. In the same line, the adult learners do not believe that they can have other learning opportunities outside the language classroom on a daily basis.

E10GI: [I feel more comfortable in the university classroom].

E5GI: [It is difficult to speak English outside of class, there are not many people to speak it with].

Thus, it can be observed that the affective and social difficulties caused by the perception of their limitations, whether real or not, are combined with their language learning convictions (Andrew, 2012; Belda-Medina, 2020; Cuenca, 2011; Souchay & Isingrini, 2004).

Category 2. Language and social opportunities

This category is made of two subcategories 'language opportunities' and 'social opportunities'. Both are connected to the concept of extrinsic motivation, which can be defined as those motives that lead a person to perform a given activity when it is related to external factors.

In relation to the subcategory of 'social opportunities', it can be said that learning a second language is beneficial for senior learners. One of the reasons is that they reconnect with society after their disengagement from work, which makes them feel that they do not belong to the society (Latorre, 2019; Traña & Larenas, 2014).

As it can be seen from the following testimonies, participants are aware of the social opportunities that arise when learning a language.

E10GI: [I like to learn English so that I can travel and get around].

E4GA: [One of my reasons for learning English is to watch videos and understand them on social media].

E3GB: [I would like to understand English songs].

In relation to the subcategory of 'language opportunities' Traña & Larenas, (2014) comment that learning a foreign language not only allows senior learners to obtain social opportunities, but also linguistic ones. As they indicate in the following testimonies:

E9GB: [English is one of the most widely spoken languages].

E6GB: [It allows me to have access to more scientific knowledge].

Both testimonies go beyond the social benefit of learning a language, focusing more on the linguistic benefits such as speaking one of the most widely spoken languages in the world or getting closer to scientific knowledge as it was stated by Delors (1996) regarding their constant desire to learn new things.

3.2 Internal factors in English language learning

Internal factors are made up of two categories: physical and cognitive strengths and weaknesses.

Category 3. Physical and cognitive weaknesses

This category is made up of two subcategories: 'physiological aspects' and 'cognitive aspects'. In this case, both refer to those internal elements at the physiological or cognitive level which cannot

be controlled (Harada, et al., 2013), i.e., those obstacles that slow down their progress in learning English.

This can be seen in the following excerpts:

E6GB: [I think that as you get older, you lose your listening ability].

E5GB: [I have difficulties understanding spoken English due to my hearing impairment].

From the whole sample, a high percentage of students stated that they suffer from some physical limitation to some extent, such as hearing problems. These statements coincide with the results obtained in the Cambridge A2 KET test in which, as mentioned above, the listening comprehension part was the test with the lowest score achieved at both campuses.

As it can be seen in the testimonies, there are some difficulties that arise with age and have a direct effect on language learning, such as hearing or vision loss (Ramírez, 2013).

This physiological aspect is, therefore, linked to limitations of a physical nature, in addition to limitations of a cognitive nature, such as memory loss or greater fatigue, which could hinder the appropriate acquisition of the foreign language.

E5GB: [I find it difficult to assimilate structures and vocabulary when listening a story due to my short-term memory loss].

Similarly, some of the participants are not used to have study habits as they have been engaged only in practical tasks for many years. This is due to the loss of plasticity, the decay of memory and the ability to process information. This information can be seen in the following excerpt:

E3GB: [I've tried many times, but I'm still a beginner. It's very hard for me to start studying again].

These results are in line with Rybertt (2017) and Manuel (2022) who state that there are factors linked to hearing and cognition that can affect the English learning of older people. However, as stated by numerous authors previously (Baumgartner, 2001; Espinar-Redondo & Ortega-Martín, 2015; Pincas, 2007; Renzi et al., 2022) this learning process helps them to reduce these limitations, to keep their motivation and to maintain a high self-esteem.

In this regard, Falasca (2011) advocates the use of various teaching techniques and methods that allow these limitations to be diminished. However, Ramírez (2013) mentions that 'the field of foreign language acquisition has not developed methodologies and study materials adapted to the cognitive, psychosocial, linguistic (L1) and cultural reality of the elderly' (p. 164).

Category 4. Physical and cognitive strengths

This category is made up of two subcategories 'physical strengths' and 'cognitive strengths'. Both are connected to the concept of intrinsic motivation as it is related to the doing of an activity for its inherent satisfaction rather than for some separable consequence. Some evidence of both categories could be the following:

E1GB: [I like learning English because it activates my mind].

E8GB: [I like English as it is good to increase my mental acuity].

Our participants are aware of its physical and cognitive benefits, and this leads them to be more intrinsically motivated to learn it. This is the reason why, in addition to these physical and cognitive benefits, studying English is a great learning experience for them:

E4GA: [a personal challenge].

E10GI: [a personal project].

E9GB: [I always wanted to learn it].

E6GB: [for self-improvement, now that I am retired, I would like to learn it better].

Thanks to these testimonies, it can be seen how adult learners are highly motivated to learn the English language, an activity that entails a great personal fulfilment as well as physical and cognitive advantages.

4. Conclusions

This study addressed an under researched topic as the senior learners are a group age that has not been explored in the area of teaching English as thoroughly as other group ages. Thus, this article attempted to contribute to this area of knowledge by analysing, firstly, the English language proficiency of the senior participants and secondly, by exploring the different factors that may influence their English learning process.

In order to shed light on this issue, and to respond to the first specific objective (SO1) we employed a reduced version of the standardised test, known as the Cambridge KET (*Key English Test*) corresponding to a basic level, A2 level of the CEFR. As can be seen in Table 2, a very high pass rate was obtained at both sites, with a total of 64.71%, which almost two thirds of the sample. However, some issues were raised as the listening comprehension part was the most difficult one for almost all of the students, these results coincide with other previous studies mentioned above and with the testimonies of the participants.

To respond to the second (SO2) and the third specific objective (SO3), an open-ended interview was employed and therefore, a SWOT analysis was implemented to better understand the presence of internal and external factors in the language learning process of senior learners. In this analysis, we could observe the internal factors: physical and cognitive weaknesses and strengths, as well as the external factors: the language and social threats and opportunities.

The results point out that despite certain physical and cognitive weaknesses and some language and social threats, this language learning process promotes a huge increase in their intrinsic motivation. This goes in hand with the promotion of physical and cognitive strengths, as well as social and language opportunities that help them to keep integrated socially. They highlight that personal satisfaction is one of the key aspects in this learning process.

The findings drawn also show that it is necessary to work on the development of methodologies and study materials adapted to the reality of our seniors. The university programme for senior learners contributes with no doubt to the improvement of their personal and social skills; however, it is undeniable that this kind of training still has shortcomings within the educational institutions.

As prior research in this area has a narrow scope, we think that our findings could generate interesting and relevant information about the English learning process for senior learners. However, among the limitations it could be stated that the findings are not generalizable, since the results and conclusions reported are presented with a reduced sample of fourteen senior students. Another limitation that could be mentioned is the gender bias, most of the students were women. Nonetheless, even though our findings are limited to a particular case study, they serve as the starting point for future research with a larger and more representative sample in order to make more general conclusions.

For this reason, based on the results of the present research, a future line of action focuses on the design of a larger study taken into account other regions of Spain. Moreover, as a result of this study and to demonstrate our commitment to the education of senior learners we will be working to create an innovative and up-to-date English language training programme suitable for all adult learners, whose objective is to learn English in order to remain active and socially integrated in a globalised world.

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