

## Age and Other Factors Influencing Second Language Acquisition in English Learners in a Community ESL Program

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**[Abstract]** The relationship between age and language learning had been an area of interest in Second Language Acquisition (SLA) research, but few studies focused on elderly English Language Learners (ELLs). The current study was conducted in a community-based ESL program in Oakland, California, on six ELLs from China, with age ranging from 65 to 89. Using one-on-one interviews and written questionnaires, these students narrated the challenges that they encountered during English learning. This study confirmed that SLA can take place in students older than 65 years old, but certain pedagogical strategies are best suited when teaching these elderly learners.

**[keywords]** second language acquisition; adult ESL; age factor; classroom strategy

### Introduction and Literature Review

The relationship between age and language learning had been an area of interest in Second Language Acquisition (SLA) research, but most of the studies were focused on the learning process of children and adolescents. There had been few studies of second language learning in elderly students.

In searching through recent reports on the relationship between language learning and cognitive factors, Kemper (2006) provided insightful information on theories related to language learning in adults. It was reported that older adults appeared to use simplified speech, and this simplification appeared to be progressive with age. The symptoms could be followed by tracking two aspects of the linguistic structure of speech: (1) the developmental level or D-level, that was sensitive to the amount of embedding and the type of embedding used to create complex sentences, and (2) the propositional density or P-density, that assessed how much information was packed into a sentence relative to the number of words. Using these two parameters, Kemper found that the syntactic complexity of healthy adults' speech declined in late adulthood. It was determined that both the grammatical complexity and the propositional content of older adults' spontaneous speech declined between ages 74 and 78. However, there was considerable individual variation in older adults' initial level of grammatical complexity and propositional content, as well as individual variation in their rate of decline. Even with recent reports on cognitive sciences [Mamiya et. al, (2016), Chai et.al, (2016)] which linked new discovery in cognitive sciences to language learning in adults, much was unknown in the basic mechanism of language acquisition of elderly adults.

Another study was reported by Bellingham (2005) who described the progress of English learning of five adult Asian students that had migrated recently to New Zealand. The median age of the study group was in the '40s (range from 39 to '50s). With the mid-life English Language Learners (ELLs), they had some advantages over younger language learners such as general world knowledge, previous language knowledge, self-discipline and time. At the same time, these

middle-age students admitted that their declining memory and slow reactions became obstacles in the second language learning process. Overall, Bellingham asserted that there was ample evidence of second language acquisition occurred in this group of ELLs in their 40's.

Moreover, in the study reported by Ehrman and Oxford (1995), which involved subjects between 25 and 52 years old, the researchers contended that while it helped to have cognitive aptitude, effective learning habits, learning experience, motivation, and self-confidence, as well as certain personality dispositions, "age" alone was not the absolute barrier to language learning. If this observation on the relationship between age and language learning were true, can second language acquisition take place at a later stage in life, in students at the age of 65 and beyond? The intention of this study was to address this question by following the learning history of six students and deciphering critical factors that influenced their English language learning process.

### **Research Methodology**

#### ***Participants***

The English Language Learners chosen for the study were students from a community ESL program in Oakland, California, in which the researcher was the instructor for the intermediate level ESL class. Students in the ESL class were immigrants arrived from China whose mother tongue (L1) was Chinese and were learning English as a second language (L2) so that they can improve their communication skills in English. The typical class size was 12-18 students, including male and female. The age range of the six participants in this study was from 65 to 89. Informed consent with each participant was obtained before the study and the study protocol was reviewed by the IRB at California State University East Bay.

#### ***Study Method***

The research method deployed in the study was based on the narrative of the study subject's English learning process recorded in a one-on-one interview, along with answering a list of questions related to the person's English learning experience, both inside and outside of the classroom.

At the onset of the study, each participant was given a general questionnaire (see Protocol EQ-03-2018 in Attachment 1), written in Chinese, due to the varying degrees of English aptitude in the study group. The primary focus of the first questionnaire was to reflect and identify issues which the ESL student have encountered and affected their English learning over the past two years as students in the Community ESL class. Data from this questionnaire was collated and summarized.

In addition, another set of questions gauging the progress (or the lack of) the four essential aspects of English learning (Speaking, Listening, Reading and Writing) was given to the students and answered in Chinese (see Protocol EQ-04-2018 in Attachment 1). Finally, the oral interviews were conducted individually by the researcher with the student, using Chinese. We had chosen to use the students' mother tongue for the interview so that the students could freely express their sentiment and concern on their English learning process. Also, the interview was audio recorded but the recordings erased at the end of the research project.

### *Data Collection and Analysis*

Audio recordings from the one-on-one interview conducted with the study participants were reviewed carefully and any factors mentioned by the participants that have either aided or hindered their English Learning process were recorded. Individual response on the two supplementary questionnaires answered by each study participant was analyzed, collated and the noteworthy responses translated into English and presented in the Results and discussion section.

## **Results and Discussion**

### *Demographics and the General Background of the Six Elderly Ells in Oakland*

The targeted study group was composed of six (6) ELL students (2 males and 4 females) with their ages spanning from 65 to 89 years old. Each student had been studying at the Beginners and Intermediate level ESL classes in Oakland for 2 years or more. Two students (Subject B and D) had graduated from the Beginners class two years ago and moved on to the next level of ESL learning. Another two students (Subject E and F) were also former students who had chosen to remain at the Beginner's ESL class with another teacher. The last set of two students (Subject A and C) were attending Intermediate ESL class currently. The following provided a brief overview of the six participants in the study.

Subject A, like Subject C, were ESL students who had been studying in the ESL class for more than two years. Both were college educated in China and had been living in the Bay area for over ten years. Since their friends were mostly Chinese and they lived in the neighborhood where the Chinese language was heavily used, both Subject A and C had little practice of the English language outside that of the ESL classroom.

Subject E and F were a married couple who had been studying in the Beginners ESL class for four years, with me as their teacher for the first two years. Both were high school graduate in China and had been living in the Bay area for over ten years. At the time when Subject E and F were attending Beginners ESL class, their workplace necessitated them to interact with customers and co-workers in English. More recently, both students had retired and the demand to use the English language in the workplace was no longer present.

Subject B had studied in Intermediate ESL class for several years and then was promoted to Advanced ESL class. Subject B also graduated from college in China and had been living in the Bay area for over 25 years. Subject B's interests in academic subjects were not limited to English study but also on a wide range of topics such as humanities and mathematics. It turned out that Subject B was an avid reader of Chinese and English books and had developed a strong sense of belonging with the neighbors that he associated and the community college that he attended. Subject B had plenty of opportunities to interact with both English native speakers as well as non-native English speakers.

Subject D also studied in the Intermediate ESL class for several years and then was promoted to Advanced ESL class. Subject D graduated from high school in China and had been living in the Bay area for over 20 years. What was unique about Subject D was her enthusiasm towards learning English. Subject D never gave up an opportunity to learn a new word or a new expression in class and was not shy to strike up a conversation with a stranger in English.

Common to all the students in this study group was that they were all immigrants from China who were faced with the challenge of adjusting to a new culture and a foreign language once they arrived. Whatever exposures to the English language that they had in China, were either forgotten or not applicable to the daily interaction in the USA. These students were eager to learn the English language as their second language, in order to communicate effectively with English speakers.

Despite the potential cognition challenges (e.g. short attention span, poor short-term memory, slower mental processing speed) and other physical challenges (e.g. hearing or sight impairment, physical immobility) associated with the later stages of life, most of these elderly ELL students were motivated at learning English, and they gladly came to the community ESL classes. When judged by their own self-evaluation during the interview (refer to Table 1), along with the observation of these students in the classroom, there was ample evidence of improvement in their English language abilities in the past two years. That said, the level of English competency at which an elderly ELL student able to achieve was highly individualistic. Some of the crucial factors affecting their learning process were discussed in another section.

*Table 1*  
*Demographics of ELL Students in the Study Group*

Subject	Gender	Age	Education level in China	Prior exposure to English in China	How long have they been living in the USA?	# of Years attending ESL class in Oakland	Current ESL Competency Level	Self-rating on the improvement of English learning in past 2 years
A	F	70	College	50 yrs. Ago	10 yrs.	4 yrs.	Low Intermediate	Reading/speaking improved
B	M	89	College	70 yrs. Ago	25 yrs.	8 yrs.	High Intermediate	Reading/speaking /listening improved
C	F	80	College	60 yrs. Ago	30 yrs.	4 yrs.	Low Intermediate	Reading/speaking /listening improved
D	F	66	High School	46 yrs. Ago	20 yrs.	6 yrs.	High Intermediate	Reading/speaking /listening improved
E	M	66	High School	46 yrs. Ago	12 yrs.	4 yrs.	Beginners	Speaking/Listening improved
F	F	65	High School	45 yrs. Ago	12 yrs.	4 yrs.	Beginners	Speaking/Listening improved

### *Issues Encountered by the Senior Ells in the Learning Process*

Several issues encountered by the senior ELLs in the English learning process was common to those engaged in the beginning stage of English language learning. Such issues were exacerbated by the deterioration of their eyesight, the gradual loss of their hearing and the slowing down of the rate of processing of audible and visual information in their brain, as had been reported in the literature.

In Tables 2-5 below, we have outlined some of the most commonly cited issues encountered by this study group, as well as the frequently cited remedies that were suggested by students in the interview and in the survey questionnaires.

*Table 2*

*Things that had aided or hindered Speaking skill acquisition*

<b>Description</b>	<b>Aided</b>	<b>Hindered</b>	<b>Frequency reported by ELLs</b>
(a) I don't recall the correct English word to be used		X	100%
(b) I forget how to express this thought in English		X	100%
(c) I have to translate first from Chinese on what I wanted to say, hence a delay in speaking		X	67%
(d) The teacher provides an adequate prompt on the speaking topic	X		100%
(e) The classroom that has an anxiety-free atmosphere	X		80%
(f) Classmates that provide encouragement	X		50%

*Table 3*

*Things that had aided or hindered Listening skill acquisition*

<b>Description</b>	<b>Aided</b>	<b>Hindered</b>	<b>Frequency reported by ELLs</b>
(a) I don't recognize the English words used		X	100%
(b) I don't understand the meaning of the expression		X	100%
(c) The speaker speaks so fast that I cannot catch up		X	50%
(d) Speaker repeats utterance with simpler words	X		100%
(e) Speaker uses body language or real objects to help to communicate	X		50%
(f) Speaker speaks slowly so that I can understand	X		50%

*Table 4*  
*Things that had aided or hindered Writing skill acquisition*

<b>Description</b>	<b>Aided</b>	<b>Hindered</b>	<b>Frequency reported by ELLs</b>
(a) I don't recall the appropriate English words to be used		X	100%
(b) I am unsure about the correct grammar form		X	100%
(c) I rarely practice writing		X	100%
(d) I use the dictionary to look up unknown words	X		100%
(e) Teacher gives examples of proper grammar construct	X		100%
(f) I practice writing more often in class	X		100%

*Table 5*  
*Things that had aided or hindered Reading skill acquisition*

<b>Description</b>	<b>Aided</b>	<b>Hindered</b>	<b>Frequency reported by ELLs</b>
(a) I don't recall the meaning of many English words		X	100%
(b) I forget the English expressions that I learned before		X	100%
(c) I don't read many books in English		X	50%
(d) I use Google translate to provide interpretation into Chinese	X		75%
(e) I record new words or expressions in a notebook and review them periodically	X		33%
(f) I practice reading short passages in magazines but not books	X		50%

### **Implications and Conclusions**

#### ***Motivation Is a Critical Factor Affecting the Elderly ELL's Learning Progress***

In Kemper's comprehensive survey (2006) on adult language acquisition, one could infer that in the ESL classroom with the elderly students, the learning challenges for elderly adult learners

were similar to the younger adult learners. Bellingham (2005) also reported that the challenges that middle-aged English language learners faced were similar to younger learners. In this study, the self-admission of the students and the observation made by their teacher in class again confirmed that of the six elderly ELLs (age from 65-89), in spite of challenges in the learning process, second language acquisition indeed took place for the students for at least two successive years and continuing. However, the level of English competency at which an elderly ELL student was able to achieve varied individually, depending on the learning strategy customized and deployed by each student.

Based on the observations made in the interview of these elderly ELLs, we suspect that “motivation”, along with “goal setting”, are the key factors that affected the elderly ELL’s learning progress. With these elderly ELLs, each student had developed a set of unique learning strategies to attain the final goal of his or her purpose in English learning. For example, Subject B, the oldest of the group, had tremendous perseverance in pursuing classroom education. Not only did Subject B attain a high level of English conversational skills, but the student was also an avid reader and continued to pursue other academic courses such as social studies and mathematics at the local community college. Subject B’s final goal was to receive a General Education Certificate in the adult education program. These goals motivated him to pursue the study of English and other subjects.

Another student, Subject D, who recently reached retirement age, had set her personal goal to speak and write like a native speaker. With this goal in mind, she had enrolled herself in multiple ESL classes and followed a habit of the daily journal entry to record new vocabulary and seizing every opportunity to converse with native English speakers. This student recognized the value of classroom instruction (aside from self-directed study) and sought every opportunity to practice her L2 skills. There is no doubt that someday she would attain her goal as a native-like English speaker. Again, the high goals set by this student propelled her efforts of learning.

In contrast, Subject E and F were a married couple who came to the Beginners ESL class four years ago and remained essentially at the same L2 language competency level for the past four years. Their goal of learning English was limited to handle daily conversations and meet their communication need in the workplace. Recently, they have retired from actively working, so their motivation to attend ESL class regularly had dwindled. It showed that as the goal of English learning shifted, so did the effort towards actively learning English.

In the case of Subject A and C, who had studied in the Intermediate ESL class for three years, their goals were to maintain their current level of English proficiency, so that they could continue to converse in English to neighbors and families. Since both students were well over 70’s, they suffer from signs of short-term memory loss and were unable to stay focus in class. It seemed that their effort to learn new material in English was counterbalanced by the loss of L2 already acquired, such that the net rate of progress was essentially at a standstill. Cognitive impairment has adversely affected English learning in these two older students regardless of their motivation.

### ***The Lack of Influence of L1 Educational Level on the Study Group***

In our study group, the formal (L1) educational level of these students had no apparent correlation to the success of learning the English language. For example, Subject A and C both had college degrees in China, but their level of English language competency was lower than that

of Subject D, who only had a high school education. This observation differed from the report by Mackey, Alison, and Sachs, Rebecca (2012), who suggested that “L1 competency” might signify a good indicator of the success or failure in L2 language acquisition. It was possible that among these six elderly adults in this study, for those who had attained a higher level of “L1 competency” in China, the advantage from having a higher education previously was offset by their current cognitive dysfunction such as reduced working memory and compromised hearing.

### ***Conclusion and Implication on Pedagogical Strategies for Teaching Elderly ELL’s***

In summary, from the results of this study, it is reasonable to concur with the statement that “age alone is not an absolute barrier to language learning”, which was suggested originally by Ehrman and Oxford (1995). Furthermore, the achievement of a certain level of competency in English learning seems to be driven by the personal goals that these six ELLs had set for themselves. The goal established by the individual student then became the primary motivational force behind the tailored learning process that resulted in attaining the specific level of language competency.

As teachers, we ought to be aware of the aspirations and limitations of our students. For students who are beyond retirement age (> 65 old), teachers must recognize the cognitive dysfunction facing these students. From the interview conducted with the group of six elderly ELLs, we had summarised some of the frequently encountered issues with classroom teaching to this group and provided suggestions on how to cope with these issues in Table 6.

*Table 6*

*Pedagogical Strategies for teaching elderly ELL in a community ESL Program*

<b>Learners' Issues</b>	<b>Pedagogical Strategies for teaching elderly ELL</b>
1. Cannot catch up with what teacher has said	1. Slow down the speech delivery rate and use a visual aid (e.g. pictures or other realia) to highlight the lesson
2. Poor attention span	2. Teach lessons in chunks, with students' interaction spliced between topics of instruction
3. Inability to recall words or phrases already learned	3. Choose topics of interest to this age group and illustrate the same topic with different examples before moving on to a new topic. Encourage the student to associate the topic with a personal experience that they have encountered previously
4. Intolerance to ambiguity	4. Encourage ambiguity in listening and reading and incorporate exercises of guessing meaning into the lesson plan
5. Unwillingness to practice reading or writing	5. Encourage students to read magazines associated with their hobbies, advertisement encountered on public transport and billboards, the news reported on newspaper; also encourage students to write their own journal entry, and bring their questions in class to share

6. Sustaining motivation in learning	6. Classroom learning time is essential for this age group to instill a regular schedule of target language exposure. Due to the quick relapse of short-term memory, re-iteration of the teaching process is necessary during class instruction and teacher must be prepared to adjust the pace of teaching according to the students' progress.
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Though it is infrequent for ESL teachers to encounter many elderly ELLs in their classes, for those teachers who do, attention to the learning challenges of the elderly students would prepare the teachers to cope with challenges of second language acquisition in the elderly students. Finally, workshops and seminars on teaching English to the elderly learners would also enhance the teacher knowledge in this area of pedagogical strategies.

### Acknowledgment

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## Appendix I

### PROTOCOL: Questionnaire on English Language Learners (EQ-03-2018)

A) **Gender:**  Male  Female B) **Age:**  20-40  40-65  65+ C) **Education:**  Jr High  High School  College  
 D) **Years of learning English?**  1  2  3  4  5  6 years, #  lessons per year, #  hours per lesson.

#### Questionnaire:

Please check the answer that best describes your learning experience and place a  mark. **You may select up to 3 answers in each question**

1. In the past two years, did you practice “Listening English”?  No /Yes:  Occasionally  
 Every week  Every month
2. In the past two years, did you practice “Speaking English”?  No /Yes:  Occasionally  
 Every week  Every month
3. In the past two years, did you practice “Writing English”?  No /Yes:  Occasionally  
 Every week  Every month
4. In the past two years, did you practice “Reading English”?  No /Yes:  Occasionally  
 Every week  Every month
5. On “Listening English”, name three reasons that makes learning more difficult:
  - a. Cannot remember the correct word to use
  - b. Do not know how to say it
  - c. Feel embarrassed to speak in English
  - d. Had to think of the answer first in Chinese and then translate into English
  - e. Other reasons \_\_\_\_\_
6. On “Listening English”, name three reasons that makes learning easier for you:
  - a. Teacher provides adequate speaking examples
  - b. Learning setting is relatively stress free
  - c. Received encouragement from other students
  - d. Feel good when I can speak in English
  - e. Other reasons \_\_\_\_\_
7. On “Speaking English”, name three reasons that makes learning more difficult:
  - a. Cannot remember the correct word to use
  - b. Do not know how to say it
  - c. Feel embarrassed to speak in English
  - d. Had to think of the answer first in Chinese and then translate into English
  - e. Other reasons \_\_\_\_\_
8. On “Speaking English”, name three reasons that makes learning easier for you:
  - a. Teacher provides adequate speaking examples
  - b. Learning setting is relatively stress free

- c. Received encouragement from other students \_\_\_\_
- d. Feel good when I can speak in English \_\_\_\_
- e. Other reasons \_\_\_\_\_
9. On “Writing English”, name three reasons that makes learning more difficult:
- a. The passage content is not interesting to me \_\_\_\_
- b. Too many new words in English that I do not understand \_\_\_\_
- c. Forget the grammatical rules in writing \_\_\_\_
- d. I rarely read English manuscripts \_\_\_\_
- e. Other reasons \_\_\_\_\_
10. On “Writing English”, name three reasons that makes learning easier for you:
- a. Teacher regularly drills us in vocabulary \_\_\_\_
- b. Teacher frequently teaches us grammar rules \_\_\_\_
- c. Teacher always shows us writing examples \_\_\_\_
- d. I regularly read English manuscripts \_\_\_\_
- e. Other reasons \_\_\_\_\_
11. On “Reading English”, name three reasons that makes learning more difficult:
- a. The passage content is not interesting to me \_\_\_\_
- b. Too many new words in English that I do not understand \_\_\_\_
- c. Forget the grammatical rules in writing \_\_\_\_
- d. I rarely read English manuscripts \_\_\_\_
- e. Other reasons \_\_\_\_\_
12. On “Reading English”, name three reasons that makes learning easier for you:
- a. Teacher regularly drills us in vocabulary \_\_\_\_
- b. Teacher frequently teaches us grammar rules \_\_\_\_
- c. Teacher always shows us writing examples \_\_\_\_
- d. I regularly read English manuscripts \_\_\_\_
- e. Other reasons \_\_\_\_\_
13. In your experience of learning English, please suggest what helps you to learn English well?
- \_\_\_\_\_

*Thanks very much for sharing your personal experience with English learning. \*The personal information collected in this questionnaire will be kept confidential and are used only for the research on teaching English and improving English course design.*

## Appendix II

### PROTOCOL: Interview on Elderly English Language Learners (EQ04-2018)

Date of interview: \_\_\_\_\_ Interviewee code# \_\_\_\_\_ Interviewer: T.  
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**(I) Please check the answer that best describes you:**

**(a) Gender:**  Male  Female **(b) Age:**  60  61-70  70-80  80+

**(c) Prior Education in mother tongue:**  Jr High  High School  College and above

**(II) As an English student, please reflect on your own experience in learning:**

1. Where and how did you learn English (in school, by casual conversation, watching movies, listening to radio etc.) before coming to this ESL class?
2. For what **purpose(s)** have you learned and used the English language? What **motivates** you to come to study English in the ESL class?
3. How would you describe the **improvement** or **setback** in your English proficiency level for the **past two years** in these FOUR areas of language skills?
  - (A) Reading?
  - (B) Writing?
  - (C) Speaking?
  - (D) Listening?
4. What has been especially **helpful** to you in the process of learning English in past years? Consider personal effort, classroom experiences, and non-classroom interactions in these FOUR areas of language skills:

- (A) Reading?
- (B) Writing?
- (C) Speaking?
- (D) Listening?
5. What has been especially **difficult** for you in the process of learning English in past two years? Consider personal effort, classroom experiences, and non-classroom interactions in these FOUR areas of language skills:
- (A) Reading?
- (B) Writing?
- (C) Speaking?
- (D) Listening?
6. If you were planning to learn a new foreign language now, how would you go about to study the new language **based on your past experience** of learning English?
7. If you were planning to give advice to a friend who is beginning to learn English, what would you tell your friend, **based on your past experience** of learning English?

*Glad that you shared your personal experience on English learning with me. The information collected here will be used strictly for research purpose and for English course design. Again, thanks for your help!*