

Online learning of foreign languages by adults during the pandemic: a qualitative case study of the emotional outcomes

Uczenie się języków obcych online przez dorosłych w czasie pandemii: studium jakościowe efektów emocjonalnych

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emotional outcomes of learning, adults learning foreign languages, emergency remote teaching, qualitative methods in SLA

Słowa kluczowe

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Abstract

Learning foreign languages in adulthood remains a challenging endeavour. As research shows, adults might study a foreign language for many years, for not only intellectual but affective profits that the activity may bring (Singleton and Zaborska, 2020). The present study deals with the middle-aged group of adult learners, which is the least researched when it comes to adult foreign language learning (Kuklewicz & King, 2018). The immediate aspect of their learning addressed by this paper is the shift from stationary, face-to-face learning with a tutor to online learning during the pandemic. Given the huge role that emotional reactions, motivation, and self-efficacy play in learning a foreign language, the focus of the present study is on the affective outcomes of the shift in language learning environments from traditional to virtual, taking place in an emergency mode in 2020. The researched group, active IT professionals, all study in one

workplace, thus constituting a single case of adults learning languages online during the pandemic.

Abstrakt

Uczenie się języków obcych w wieku dojrzałym pozostaje zadaniem niezmiernie trudnym.

Jak pokazują badania, niektórzy dorośli uczą się przez całe lata, nie tylko ze względu na korzyści intelektualne, ale również emocjonalne, jakie może przynieść uczenie się języka obcego (Singleton i Zaborska, 2020). Opisane w artykule badanie objęło grupę dorosłych w średnim wieku, o której wiemy obecnie najmniej ze wszystkich grup osób dorosłych (Kuklewicz & King, 2018). Szczególną uwagę poświęcono zmianie trybu nauczania, ze stacjonarnego na zdalny, która podyktowana była nastaniem pandemii Covid-19.

Wziąwszy pod uwagę ogromną rolę jaką emocje, motywacja i poczucie własnej skuteczności ogrywają w procesie uczenia się języka, postanowiono skupić się na emocjonalnych efektach przejścia nauki w tryb zdalny. Badana grupa, której przypadek opisano w artykule, to czynni profesjonalści IT, osoby uczące się różnych języków obcych w swoim miejscu pracy.

Online learning of foreign languages by adults during the pandemic: a qualitative case study of the emotional outcomes of the shift.

1. Introduction

Language learning as an additional activity seems to be systematically growing in Poland. Apart from the immense popularity of private schools and private tutors that serve those who are not entirely satisfied with language teaching provided by their state schools (Komorowska, 2014), there is more and more interest in language learning by professionals. In their case learning usually consists in voluntary participation in language courses offered by language schools, private tutors, language schools offering on-site courses at their workplace, and, these days, also online language classes. Professionally active students – who are situated among language learners between young adults (i.e., university students) and seniors (a post-employment community of learners) want such lessons at work for at least two reasons: to advance their career prospects as well as to contribute to their own personal development. The primary goal that many professionals pursue is to polish their speaking, a skill often undermined at school or in university classes. Thanks to learning conditions typical for the office environment, adults can now learn in small groups and, not infrequently, profit from one-to-one language instruction. In the corporate world the latter becomes affordable thanks to good salaries and the possibility of obtaining financial subsidies from their employer, who is also interested in their staff's language skills and job satisfaction. It is not unimportant that, after the initial interest of the well-earning in satisfying material needs, there come the needs of self-development in different spheres, including the learning of languages.

Although language learning in middle age is often described as difficult, it may come to be recognised as a huge life bonus to those whose school learning or previous professional experience did not equip them with excellent language skills. Unlike school learning, this kind of learning is usually voluntary (except for the cases where the employer actually insists on language learning and certification of their employees) and based on the analysis of learners' needs (Sobkowiak, 2011), which may largely increase the students' positive appraisal of their learning. Provided their instructors listen and respond to their goals and needs, adult learners may find learning both useful and pleasant. Rooted in the long-standing method of Community

Language Learning (Stevic, 1979), the principle of treating the adult learner as a client or patient who has a particular problem to solve determines the fact that adults also develop a unique relationship with their tutor, relying on his or her aid, trusting their linguistic inadequacies in their hands. Moving the learning environment from stationary into virtual in the situation of the unprecedented 2020 pandemic changes both the type of contact between the learners and their instructors and between co-learners. At least potentially, it may affect the motivation that adults hold to continue learning.

2. Learning foreign languages by adults

When it comes to English learning worldwide, some researchers wonder what reasons might drive people of adult age – starting from young adults (20-40), through middle adults (40-60), and late adults – to pursue the difficult process of foreign/second language learning in the country of their L1, without much obvious contact with English speakers in the immediate environment (as opposed to second language learners in countries where English is actually used). According to Lanvers (2012), the answer must be the transition of English from a foreign to a global language. Starting from those shortly after university graduation through those in older age (after 60), adults decide to engage in language learning activities despite the fact that adult language learning is often described with such words as “hard”, or “a struggle” (Lanvers, 2012).

Numerous studies and abundant anecdotal evidence have shown that many adults do have significant problems in learning another language. Yet researchers and nonspecialists alike have mistakenly assumed that this somehow implies that all adults are incapable of mastering an L2. First, adults are not a homogeneous group of linguistically incompetent creatures. (Marinova-Todd et al, 2000:18)

Assuming the heterogeneous character of linguistic competences of adults, it has to be said that adult professionals are the ones who have obtained language instruction the longest, that is throughout secondary and tertiary education. Today, there are few people in Poland who graduated from a university completely without foreign language skills. Many of them have more or less successfully used English for work or personal reasons, but still want to improve their so far incomplete language proficiency or, in the case of really proficient ones, make sure that they use the language and do not backslide.

What might be their primary motives? Do they seek the privileges of multilinguals, who seem to be more wanted as a workforce, or does the idea

of being a person who can communicate/read in the foreign language appeal to them as a personal goal to be achieved? Or maybe it is the awareness of the research, suggesting quite strongly that using more than one language substantially helps against the danger of such problems of older age as dementia (e.g. Bialystok et al (2007)? It seems that we are not completely rational when it comes to engaging in language learning in adulthood: emotions play an important role.

2.1. The role of affect in adult learning

The role of emotions in second/foreign language learning have been stressed by humanistic psychology, which directed our attention to the fact that learners' affect – not just intellect – is important in the process of learning. Positive affect, such as a feeling of interest, pleasantness or usefulness of tasks, and satisfaction with one's performance, results in increased motivation to continue learning the language. On the other hand, negative emotions – for instance boredom, tension, or fear – lead to negative attitudes and, as a consequence, low results of learning (Asotska & Strzałka, 2011). Schuman (1999) argued that positive appraisals of the language learning situation – that is, the target language, its speakers and the culture in which it is used, the teacher, the syllabus, and the text – enhance language learning, while negative appraisals have the power of inhibiting second language learning (Asotska & Strzałka, 2011).

Because of the voluntary character of their learning, adults' positive appraisal of the language learning situation and the feeling of self-efficacy seem to be crucial factors in keeping their motivation at a high level. When adults do not consider their learning as a positive experience or do not see themselves as potent participants of the process, they are likely to quit the course they attend, which sometimes results in abandoning learning. As Ferrari (2013) discovered, adults, who have strong social bonds motivation, are less tolerant of learning environments in which they do not feel comfortable. In terms of the social component of the process, the statement may refer both to the co-students and the teacher, who both contribute to an adult's feeling that learning is a satisfying endeavour. In terms of linguistic input (from the teacher, the materials, and the techniques), as well as physical conditions, adults may just be more demanding than younger learners (Strzałka, 1998).

2.1.1. Emotional outcomes of learning a foreign language

Research conducted recently in Japan showed that seniors learn foreign languages because they are motivated by the pleasure that learning brings them. Positive affect arising from the process of learning is what makes adults think not so much about the pain involved in their language learning, but rather about the joy and satisfaction that can be derived from the activity. As the authors notice, seniors consider language learning as a means of interacting and integrating socially, and the social well being achieved this way may lead to positive cognitive effects (Singleton & Zaborska, 2020).

Although the above observations may not be generalized to all adults, the idea that people want to learn a language because of (among other factors) the positive emotional reactions that appear in the process seems worth attention. It is the good feelings related to the activity which seem to motivate adults to continue actually more than any objective learning outcomes, which may be smaller than the ones achieved by younger students. It is worth noting that although Critical Age Hypothesis research does not exclude adult learners' progress in a foreign language, the curve of the results of the language test (e.g., grammaticality judgements) by age (Vanhove, 2013) is rather merciless.

In order not to give up at the very beginning, adults must be driven by something else than the vision of quick transformation from a monolingual into a speaker of a foreign language or two. There is no adequate research suggesting what is the rate of progress in language proficiency which prevents an adult from continuing to learn. The profit obtained from the participation in a language course will be appraised individually, and the effects ranked as positive will not necessarily be pure language proficiency gains. Some adults of middle and older age, for example, feel that learning a foreign language in itself nobilitates them and allows them to think well of themselves (Strzałka, 2011). As mentioned before, positive affect arising under the influence of a particular group, particular teacher, specific materials, and mode of learning may itself drive adult learners to continue learning. On the other hand, their negative appraisal of the learning environment, given the lack of institutional or social pressure, is likely to result in giving up learning.

The learning environment, which affects any learner motivation to learn includes the mode of learning: traditional or technology-based. It is interesting to see if the emergency shift in the mode of learning from stationary into online during the 2020 pandemic, which led to a change in the character of all social contacts, affected learners' appraisal of their learning and, consequently, their motivation to learn.

3. Online learning of foreign languages during the pandemic

On March 27, 2020, Hodges et al published an article in which they describe the then recent situation in (American) education. According to the internet article, “well-planned online learning experiences are meaningfully different from courses offered online in response to a crisis or disaster” (Hodges et al, 2020), so a new term suitable to these particular COVID-19 circumstances was suggested: emergency remote teaching. “Moving instruction online can enable the flexibility of teaching and learning anywhere, any-time, but the speed with which this move to online instruction is expected to happen is unprecedented and staggering” (ibid). On the basis on the objections to the understanding of all previously known types of online learning as the same as emergency learning and teaching, the researchers suggested the following definition:

Emergency Remote Teaching (ERT) is a temporary shift of instructional delivery to an alternate delivery mode due to crisis circumstances. It involves the use of fully remote teaching solutions for instruction or education that would otherwise be delivered face-to-face or as blended or hybrid courses and that will return to that format once the crisis or emergency has abated. The primary objective in these circumstances is not to re-create a robust educational ecosystem but rather to provide emergency remote teaching. (Hodges et al, 2020)

As it is stated above, during the pandemic we teach languages online because we have to, rather than because we necessarily want to. At the same time, we use the existing technology to provide lessons while face-to-face contact is heavily restricted. Although before the pandemic teachers could have worked online in a more time-effective manner – that is, without spending time on commuting to the learner-client – they did not. It must have resulted not from the lack of relevant technological solutions, but from the teachers and learners’ agreement to provide and obtain traditional language learning instruction in situ.

Also, it is assumed that teachers who provided face-to-face teaching prior to the pandemic did not focus their energy on acquiring skills of designing, conducting, and assessing online teaching, which does not mean they did not possess them at all. In a study of Polish teachers of English, for example, Adamek (2020) found out that 63% percent of primary and secondary school teachers willingly used teaching methods involving the use of information and communication technology before the pandemic, while approximately 30% had an unfavourable attitude towards ICT.

4. The role of qualitative data in SLA

Although much of the published research in SLA seems to be of qualitative nature (Dorney, 2007), the impact of qualitative studies remains massive. Since the mid-1990s this kind of research has been more and more accepted and recognised (Duff in Dorney, 2007). It is an ideal type of research for providing insights into contextual factors, usually of social and cultural character. As qualitative data have an emergent nature, researchers who choose this kind of research start their research process with an open mind and do not intend to prove any hypothesis of their own (ibid). Research of this type is more likely to shed light on the classroom as a natural environment. There is no manipulation of the teaching introduced by the researcher, or control of the variables. The setting is described to the best of researchers' knowledge, and the results may be generalised only to this same (type of) setting.

5. Research

5.1. Rationale

According to the researchers interested in older adult language learning, the group that has been least researched is the middle-aged adults (Kuklewicz & King, 2018), who are between 40-60 years of age. It seems to the author that so-called younger adults (20-40) are too a wide group to be put in the same category of learners. The division seems to overlook the fact that those who are no longer university students but active participants on the job market have specific character, expectations, and motivation to learn. Although they might learn to promote their career prospects, it is not always ESP courses that they follow.

The emergency transition of language courses into the virtual domain during the 2020 pandemic sparked the researcher's interest in the response to this kind of learning of adult learners from the professionally active group.

5.2. The participants.

In an attempt to elicit data about online learning of foreign languages, the author was looking for a cohesive group of learners who all changed the mode of learning from in-class to online one. A convenience sample of such learners was found in one of the IT companies in Krakow, taught by several language teachers known to the researcher. Based on this selection, the participant group was professionally homogeneous, and consisted of 27 adult learners of English, twenty two men (22) and five (5) women, all with L1 Polish.

The term emergency online learning applies to the research participants, as all of them participated in in-class foreign language instruction at the workplace prior to the pandemic. The time of their contact with language instructors in the workplace ranged from several weeks to 12 years (on and off). Levels of advancement ranged from A1 to C2. The language learnt was primarily English, with four participants learning Italian, two participants learning German, and one learning Russian. The language instructors/tutors providing the online lessons to the group in question were five teachers of English (four native speaker teachers and one Polish teacher), one teacher of Italian, one of German, and one of Russian. The discussion of the elicited data does not take into account the differences in the time of studying or the language of study, for the lack of sufficient representatives of the potential subgroups of learners. In the research they simply treated it as “foreign language learners attending online courses organised in an emergency mode due to the restrictions following the outbreak of the Covid-19 pandemic during the period between April and 30 of October”. Excluding the summer months when teaching was either suspended due to holiday season or took place face-to-face (while the COVID restrictions were eased in response to a decreased number of infection cases), the online experience of the learners lasted from two months (new learners joining the courses in September) to five months. In the case of the latter, the comparison with in-class learning will be done on the basis of their previous (*i.e.*, taking place elsewhere) experience.

5.3. Research problems and tools.

Interested in the adults’ experience of online learning of foreign languages, the author was particularly looking for answers to the following questions:

1. What is professionally active adult learners’ appraisal of their (emergency) online language learning experiences?
2. How does online learning change the type of learning tasks and how do the students emotionally respond to this change?
3. Are the students satisfied with the new way of learning offered to them during the pandemic?

In order to “hear” the particular voices of the learners in question, the qualitative research method (a predominantly open-ended survey) was chosen. The participants have been surveyed with an online questionnaire composed of 15 questions concerning:

- level of satisfaction with the online mode of learning
- perceived advantages and disadvantages of online (versus in class) learning

- motivation level in on-line versus in class learning
- factors positively and negatively affecting motivation in on-line versus in-class learning
- type of learning activities offered during on-line learning
- students' preferred language learning activities in-class and online
- self efficacy in on-line versus in class learning

5.4. Discussion of elicited data

What follows is a discussion of the answers to the research questions asked in 5.3.

What is professionally active adult learners' appraisal of their (emergency) online language learning experiences?

One of the first questions the survey participants were asked, as well as one of the few close-ended answers they could provide was "to what extent are you satisfied with learning your foreign language online?" 20 out of 27 adult learners confirmed they were "very satisfied (6) or satisfied (14) with this mode of learning (during the pandemic). This (quantitative) result informs us that the informants' general perception of the foreign language courses provided on-line is positive. It is interesting to see what particular advantages and disadvantages the learners notice about this new way of learning.

The table below presents accumulated answers to two open-ended questions: "What are, in your opinion, the advantages of learning online?" and "What are, in your opinion, the disadvantages of learning online?"

<p>advantages of online learning perceived by adults (26 learners)</p>	<p>makes learning possible during COVID, time economy, flexibility of time and place, increased pace of learning, access to online materials, dictionaries, no need for additional tech equipment (radio/disc player/personal computer), screen sharing, use of students' materials, access to online materials, learning independent of student and teacher location, safety, the comfort of learning from home, stress on speaking skills, the presence of the teacher (so to speak), having all materials made available on the screen, none (3)</p>
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disadvantages of online learning perceived by adults	problems with internet connection, jerky conversation, difficult to use coursebooks, free applications do not allow to continue class for longer than 45 minutes, voice (connection) quality, lack of direct, physical contact with the teacher, less grammar practice, necessity to repeat if sound quality is low, no pair-work, less written work, none (8)
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Table.1 Perceived advantages and disadvantages of online learning during the pandemic

As it seems, there are more advantages of (the emergency) language learning online than the perceived disadvantages. Learning (in the time of the pandemic) is first of all safe, it is comfortable, and it allows for the use of more different materials than the traditional (office) classroom.

The drawbacks include mainly technical problems, some learners complain about the lack of grammar practice or pair work, which seem only temporary difficulties (both can be overcome by the teacher), and some notice the lack of personal contact as a disadvantage.

How does online learning change the type of learning tasks and how do the students emotionally respond to this change?

As we could see in the table discussed above, the increased stress on the speaking skills, which characterises online lessons is welcomed by some students while others are of the opinion that “less stress on grammar activities or writing tasks” is a disadvantage of on-line learning. Let us see how the activities changed, according to the learners.

techniques used in traditional contact	reading, grammar activities, speaking, speaking in pairs, listening to recordings, coursebook activities, video watching, conversation on different topic, answering questions, writing tasks, crosswords (vocabulary), games, repeating words and phrases, using them in different context
online techniques	all tasks from a coursebook, listening tasks, reading texts, dialogues, conversation, crosswords (vocabulary), answering questions, watching a video.

Table 2. Techniques used by the teachers in traditional and online contact with the adult student

As we can see, there are more techniques that the students are exposed to in class than in on-line learning. It is interesting to see that (explicit) grammar exercises are not among the on-line techniques, which some students obviously miss.

To some other students, who claim that there is little difference between in-class and online learning, this is not apparent:

“tasks are really the same”

“tasks have not changed”

“maybe there is just less stress on spelling”

Among the activity types that the sample group students admitted to preferring in the in-class mode of learning are the speaking activities (“conversation”, “discussions”, questions and answers”). This may explain why the online mode, in which the speaking activities are run with the same or higher frequency, is generally accepted by the adult learners.

Are the students satisfied with the new way of learning offered to them during the pandemic?

The data collected from the closed ended questions of the survey showed that, within the study participants, the overwhelming majority were “very satisfied” or “satisfied” with the emergency online mode of learning and only one person, who suspended their course, felt “demotivated” due to this mode of learning. The total size of the “very satisfied” and “satisfied” participants group, however, decreased with the onset of the online lessons: from 20 to 16 persons.

Data from the open-ended question (“what demotivates you in on-line learning”) may explain due to which factors motivation may decrease:

“lack of the direct contact with the teacher” (2)

“difficulties with the spelling of new words”

“communication problems due to technical issues”

“it is more difficult to concentrate when you learn at home”

It seems that although the majority of students have accepted the new form of contact and positively appraise their online learning experience, some adult learners are not entirely satisfied. While some of the ailments could be removed, should the teachers be informed about them (e.g. spelling problems), others simply cannot be changed. One of such features of the in-class learning environment which online learning simply lacks is the direct contact with the teacher.

6. Conclusions

The case of 27 adults learning foreign languages at work, whose learning went online during the pandemic, shows that a different mode of learning does not change their attitude to their language course in a considerable manner. Although general satisfaction with learning fell a little, adult learners of this middle group seem to exhibit a strong inner motivation to continue learning. There are learners among the sample who seem to prefer the traditional in-class learning, with the encouraging smile of the teacher, who back-channels as they speak, but only one person “feels demotivated” by the on-line mode.

As the emergency shift did not mean a change of the teacher, the group, or the time of learning, we may conclude that these factors play a crucial role in the positive appraisal of the language learning environment. For a majority of the students, the change to the online mode met with positive appraisal and hence, should not be an obstacle to further learning.

As for the techniques used, most traditional activities, like reading and discussing texts (which could be sent to the learners or shared on the screen) as well as the speaking activities were easily transferred to the online mode. Also listening comprehension (including video watching) was used in a similar manner. The teachers did not use any online applications, like Quizzlet, for example, which are popular with teachers of secondary school students and which could reinvigorate learning online. Instead, teaching in an emergency online mode, they tried to “recreate the traditional learning ecosystem” and were quite successful at that.

7. Limitations of the study

Obviously, the present article describes the perception of online language learning by adults represented by a small group of learners, homogeneous as far as their occupation, and, what is more, dominated by male learners. The occupation of the examined group is not an unimportant variable: we can only predict that other professional groups might have a different attitude to learning in front of the computer screen. The pandemic has sent many different employees to work from home, which may make them avoid any additional online contacts, while for the group in question, it did not matter too much. Also, the results could be different for a more mixed gender sample. All things considered, the research supports the idea that online language education might be the way of the future, to the regret of those who cherish the delicate ecosystem of the face-to-face language class.

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