

## Challenges of learning English in late adulthood: The case of online learning

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### Abstract

Foreign language learning has been found effective in helping older people improve cognitive functioning and provide opportunities at psychological and social levels. This study examines the difficulties older adult English as a Foreign Language (EFL) learners and their instructors encounter within the online learning and instruction framework. To achieve this objective, seven EFL learners over 60 and two English teachers were included as participants in the study. The collection of qualitative data occurred over six weeks during an English course. The objective was achieved by submitting participants' weekly self-reflection reports, interviews with learners and instructors, and the researchers' observations. A content analysis was conducted to examine the qualitative data. The study's findings indicate that learners aged 60 and over have several cognitive and physical obstacles when participating in online English courses. Additionally, they rely on their previous learning habits, potentially impacting their overall learning experience. This study provides insights into the pedagogical implications of teaching English to older adults and recommendations for traditional face-to-face classroom instruction and online learning modalities.

**Keywords:** online language teaching, older adult language learners, online education, late adulthood

### Geç yetişkinlik döneminde İngilizce öğrenmenin zorlukları: Çevrimiçi öğrenme örneği

### Özet (Türkçe)

Yabancı dil öğreniminin ileri yetişkin insanların bilişsel fonksiyonlarını iyileştirmelerine ve onlara psikolojik ve sosyal düzeyde fırsatlar sunmalarına yardımcı olmak için etkili olduğu tespit edilmiştir. Bu bağlamda, bu çalışmanın amacı ileri yetişkin İngilizce öğrenen öğrencilerin ve onların öğretmenlerinin çevrimiçi eğitim ve öğretim süresince karşılaştıkları zorlukları incelemektir. Bu hedefe ulaşmak için, 60 yaş üzerinde yedi İngilizce öğrenen öğrenci ve iki İngilizce öğretmeni çalışmaya katılımcı olarak dahil edilmiştir. Bu kapsamda yürütülen İngilizce dersleri 6 hafta boyunca gözlemlenmiş, katılımcılardan her hafta öz yansıtma raporu istenmiş ve 6 haftalık araştırma süresi sonunda her bir katılımcı ile bireysel görüşmeler yapılmıştır. Elde edilen nitel veriler içerik analizi yöntemiyle analiz edilmiştir. Analiz sonucunda, 60 yaş ve üstü öğrencilerin çevrimiçi İngilizce kurslarına katıldıkları zaman birçok bilişsel ve fiziksel engellerle karşılaştıkları, bu öğrencilerin daha önceki öğrenme alışkanlıklarını korudukları ve bu durumun mevcut öğrenme deneyimlerini etkilediğini ortaya çıkmıştır. Bu çalışma, ileri yetişkinlere İngilizce öğretiminin pedagojik etkileri ile hem geleneksel yüz yüze sınıf eğitimi hem de çevrimiçi öğrenme yöntemleri konusunda öneriler sunmaktadır.

**Anahtar Kelimeler:** çevrimiçi dil öğretimi, çevrimiçi eğitim, ileri yetişkin dil öğrencileri, ileri yetişkinlik

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## Introduction

Based on the OECD (2022) statistics, a global trend of increasing life expectancy at birth suggests an expected increase in the senior population in the coming years. Due to this rationale, the social integration of the aged population has been a focal point of national projects aimed at enhancing the quality of life during ageing. In light of the objective to offer older individuals, particularly in the aftermath of the COVID-19 pandemic, opportunities for physical, social, and mental well-being, governments have undertaken research into non-pharmacological interventions aimed at enhancing cognitive functioning and mitigating mental health decline among older people (Hanna et al., 2022). Concurrently, the World Health Organization (WHO) has supported the ongoing pursuit of knowledge and skills among older persons to effectively navigate their lives and sustain engagement (WHO, 2015). According to the World Health Organization (WHO, 2022), there has been an observed increase in the Healthy Life Expectancy (HALE) at birth. HALE refers to the average years an individual might anticipate living in complete physical and mental well-being.

The claims mentioned above by the authorities have prompted several endeavours to formulate suitable educational initiatives and legislation and a growing recognition of the significance of lifelong learning for older individuals (Mestheneos & Withnall, 2016). In the present context, it has been asserted that the acquisition of foreign languages (FL) can contribute to the enhancement of cognitive abilities among older individuals, offer avenues for social interaction, promote self-worth, and serve as a protective factor against the onset of dementia (Alladi et al., 2013; Bak, 2016; Klimova, 2018). Similarly, Ramirez-Gomez (2016) stated that older persons have advantages in terms of psychological well-being, social interactions, and cognitive functioning. In addition to disseminating the research above findings, there has been a recent observation of heightened interest among older persons in acquiring foreign languages. Nevertheless, a significant number of educators probably lack adequate expertise in designing lesson plans tailored to the needs of older students. In addition, it is essential to consider the potential impact of ageist societal assumptions on language teachers. Such assumptions may result in teachers treating all adults as a homogeneous group and consequently influencing their selection of teaching methodologies (Ramirez-Gomez, 2014).

Furthermore, it has been proposed that there are various physical (Merriam & Caffarella, 1999) and cognitive (Kim & Merriam, 2004; Martin, 2003) disparities between younger and older adults that are likely to impact the development and implementation of educational initiatives, indicating the necessity for distinct examinations based on age cohorts. For example, in a study by Marcotte and Ansaldo (2014), young and old participants were examined to determine age-related behavioural and neurofunctional patterns in L2 word learning. The findings revealed that senior people required longer time than younger participants. Furthermore, while the performance was comparable for both groups, there were variations in the brain region stimulated during second language (L2) word acquisition among the young and elderly participants. Likewise, Polonyi et al. (2016) conducted a study

investigating the initial acquisition of many factors in a second language (L2). Individuals of a younger age demonstrated higher levels of success across nearly all learning tasks involving artificial language. In addition, the response time of older persons for many tasks was greater than that of young adults. Therefore, considering the potential differences, this research has chosen to utilise the Critical Foreign Language Geragogy (CFLG, Ramirez-Gomez, 2016a), which asserts the presence of challenges in instructing English to older individuals stemming from their distinct characteristics and requirements when compared to younger adults. Consequently, CFLG proposes the development of tailored educational initiatives to cater to the specific needs of this learner demographic. Within the context of this theoretical framework, the primary objective of this study is to examine the various obstacles encountered in teaching English to older adult learners of English as a foreign language (EFL). This investigation seeks to uncover this learner demographic's requirements and distinguishing traits.

## Literature Review

### *Effects of Age on L2 Learning*

The impact of age on learners' potential level of language proficiency appears to be a topic of debate. Lenneberg (1967) posited the Critical Period Hypothesis, which suggests that learning a language after puberty may yield suboptimal language fluency. Krashen et al. (1979) also claimed an advantage to learning a language at a younger age, as younger learners tend to acquire language skills more quickly. However, they noted that older learners may demonstrate a faster rate of language acquisition. Consequently, a prevailing view has emerged that younger learners exhibit superior second language (L2) proficiency compared to their older counterparts. According to Andrew (2012), however, the CPH model does not differentiate between different stages of adulthood, as defined by developmental psychology as adulthood (20-40 years), middle adulthood (40-65 years), and late adulthood (65 and over) (Sigelman & Rider, 2012) and offers a limited explanation for the impact of age on second language (L2) learning. So, he has claimed that the prevailing notion that language acquisition becomes more challenging with age requires reconsideration. Furthermore, Major (2014) argued that a crucial age range exists throughout human development, beyond which individuals lose the capacity to acquire a second language (L2) with the same proficiency as their original language. Similarly, Hu (2016) documented that individuals in the adolescent or adult stage may encounter significant challenges when acquiring novel linguistic abilities and retaining a sense of foreignness. On the other hand, supporting Andrew (2012), Singleton and Lesniewska (2021) argued that the concept of a critical period in second language (L2) acquisition lacks empirical evidence and cannot be disproven. Therefore, the commonly held belief that acquiring additional languages after reaching puberty, a timeframe that varies among individuals will result in imperfect and incomplete language proficiency poses particular problems.

Singleton and Zaborska (2020) agreed that a subsequent decrease in auditory acuity with advancing age leads to significant hearing impairment in older ages (Singleton & Ryan, 2004), which might negatively impact the oral-aural aspects of acquiring a second language. Also, addressing the assertions about the cognitive decline in ageing individuals, McElree and Dyer (2013) stated that the process of ageing is not consistently linked to a decline in working memory capacity but is more closely associated with a decrease in processing speed and Singleton (2017) claimed that working memory capacity can be enhanced through experience and training, potentially benefiting the acquisition of a second language even in individuals at later ages. Consequently, there have been more scholars who hold a different perspective regarding the explanation of success or failure in second language acquisition (SLA) solely based on age, as they argue that it is influenced by cognitive, social, and psychological factors (Ellis, 2008; Dörnyei, 2009; Singleton & Lesniewska, 2021). For example, Pfenninger (2011) found that the potential advantages of an earlier age of initial exposure to a second language (L2) are not universally applicable and do not necessarily lead to a heightened level of proficiency in L2 inflectional morphology. As a result, contemporary discussions on age in SLA now consider physical maturation and psychological and sociocultural dimensions (Singleton & Lesniewska, 2021).

### *Older Adult Learners in EFL Learning*

Older adults are classified as people over the age of 60 by Ramirez Gomez (2016b), who has proposed applying CFLG principles in older adult foreign language education. Based on data from the World Health Organization, it is estimated that by 2030, approximately one in six people in the global population will consist of individuals aged 60 and beyond. Furthermore, it is anticipated that by 2050, this demographic group will comprise twice the size of the world's population. Consequently, it is imperative to develop a comprehensive strategy to ensure the overall welfare of this ageing population.

So far, several researchers have pointed out the benefits of learning a foreign language for older learners, especially their health (Antoniou et al., 2013; Klimova & Kuca, 2015; Ramirez-Gomez, 2016a). However, given that learning a foreign language necessitates the continuous use and performance of specific physical and cognitive skills, the literature's suggestions about common characteristics of older adult learners—such as a decline in vision and auditory acuity (Weinstein-Shr, 1993; Singleton & Ryan, 2004), issues with memory, processing speed, and attention (Scott, 1994; Hakuta et al., 2003), impeded reactions (Bellingham, 2005), or troubles with encoding and remembering new information (Hakuta et al., 2003; Singleton & Ryan, 2004)—may prove to be obstacles in the process of learning a foreign language.

In this context, Singleton and Ryan (2004) have asserted that these attributes can present difficulties in the language learning environment, particularly in the acquisition of new linguistic elements, such as vocabulary acquisition or time-constrained tasks, the retention of words, and the comprehension of instructions

provided by the teacher. Moreover, the study conducted by Kuklewicz and King (2018) found that acquiring proficient listening abilities poses a significant obstacle for elderly individuals engaged in learning English as a foreign language (EFL). These challenges can impact students' mobility, capacity to remain seated for extended periods, and ability to discriminate between speech sounds and comprehend spoken words.

Regarding language anxiety, MacIntyre et al. (2002) found no statistically significant correlation between age and language anxiety. According to Grasso's (2017) findings, it was noted that older persons demonstrated higher levels of communication apprehension overall, with particular emphasis on experiencing medium to high levels of anxiety in the context of the classroom environment. As for the online context, on the other hand, a study conducted by Baran-Lucarz and Slowik-Krogulec (2023) revealed that the level of language anxiety of six older persons was slightly reduced compared to the in-class mode.

Regarding the design and delivery of language lessons, according to Grognet (1997), older persons are less likely to tolerate learning irrelevant content or grammatical rules out of context. Nevertheless, individuals typically exhibit optimistic dispositions towards their overall learning process and leverage the advantages of their prior learning experiences in acquiring a second language (L2). Additionally, research conducted by Bialystok and Hakuta (1999) has revealed that individuals within this particular age group exhibit a greater degree of caution and self-awareness when responding to questions in a classroom setting, particularly when they perceive themselves to lack knowledge of the correct response. Moreover, Slowik (2016) asserted that learners' prior learning experiences often influence their expectations in language acquisition. Consequently, she highlights the advantages of utilising the learners' native language and employing translation as a pedagogical approach in English as a Foreign Language (EFL) classrooms, as exemplified in the Grammar Translation Method. Additionally, Jaroszewska (2013) observed an upward trend in the availability of L2 courses tailored for older adults. However, there is a pressing need to enhance the existing teaching technique, which has proven ineffective and inadequate in meeting the specific learning requirements of this demographic. Furthermore, there is a dearth of suitable learning resources catering to the unique needs of older learners. Similarly, Slowik-Krogulec (2019) highlighted the challenges faced in older adult education in the context of English as a Foreign Language (EFL). These challenges encompass an absence of suitable instructional resources, suboptimal classroom arrangements, and heterogeneous groups comprising individuals of varying ages and proficiencies. Consequently, older adults encounter prejudices from their peers and instructors and inadequate testing and evaluation methods. In light of these concerns, Slowik-Krogulec (2019) advocated for incorporating older adults' unique needs and distinctions in the development of language classes. In a comprehensive examination of previous research on older adults' English as a Foreign Language (EFL) studies, Eguz (2019) corroborated Slowik-Krogulec's findings about the presence of challenges, including the absence of suitable instructional materials

and the necessity of tailoring language classrooms to accommodate the unique characteristics and requirements of this group. Also, about this matter, Werbinska (2018) proposed implementing personalised L2 programs that cater to particular interests, such as gardening or cooking, as well as utilising virtual world resources, such as mobile phone calls with native speakers, for older adult learners. Furthermore, Slowik-Krogulec (2021) highlighted the considerable impact of a seminar course titled "Older Adults and Second Language Acquisition (SLA)" offered at a university. The course was designed for pre-service English as a Foreign Language (EFL) instructors. It was pivotal in shaping their attitudes and enhancing their instructional approaches when teaching English to older adults.

### *Challenges of Online EFL Learning*

Various well-known models have been employed in online education, including blended learning, synchronous learning, asynchronous learning, and emergency remote teaching and learning, a category that emerged in response to the COVID-19 pandemic (Sener et al., 2020). The current study utilised synchronous Zoom classrooms to deliver English language instruction. Therefore, this review concentrates on examining studies that explore the experiences of both students and teachers in synchronous online education, specifically concerning technical and pedagogical matters.

The research results indicate that educators may encounter challenges when conducting virtual instruction due to insufficient information and communication technology (ICT) expertise or inadequate preparation for online pedagogy (Gao & Zang, 2020). In addition, technical issues like infrastructure failure have been suggested to be a significant problem for both learners and teachers and prevent the effectiveness of online classes (Gao & Zang, 2020; Kulal & Nayak, 2020; Sener et al., 2020). Similarly, Olt and Teman (2018) have observed that students and teachers encounter auditory challenges in virtual classrooms, resulting in a diminished ability to communicate effectively compared to traditional in-person classes. This is mainly due to technical complications and sound and video quality issues. Researchers have also examined the dropout rate in online classes as an additional area of investigation. Typically, adult learners have the option to voluntarily enrol in a language classroom, in contrast to young learners. This distinction may contribute to increased attrition rates in online courses (Flood, 2002). According to Tyler-Smith (2006), factors such as cognitive load, limited study time, technological difficulties, and inadequate peer contact contribute to the propensity of adult learners to withdraw from online courses. In contrast, the focus on instructors' ICT competencies appears to dominate the emphasis on students' ICT proficiency in information and communication technology (Gao & Zang, 2020).

The existing body of research on the challenges encountered in English language learning has predominantly centred around young, teenage, adult, and middle-aged learners. Moreover, investigations about older adults have primarily concentrated on acquiring a foreign language within a traditional classroom setting rather than through

online platforms. Consequently, there appears to be a dearth of knowledge regarding the difficulties older adult learners of English as a Foreign Language (EFL) face in an online learning and teaching environment. As also put forward by Owatnupat (2021), it is clear that researchers in this discipline seem to continue to overlook older adults as a distinct group. The low participation of individuals aged 60 and above in foreign language learning may explain this phenomenon through official, informal, or non-formal education. However, instructing older adults in a foreign language can pose significant difficulties. Thus, educators must address and correct misconceptions regarding the learning capabilities of older individuals. Therefore, this study seeks to provide a scholarly contribution by investigating the various aspects that pose challenges to online English learning and teaching for older adults, which would fill the gap in the field. In pursuit of this objective, the present study addressed the following inquiries by collecting data from several sources, encompassing participants' self-reflections, classroom observations, and interviews.

(1) What challenges do older adult learners face in online English instruction?

(2) What challenges do EFL teachers experience in teaching English to older adult learners?

(3) What are the suggestions of older adult EFL learners and their teachers for the challenges they face in online English learning/teaching?

## **Method**

### *Research Design*

The present research is a qualitative single case study addressing issues encountered by EFL learners aged 60 and over and their teachers in online English learning and teaching. According to Cresswell (2014), when little research has been undertaken on a given incident, a qualitative approach is essential to examine and comprehend the critical variables. A case study is an intense study about a person, group, or unit conducted to generalise over several units (Gustafsson, 2017). When the researcher desires to study a single person from a particular group or a single specific group from a group of people, Yin (2009) offers a single case study. The experiences of EFL learners over 60 were explored in this case study to reveal the obstacles confronted in learning/teaching English online, using self-reported data acquired through semi-structured interviews and self-reflection reports.

### *Participants and Setting*

The study involved a sample of seven older adult English as a Foreign Language (EFL) students, consisting of one male and six female participants. These individuals were enrolled in online A1 English classes conducted by two EFL teachers employed at a public education facility located in Istanbul. Public education centres in Turkey are non-formal educational establishments that offer social-cultural knowledge and skills to the general public, facilitating the productive utilisation of their leisure time and fostering personal development. These institutions provide a range of courses in

several disciplines, serving students of all age groups with the option to choose between either live or virtual instruction. The participants in this study were chosen from individuals who volunteered to learn English at a public education centre. The individuals in question were all above the age of 60 and were either retired or not actively employed. Furthermore, their health conditions did not necessitate continuous nursing attention. Furthermore, all participants were Turkish individuals residing in Turkey since birth and possessed native fluency in the Turkish language. Before the commencement of the research period, they had been engaging in English language instruction via the Zoom online meeting platform for four weeks. The instructors who participated in the study adhered to a uniform syllabus and utilised identical course materials for the instruction of English. The use of pseudonyms was employed to preserve the anonymity of the participants, as articulated by Yin (2009), who advocated for their use in case studies to uphold ethical principles. Furthermore, all participants demonstrated their informed consent by affixing their signature to an official document. Tables 1 and 2 below provide comprehensive information regarding the profiles of the students and teachers who participated in the study. Before the commencement of data collecting, the research in question underwent a thorough examination by the ethics committee of a public institution, which subsequently granted the requisite approvals.

**Table 1.** Participant students

Student	Age	Gender	Occupation	Years of experience as an English learner
Emel	69	Female	Public servant (retired)	After several EFL lessons, she got a B2. After a long absence, she learned English for six months.
Ali	67	Male	Turkish Language and Literature teacher (retired)	Two years
Semra	66	Female	Banker (retired)	One year
Ayse	70	Female	Banker (retired)	Two years
Sanya	71	Female	Medical doctor (retired)	Six months
Reyhan	70	Female	No work experience	One year
Zehra	69	Female	No work experience	Five years

**Table 2.** Participant instructors

Instructor	Age	Gender	Academic attainment	Years of experience as an English instructor	Years of experience instructing seniors
Bengi	57	Female	Bachelor's degree (ELT)	11 years	Five years
Orhan	42	Male	Bachelor's Degree (ELT)	Six years	Four years

*Note: ELT stands for English language teaching*



### *Data Collection Instruments*

Various sources were used for data collection to increase the study's validity (see Table 3). In addition, due to the same reason, the present research has questioned the views of participant students' teachers because, as Patton (2002) noted, one way to improve the credibility of the results is to look for evidence that supports the researchers' interpretations.

**Table 3.** Data collection instruments

Tool	Data collection frequency	Total amount
Self-reflection reports	Once a week (by participants)	Six reports per participant in 6 weeks
Class observation	2 hours a week (by one of the researchers)	12 hours in 6 weeks
Semi-structured interviews	After six weeks, participants were questioned individually by a researcher.	Average 40-minute interview transcription for seven students and two instructors

### *Self-reflection Reports*

According to McCroskey (1984), self-reports are suitable for evaluating perceived competence, emotions, or feelings. This study aims to investigate the perspectives of learners and their teachers regarding the difficulties they face in teaching and learning English as a Foreign Language (EFL) for older adults. In order to gather data, all participants, who included two teachers, were instructed to engage in weekly self-reflection activities. The participants' reflections were written in Turkish, their native language, to facilitate a more practical expression of their thoughts. Prior to commencing the 6-week research study, participants were presented with a comprehensive explanation of the desired content to be written about. Additionally, a template consisting of guided subjects and corresponding questions was made available to the participants (see Appendix A). Subsequently, participants were required to compose a self-reflective report in Turkish following each weekly four-hour session. Participants in the study documented their reflections either by written means on paper or by recording their voices. After that, they transmitted these reflections to the researcher every week.

### *Observation*

As McCroskey (1984) asserted, self-reports exhibit robust validity and offer valuable means of measurement; however, to enhance the credibility and dependability of the qualitative data, it is imperative to incorporate observations. This is because observations offer insights into actual behaviours and practices that may not be accurately captured by self-reported data alone. In order to achieve this objective, the researcher conducted regular observations of a two-hour English class every week over six weeks. During these observations, the researcher made detailed notes about the behaviours exhibited by learners and the teachers. The observation sheet that

incorporated guided themes was utilised to conduct observations (refer to Appendix B).

### *Semi-structured Interviews*

Given the inherent constraints of relying solely on self-reflection and the potential for researcher bias in observational methods, the investigators opted to administer individual semi-structured interviews to all participants upon the culmination of the 6-week English course. The interviews were undertaken to comprehensively address all the specified themes and gather additional insights on the viewpoints expressed by participants in their self-reflection reports. The interviews were conducted in Turkish to facilitate participants' self-expression with confidence. A pre-established interview schedule was utilised, which included predetermined subjects to be addressed and corresponding questions (see Appendix C). As suggested by Fred and Perry (2011), supplementary inquiries were posed where necessary to delve deeper into the conversation. The duration of each semi-structured interview averaged 40 minutes. The researchers sought the assistance of a language specialist to assess the Turkish translation and appropriateness of the interview questions.

### *Data Analysis*

A content analysis was performed to examine the raw data derived from participants' weekly self-reflection reports, the researcher's observation notes, and the transcriptions of interviews. The researcher engaged in multiple iterations of data processing to obtain the initial emerging codes. The researchers engaged in a systematic analysis of the data by first identifying and highlighting responses that were deemed essential and intriguing. Subsequently, codes were assigned to these responses to indicate their relevance to the research topic. The researchers then proceeded to categorise developing patterns into distinct groups and ultimately discovered common themes from the data. Patton (2002) asserts that including several investigators and the independent analysis of qualitative data are essential for ensuring intercoder reliability (ICR) and enhancing a study's overall validity. About this matter, O'Connor and Joffe (2020) proposed that, depending on the magnitude of the dataset, it is customary to utilise 10-25% of the data to conduct a comparative analysis between two coders. Consequently, approximately 25% of the complete dataset was sent to another researcher specialising in the same subject to analyse and compare the results. Based on the computation of the frequency of agreements and disagreements, it was observed that the coders reached a consensus on the developing codes with a level of concurrence of up to 90%. Miles and Huberman (1994) state that the mentioned rate is higher than the established benchmark. The authors propose that a minimum of 80% agreement on 95% of codes should be achieved to ensure intercoder dependability.

## Results and Discussion

### *Challenges Faced by Older Adults in Online EFL Class*

Table 4 presents the most prevalent codes derived from the reported data, according to the primary research question investigating the difficulties encountered by elderly individuals participating in an online EFL course. The table below illustrates the prevalent themes and codes, encompassing age-related obstacles, online learning, and course-specific difficulties.

**Table 4.** Older Adults' Online EFL Class Challenges

Themes	Codes	Sample quotations
Age-related challenges	Declining memory	<i>My memory is weaker than in my 20s. I quickly forget what I learnt (Sanya, 71).</i>
	Slowing processing speed	<i>Friends try to answer my teacher's questions. I get confused and take a long time to understand expectations (Reyhan,71).</i>
	Pronunciation difficulties with particular noises or words	<i>Multisyllabic words are tricky to pronounce. For instance, I mispronounced 'congratulations'. I cannot produce /ae/ in 'accident'. I could not pronounce /th/ in the 'notice the two ways we say' part today (Zehra, 69).</i>
	Having a lower tolerance for complex language structure	<i>English sentence structure is confusing. Sometimes, the verb comes first, last. The reason is unknown, but I cannot learn grammar properly (Reyhan, 71).</i>
Online learning challenges	Past learning experiences	<i>As a Turkish language teacher, I struggle to learn a new language without studying grammar principles. Past learning methods differ from contemporary ones (Ali, 67).</i>
	Poor ICT knowledge	<i>Technology is my weakness. I attempt to follow my teacher. They should teach us technology first (Ayşe, 70).</i>
	Diversionary factors at home	<i>Phone and doorbell noises might impair online training. Some forget the microphone, so background noises block the teaching (Semra, 66).</i>
Course-related challenges	Screen time may be more complex and less productive.	<i>Sitting for extended hours and staring at a screen is disturbing. Due to my cracked disk, I require more regular breaks (Emel, 67).</i>
	Inappropriate course content	<i>I would not say I like fantasy movies. They attract youth, but not me. I like Elvis. His life would be interesting to read. Current events also interest me. I want everyday interactions with foreign pals (Zehra, 69).</i>
	Impractical course materials	<i>Why can't we have one textbook? Why study another book or go to another screen? My use of technology is slow and poor. Completely following instructions on time is difficult. Understanding instructions takes time (Sanya, 71).</i>

As can be seen in Table 4, "age-related" learner issues seem to predominate. Most students said their deteriorating memory and processing speed were their main obstacles, so they took notes and repeated what they learned. These findings support previous studies (Scott, 1994; Grognet, 1997; Hakuta et al., 2003; Singleton & Ryan, 2004; Bellingham, 2005; Kuklewicz & King, 2018) that found older adult learners have a declining working memory, slow reactions, and problems with speed and attention,

especially for timed exercises, word memorisation, and teacher instructions. Since learning a foreign language requires continuous cognitive skills, the results seem to support some of the studies in the literature in that young learners with good cognitive functions perform better in language learning than older learners. However, as McElree and Dyer (2013) noted, working memory capacity can be improved by training and experience even in late adulthood (Singleton, 2017), so this may not be considered a learning obstacle at later ages.

Some learners also expressed significant challenges in accurately producing particular sounds and words and comprehending audio or films featuring native speakers during listening exercises. Zehra has shown the presence of hearing impairments and a reduced ability to perceive speech at an average pace, which could potentially contribute to her difficulties in listening. As Kuklewicz and King's (2018) research highlights, these characteristics hinder auditory input processing. However, even though most learners did not report any hearing impairment, it was noted that all learners, excluding Semra and Emel, experienced challenges in accurately pronouncing words. Singleton and Ryan (2004) found evidence suggesting that the phonetic coding abilities of older persons may be compromised. The Critical Period Hypothesis (CPH) posits that the acquisition of distinct phonetic sounds in a second language is facilitated by the presence of a pivotal period, namely puberty. Hence, individuals who have not been exposed to the phonological structure of a language until a specific timeframe may have challenges in attaining a flawless accent (Lenneberg, 1967). The learners who have reported difficulties with pronunciation began their English language learning journey approximately one to two years ago, which may be considered a delayed start, according to the CPH. Additionally, the specific sounds mentioned by Zehra, namely /th/ and /æ/, are not present in the phonetic inventory of the Turkish language, which might explain why she has difficulty producing these sounds. On the other hand, Semra and Emel did not report any difficulties with pronunciation. Emel has engaged in the study of English for an extended duration, notwithstanding intermittent periods of discontinuation. Additionally, Emel has endeavoured to acquire proficiency in Spanish and German. Similarly, Semra indicated that she had been exposed to the English language during her childhood through interactions with her family members.

Another prevalent issue pertains to the structure of English sentences and the pedagogical methods employed in teaching them. In parallel with studies by Gomez (2016) and Slowik (2016), most participants expressed that acquiring grammar implicitly within a contextual framework poses challenges. Thus, they advocated for a pedagogical approach where teachers systematically explain grammatical rules, starting from smaller components and gradually building up to a comprehensive understanding. This preference was influenced mainly by their experiences of learning Turkish throughout their formative years. The observed phenomenon can be attributed to the historical learning patterns of learners, who tend to employ inadequate learning tactics during classroom instruction (Ramírez-Gómez, 2016b; Slowik, 2016). The procedures employed by individuals may potentially be

incongruent with the contemporary teaching methods and techniques employed by teachers in the present era. Another aspect that merits discussion is the distinction between sentence patterns and word order in Turkish and English. According to Grognet (1997), individuals in this age group tend to exhibit lower tolerance towards intricate scenarios or extraneous material. Consequently, the findings may indicate that older adults prefer studying grammar but are less inclined to engage in learning activities that lack contextual relevance. This lack of contextual relevance might lead to confusion or boredom.

Regarding online learning, it is noteworthy that five participants, excluding Ali and Emel, conveyed a deficiency in their knowledge of information and communication technology (ICT) despite their prior experience with computer usage or enrolment in an online course. Similarly, Aydan claimed that an essential number of individuals in the later stages of adulthood possess little proficiency in information and communication technology (ICT) due to their lack of exposure to computer technology in earlier periods and their non-native status in the digital realm. These learners probably lack familiarity with using computers and internet technologies within educational settings, potentially due to their enrolment in an online course being their first experience in this domain. In contrast, Ali and Emel attributed their proficiency in computer technology to their professional occupations and personal enthusiasm, thereby explaining the observed variance.

One additional concern about online education involves numerous distracting elements, such as open microphones, which might be attributed to the older adults' cognitive challenges related to memory and limited technological (ICT) proficiency. This assertion may also hold for younger students, as suggested by Olt and Teman (2018), who noted that virtual classrooms present auditory difficulties for both students and teachers, leading to a reduced capacity for effective communication as compared to traditional face-to-face sessions; nevertheless, it is crucial to note that older persons, due to age-related physical and cognitive attributes, may exhibit a higher susceptibility to distraction and a reduced tolerance for complexity. Furthermore, it has been observed that extended periods of screen use might lead to fatigue more for this age group and hinder the learning process due to potential hearing or visual impairments. In conjunction with a deficiency in information and communication technology (ICT) proficiency, this phenomenon might explain the rationale behind the collective behaviour of all participants in online sessions, wherein they consult the physical copy of the textbook positioned before them while concurrently engaging with the digital edition of the book provided by the instructor. Furthermore, Old and Teman (2018) proposed that students enrolled in online courses encounter difficulties in interpersonal communication compared to their counterparts in traditional face-to-face classes due to several factors, such as subpar sound and video quality and other technical impediments. In light of the observed decrease in visual and auditory capabilities and the potential for physical limitations that may impact mobility and prolonged screen-based activities, Grognet (1997) highlights the

necessity of improving the online learning environment to meet the needs of older adult learners better.

This study has explored issues linked to course materials. The findings indicate that most participants expressed dissatisfaction with several aspects of the coursebook, such as its content and the characters used. Specifically, the inclusion of 'Superman,' a character typically favoured by children, teenagers, and younger adults, was not perceived as relevant or engaging to their needs and interests. However, most individuals appeared willing to acquire new knowledge to remain updated. Furthermore, it was found that four participants encountered challenges in locating the appropriate pages to facilitate their engagement in activities when distinct components of a task were distributed throughout multiple pages or separate workbooks. They perceived the coursebook as excessively intricate and were dissatisfied with utilising many elements. To elucidate the present scenario, it is crucial to draw upon prior research that posits that individuals in this age group exhibit cognitive impairments such as poor memory, delayed reaction times, slow processing speed and sustained attention (Grognet, 1997; Bellingham, 2005). These aforementioned cognitive limitations have been identified as potential hindrances in second language acquisition. Senior individuals' cognitive abilities and attention span may be reduced, rendering them more susceptible to distractions and less tolerant of complicated circumstances. Consequently, course materials may be a formidable obstacle for this group. This study aligns with the findings of Eguz (2019) and Slowik-Krogulec (2019), indicating a lack of consideration for the educational requirements of older adult learners in existing textbooks. Hence, it is essential to produce new educational materials that respond to the unique requirements of these individuals.

### *Challenges Faced by EFL Instructors of Older Adults in Online Class*

The results obtained concerning the second research inquiry are displayed in Table 5. The instructors of the participant learners, Orhan and Bengi, were also requested to provide insights into their experiences instructing senior adult learners via an online platform. The findings predominantly validated the students' reported issues concerning age, online learning, and course materials. The subsequent table presents sample quotations, standard codes, and themes that reflect the viewpoints of EFL instructors regarding the challenges encountered during the online older adult EFL teaching process.

**Table 5.** Teacher views on challenges of online EFL teaching to older adults.

Themes	Codes	Sample quotations
Age-related challenges	Slow processing speed	<i>They take too long to figure out what to do, so I must give many instructions (Orhan, 42).</i>
		<i>They take longer to complete tasks than younger students. Time is needed to process information. A 3-minute task never takes 3 minutes. Even giving directions takes longer than expected (Bengi, 57).</i>
	Declining memory	<i>I must revise and repeat because they often forget what we did in class (Bengi, 57).</i>
	Difficulty in listening tasks	<i>Practising listening exercises is very time-consuming. Listening to audio repeatedly is necessary (Orhan, 42).</i>
	Past learning experiences	<i>Students make me teach grammar and translate. They find fill-in-the-blanks, question-answer, matching, and translation simpler (Orhan, 42).</i> <i>My instructional methods may be unfamiliar to them (Bengi, 57).</i>
Online learning challenges	Readily diverted focus	<i>They like to exchange experiences or opinions, which causes long task pauses. They quickly lose attention, and it is hard to refocus them (Orhan, 42).</i>
	Poor ICT knowledge	<i>Their low ICT abilities limit me to a few easy assignments in my online classes (Bengi, 57).</i>
Course-related challenges	Restrictions on the execution of particular categories of activities	<i>Role-playing and other pair and group tasks are challenging to practice. Even giving instructions takes time (Bengi,57).</i>
	Insufficient methodological knowledge	<i>I want to take a course on teaching English to this age group (Bengi, 57).</i> <i>I received no university course to teach 60-year-olds (Orhan, 42).</i>
	Lack of course materials tailored to senior adults	<i>There may not be a coursebook for this age group (Orhan, 42).</i> <i>There is no English coursebook for older adults. Thus, I have trouble choosing materials (Bengi, 57).</i>
	High dropout rate	<i>Since they do not require a language certificate to finish the course, these students drop out more than the young. Quiz days reduce participation (Orhan, 42).</i>
	Anxiety regarding examinations	<i>They dislike having examinations (Bengi, 57).</i>

In parallel with the results of the previous studies (Weinstein-Shr, 1993; Scott, 1994; Hakuta et al., 2003; Singleton & Ryan, 2004; Singleton & Zaborska, 2020), both instructors reached a consensus that individuals in this age group may potentially exhibit hearing or visual impairments, limited working memory capacity, a propensity for disengagement, challenges with pronunciation and listening, a predisposition to prioritise grammatical rules, and a tendency to draw upon their prior learning experiences in the classroom. Furthermore, Orhan emphasised that learners' commitment to preconceptions occasionally impeded their ability to engage in specific activities or employ certain strategies effectively. Additionally, the instructor emphasised the tendency of learners to deviate from the main topic and share personal experiences, posing a challenge for him to redirect their focus towards the subject

matter. The instructors' points can be considered challenges about this particular age's physical and cognitive abilities. The learners' past learning habits have necessitated instructors to modify their plans often and struggle with the selection of a suitable method of instruction. Despite lacking specialised pedagogical training in instructing English to older adults within a university setting, the teachers noticed obvious distinctions between individuals in their thirties and those sixty or older. Furthermore, it was claimed that learners faced limitations in online collaborative activities, such as pair or group work, likely stemming from technological inadequacy. Additionally, a significant amount of time was required to provide detailed explanations of complex assignments to these learners. This can be explained by the decreasing processing speed noted by Scott (1994) and Hakuta et al. (2003).

Orhan further documented issues about assessment procedures and an increasing student dropout rate. The instructor noted that students exhibit a reluctance to participate in examinations throughout the course, which can result in a higher percentage of absenteeism due to heightened levels of anxiety. Owing to the students' increased need for detailed explanations, slower pace of engagement, and the inherent difficulty in monitoring their progress on an online learning platform, particularly during examinations, a face-to-face learning environment may be a more feasible choice.

Another solution might be to carry out no examinations as a part of the course program but assess students' progress through self-evaluation forms. Similarly, as Flood (2002) highlighted, adult courses typically lack a formal commitment or contractual obligation, and participation is typically a voluntary decision. This feature may contribute to higher dropout rates, particularly in online courses, in contrast to their traditional counterparts. In the same vein, Tylor-Smith (2006) discussed the factors contributing to the propensity of adults to discontinue their participation in online courses. These factors encompass cognitive load, time constraints inhibiting study, technological challenges, and inadequate opportunities for peer connection (Evans & Tragant, 2020). Motivating older persons to persist in their participation in online classes can be facilitated by implementing effective strategies, considering their shared attributes.

The instructors also emphasised the absence of suitable instructional materials and a methodological expertise deficiency in teaching English to seniors. According to Ramirez-Gomez (2016), providing suitable course materials, activities, and proper methodology tailored to older individuals' features, requirements, and interests is crucial in enabling them to effectively utilise the advantages associated with their age when learning a foreign language. Otherwise, it might result in unfavourable inclinations.

### *Recommendations for Improving English Learning and Teaching Of Older Adults*

In addition to contemplating the difficulties, the participants offered suggestions as potential resolutions. A selection of these proposals is presented in Table 6.



**Table 6.** Participants' recommendations

Themes	Codes	Quotations
Course-related suggestions	Better textbook design	<i>It is best to study one practical coursebook with everything needed. In our textbook, grammar explanations and exercises are on separate pages, which annoys me (Sanya, 71).</i>
	Need for an appropriate English course program.	<i>A suitable English course syllabus should consider older adult learners' needs and characteristics (Bengi, 57).</i>
	Need for teacher training programs.	<i>I received no teacher training at university; I would attend one if it existed (Bengi, 57).</i>
	Official exams should be avoided.	<i>I do not advocate mid- or end-of-course exams because these students do not need a certificate. Motivating students with self-evaluation forms is safer (Orhan, 42).</i>
Suggestions for online English learning/teaching	Online learning platform training	<i>I sometimes get confused about how to turn off the sound or camera. I must immediately learn how to use this platform (Sanya, 71).</i>
	Course sessions should be shorter yet more frequent.	<i>Since concentration is difficult, class length can be shortened. I want to take regular classes provided every day (Ali, 67).</i>

The recommendations primarily focused on courses and highlighted the importance of developing a comprehensive English course syllabus, selecting appropriate textbooks, and creating teaching materials that respond to older adults' unique characteristics and requirements. In support of this notion, Reyhan asserted that regular interactions with individuals from different nationalities while travelling abroad are likely beneficial. Consequently, acquiring knowledge of appropriate phrases and expressions for public settings such as shopping centres or airports would be pragmatic and helpful.

In addition, Orhan opposed the implementation of formal examinations and advocated for using non-intimidating assessment methods, such as self-evaluation forms. Furthermore, Bengi recommended that lesson plans for older adults should allocate a more significant amount of time for activities compared to those for younger individuals. Additionally, it was suggested that textbooks for older adults should incorporate a reduced number of activities arranged in a coherent sequence to minimise potential distractions and maintain their focus. The findings presented in this study align with prior investigations conducted by Singleton and Ryan (2004), Ramirez-Gomez (2016), Kuklewicz and King (2018), and Eguz (2019). Singleton and Ryan (2004) argue that while designing a methodology for older adults, it is essential to consider certain factors. These factors include ensuring that lesson time is appropriate, making adaptations for issues related to oral-aural skills and phonetic decoding, providing clear visual and audio information, and offering memorisation help.

An additional proposal posits that teaching English as a Foreign Language (EFL) to older adults requires specialised educators with a high level of patience, extensive knowledge, and substantial experience in instructing individuals in this age group. Nevertheless, it was found that none of the instructors who took part in the study had received any prior specialised training in instructing older adults. Instead, they relied

on their experience in the teaching methods they had previously employed with other student groups. Hence, it becomes crucial to develop methodological courses tailored for instructing older adult students within English language teaching departments of universities.

Regarding issues in online learning, the recommendations primarily revolved around two key areas. Initially, in response to students' inadequate information and communication technology (ICT) proficiency, it was proposed to provide instruction on computer literacy and familiarise them with the designated online learning platform prior to the commencement of the course. Furthermore, it has been suggested that including regular language exercises in classroom instruction and increased intervals for rest may be beneficial for learners who experience age-related physical and cognitive challenges. These challenges could reduce their ability to endure extended periods of instructional time.

### **Conclusion**

This study aimed to examine the viewpoints of older adult EFL learners and their teachers regarding the challenges associated with online English education. The participants' personal opinions, which were gathered through self-reflective reports and individual semi-structured interviews, were largely congruent with the researcher's weekly class observation. The study's results corroborated prior research findings and contributed novel insights into the features of older adult learners.

The current study showed that older adults who are engaged in language learning might predominantly encounter age-related challenges, including decreased memory capacity, reduced information processing speed, heightened susceptibility to distractions, difficulties in accurately reproducing unfamiliar phonetic sounds, a propensity to deviate from the primary subject matter, and ineffective prior learning experiences. About online learning, many participants exhibited limited proficiency in information and communication technology (ICT) or reported health-related challenges. These factors impede their engagement with the course material, leading to dissatisfaction, diminished motivation, and, ultimately, higher dropout rates. The findings also unveiled challenges arising from the absence of a suitable curriculum, teaching materials, or adequate methodological understanding. Respondents offered suggestions for educators, curriculum developers, and instructional material creators to mitigate the adverse effects of this age group's unique features and enhance the effectiveness of their English learning journey.

This study offers implications and contributions to the current literature on English instruction for a specific and marginalised group of learners based on the challenges and ideas identified by participants. The findings indicated a necessity to develop suitable curriculum frameworks incorporating accurate instructional resources and approaches to mitigate the adverse impacts of an online learning setting. Furthermore, it is imperative to modify existing teacher education programs. In summary, it is essential to recognise the presence of students aged 60 and above within EFL courses and thoroughly investigate their specific educational requirements.

About the constraints of the study, the data collection was conducted within a restricted timeframe, precisely six weeks. Given that the findings primarily hinged upon the ideas shared by the participants, extending the duration of observation to encompass the learners' tangible behaviours could potentially provide supplementary outcomes or offer insights into the underlying rationales behind the expressed viewpoints. Furthermore, implementing a study with a larger sample size could potentially uncover novel and undiscovered insights. Future studies may also explore the potential effects of recommended applications.

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