

## Foreign language education to seniors through intergenerational programmes

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### Abstract

The intergenerational learning within various types of social environment and in relation to different target groups has long covered a wide range of uses. The professional literature mostly describes its benefits for children and young people, however, the intergenerational education also contributes to the development of personality and the saturation of the educational and psycho-social needs of both adults and seniors. The paper represents the authors' output of the VEGA research project No. 1/0176/15 and it is structured into three chapters. In the first chapter, the author deals with the opportunities of the foreign language education for (not only) disabled seniors. The second chapter focuses on the intergenerational programmes that can be used in the language education of (not only) disabled seniors who are clients of social residential facilities. In the third chapter, the author elaborates the psychological aspects of the foreign language education of seniors.

**Key words:** (not only) disabled seniors; foreign language education; psychological aspects of foreign language education of seniors; intergenerational learning and programmes; social residential facilities.

### Introduction

The theory and practice of foreign language education of children, young people and adults in the active age have experienced many qualitative and quantitative changes that are reflected in the content as well as in methodology of foreign language education. New technologies have been implemented into foreign language education and new methods have been modified for the new conditions. Their aim is to make the process of foreign language learning/education easier and more effective. The new methods that have been the issue of testing for years have now been introduced into practice. As we have already mentioned, most trends deal with the theory and methodology of education of young learners and people in the active age while retired people and seniors seemed to be left behind. In our strategic and conceptual studies, we pay attention to the foreign language

education of intact seniors as well as seniors with disability who are clients of social facilities. The aim of our work is to introduce the possibilities of the foreign language education of institutionalised seniors in a non-traditional way, using intergenerational education or its programmes.

The positive effect of intergenerational education has been proved in various branches of human life in all subjects involved. Rabušicová, Kamanová and Pevná (2011, p. 167) present more advantages of intergenerational education, for example connecting the segregated generations and improving the relationships among them, supporting active citizenship and social participation, supporting intergenerational cooperation, sharing social and professional sources, sharing knowledge and skills among generations, which support long life and general learning and develop the personal and social potential of all participants. The authors also add, referring to various foreign researches (research sources), that the intergenerational programmes are enriching for the older generation (the self – realization and the perception of their own value: when old people have a chance to help the development of the community, their self- confidence and self- respect increase, the ability to cope with diseases grows; meeting new people and making friends with younger people help them to prevent their social isolation and to build deeper relationships with young people, the interior motivation increases) as well as for the young generation (changes in their attitudes towards the elderly people, the improvement of the relationships and breaking of the generation gaps between them, the reduction of social segregation, the growth of social inclusion, the support of social and personal development of young people and of seniors as well, the improvement of their health condition, the increasing of the self-confidence and the decreasing of the social isolation of both generations, the growth of the social responsibility of young people, the reduction of the presumption of social-pathological behaviour, reaching better results at school, improving their health condition and immunity) (in: Rabušicová, Kamanová, Pevná, 2011, p. 167 – 168).

This potential of the intergenerational education and its programmes is also possible to use for the foreign language education of institutionalised seniors (not only) with disability.

### **The possibilities of foreign language education of institutionalised seniors (not only) with disability**

The foreign language education has got a stable institutional structure and personal platform in Slovakia. Besides the formal school system there are also various informal educational institutions. We hold an opinion that even the social residential facilities, being legally more socially and care-oriented than educationally oriented, can occasionally provide opportunities for the foreign language education of their clients. We need to mention, as we already did at the

beginning of the article, that on the theoretical level as well as in the practice of our foreign language education, there are more preferred the intact people (compared to the disabled ones) and the young people (compared to the older generation). However, it is still the fact that seniors with or without disability represent a significant target group of foreign language education which can fulfil several functions for them, respectively it can help to reach different goals (e.g., more in: Berndt, 2001, Jaroszewska, 2009), such as the integration of institutionalised seniors who are socially segregated into the major society of intact or non-institutionalised people.

We could divide the options of the foreign language education of institutionalised seniors in the following way:

- 1/ (*foreign language*) education inside the social residential facility included in a) spare-time activity (obligatory) and/or in b) one's own educational activity (facultative);
- 2/ (*foreign language*) education outside the social residential facility, included in various educational institutions, other social facilities or pro-senior oriented subjects (Határ, 2013).

It is clear that foreign language education of institutionalised seniors (not only with disability) could be provided under optimal conditions in the form of language courses offered to the clients directly inside the social residential facility itself or outside the social residential facility in the institutions designed for this purpose. Due to health conditions, age, disability and other serious restrictions, we would recommend to provide foreign language education for institutionalised seniors directly inside the social residential facility within their spare-time activities, that means to provide the service which is commonly offered to their clients by the social service facilities (e.g. in the facilities for the elderly, homes of social services, specialised facilities and day-care centres), according to the Law No 448/2008 Coll. on Social Services within the Later Directives. However, if we want to look at the foreign language education of seniors from the intergenerational perspective, more options are possible. The most realistic option referring to the foreign language education is the cooperation of a social service facility for seniors with the institutions (primary schools, secondary schools) or school facilities (e.g. school clubs, centres of free time) and / or social facilities (e.g. orphanages) for children and teenagers. The foreign language education of institutionalised seniors could be provided directly in their social residential facility with the participation of children/teenagers from schools or other facilities from nearby surroundings. On the contrary, there are more options for more mobile seniors, mainly for more independent self-caring seniors to study a foreign language at the university of third age or in a language school within mixed groups of different age, or to attend

language courses in a day-care centre which provides, pursuant to § 56 art. 1 Law No. 448/2008 Coll. of Social Services, this particular service to a retired person and to a person with disability or bad health condition or to a parent with a child or a grandparent with a grandchild.

However, it is still the fact that it is not easy to provide language education in mixed age groups (children together with seniors) which is often combined with added complications represented by the disability or inadequate self-sufficiency of seniors. The lecturer or teacher of a foreign language does not often have enough experience how to work educationally with seniors and children at the same time, not to mention the disability of seniors, and therefore it is really inevitable that an andragogue participates in the organisation of language education.

### **Intergenerational programmes available in foreign language education of institutionalised seniors (not only) with disability**

The intergenerational activities provided in various places, even in the residential facilities, enable seniors to stay active within the realms of their health possibilities. The main importance of the connecting intergenerational principles is presented in the below-mentioned and described principles. Regarding the topic of our article, the last point is mainly important for us because it shows the usage of the intergenerational learning as a tool of language education:

1. *The common living* - in the contact with seniors young people and children obtain the sense of responsibility, generosity, solidarity and they learn to tolerate the differences of another generation and see them as a gift not as an obstacle;
2. *The importance of the participation of pupils* - the activism and mutual connection of pupils and senior generation positively influence the pupils' attitude towards the learning process, their behaviour but also the team work and more active participation in the offered activities;
3. *The understanding of the cycle of life* - children, who have got the chance to spend time with other periods of life and they directly face the reality of ageing, perceive the time concept better and they get the specific bases and the experience to understand the limits and the personal history of a man;
4. *The creating of identity* - generation of children and young people receive the heritage by means of memories of older people and subsequently they are able to adapt themselves as individuals better. Connecting reminiscence together with the testimony of their own long life, the senior generation transmits to the younger generations not only the dimension of the past, but they also opens them the door to the future at the same time;
5. *The language proficiency* - the experience from school environment clearly demonstrates that the cooperation of different generations enables and helps

to improve written and oral skills. The teachers noticed a qualitative benefit not only in the written work of pupils and students but also in the improvement of the reading skills. The cooperation with seniors represents a strong motivation for the educators, they describe them their experience and they communicate with them also via e-mails. In this way all representatives of different generations participating in the intergenerational programme have a chance to develop their communicative and language skills (Križo, 2015).

It is not easy to create an intergenerational programme because the people involved have very different opinions, values, interests due to their contemporary period of life and experiences they have obtained already. Therefore, it is important to take into consideration so that these programmes are suitable and adapted to the needs of each group as well as to the cultural and social reality of all participants (Pérez González, 2007). Because of the fact that our article deals also with the target group of disabled seniors we must emphasize that respecting of the special educational needs due to the type and degree of their disability are crucial by choosing educational activities, curriculum and general organization of language education. Granville and Ellis (1999, in: Sanchéz Martínez et al., 2010) mention some characteristic features, respectively conditions necessary to be fulfilled in order to reach the quality and effectiveness of the intergenerational programme:

1. It must be planned specifically with a precise intention so that the designed aims could be fulfilled;
2. It must be carefully and thoroughly defined;
3. It is necessary so that it is comprehensible for all people who are going to participate in the intergenerational exchange;
4. It can make use of the presence of the middle-aged generation as a facilitator of the programme;
5. The programme must be continual and regular, respectively it should not be only in a form of some individual meetings and events;
6. It must have a positive feedback from all participating generations of the programme;
7. The intergenerational project should achieve the improvement of the quality of life of different generational groups and indirectly also the quality of life of people living in their surroundings.

Hatton-Yeo and Ohsako (2000, in: Ayala et al., 2007) mention four kinds of intergenerational programmes including also the foreign language learning:

1. *Older people support and help younger people* (e.g., as teachers helping with school tasks advisors or tutors, child care, companions in spare-time activities);
2. *Younger people help older people* (e. g friendly visits, accompanying by travelling, courses of IT technologies and communication, lectures on various topics);
3. *Seniors and representatives of the young generation cooperate together to help their own community* (environmental projects, exchange of professional knowledge);
4. *The older and younger generation cooperate and take part in social activities and education* (prevention against the drug addiction, drama performances, discussions, *foreign language education*).

The division mentioned above is doubted by some authors, for example by Newman and Sánchez (2007, in: Sánchez Martínez et al., 2010) who say it is more difficult to determine exactly who actually helps whom in the intergenerational education. They also refer to the fact that the main purpose of the intergenerational exchange are the reciprocal benefits of all participating generations involved. Although one group always seems to be more active, more as an educator than an educant, the intergenerational practice and the feedback of the participants of the intergenerational programmes clearly prove the fact that activities made together are profitable for children, teenagers and also for seniors, mainly in the cognitive, emotional, social and physical area resulting in the improvement of the health and the prevention against different diseases typical of the old age. Our potential intergenerational programme focused on the foreign language education can be included according to the previous division into two intergenerational programmes, especially in the second type where mainly the generation of children and young people with higher language proficiency help seniors to learn a foreign language. At the same time, it can represent the fourth model where the representatives of both generations participate actively and they cooperate in the realization of educational activities. We consider it suitable to mention one more way of dividing the intergenerational programmes according to M. Sánchez Martínez et al. (2010) which also presents curricularly manifold educational charge of the intergenerational education:

8. Programmes oriented on the education and development of skills;
9. Programmes oriented on the emotional and social development of children and teenagers;
10. Intergenerational strategies whose aim is to support the cultural and national awareness;
11. Programmes oriented on different kinds of art;

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12. Programmes oriented on the development of the community;
  13. Programmes oriented on the improvement of health;
  14. Programmes oriented on the support of families.

According to this differentiation, the foreign language education of seniors by means of the intergenerational learning is included in the programme primarily oriented on the education and development of skills, but we dare to state that interactions between seniors and children help to their emotional and social development, they support their cultural and national fellowship and, at the same time, they have the opportunity to know the beauty and the heritage of other cultures. And finally, the intergenerational education, whose content is the foreign language education, surely helps to improve the health condition of seniors.

Seniors have got the same ability to study a foreign language as other adult people. Also in this case, there are the same rules and characteristic features as in any other educational field of adults and seniors. The experts think that weaker memory processes typical of this age group can be compensated with higher interest and enthusiasm for studying and language education which can be for them a very important and nice time in their routine programme in the social residential facility (Gómez Bedoya, 2008). Thinking about the foreign language education of seniors in the context of the intergenerational education, we would like to mention the project called **Intergenerational Dictionary** whose aim was to deepen the communication exchanges among different generations by means of the vocabulary used by the participants of the project (grandchildren and grandparents) in particular topics which is, at the same time, differentiated according to the age. Individual meetings (6 altogether) were held at school as a part of the school subject "Language and Literature" in the city of Huelva in Spain. The plan of the intergenerational education included topics like clothes, jobs, IT technologies and communication. The study showed the importance of analysis of the vocabulary used by seniors, children and teenagers because the knowledge of the differences can help us to solve the current communication problems between the representatives of the old and young generation (Cruz Díaz, Acosta Soriano, 2009/2010) We were interested in this particular intergenerational programme because it solves the lexical problems, though just within one language. However, we think it can serve as an inspiration and a model for creating of intergenerational projects whose aim will be the foreign language education.

Rabušicová, Klusáčková and Kamanová (2009) state that the intergenerational learning is realised implicitly in the non-formal educational courses. Therefore, the educational aim does not lie in connecting of different generations but in the centre of interest are particular topics demanded by the participants of the course, such

as the foreign language learning. The presence of young people among the seniors gives an additional value to these educational activities.

### **Psychological aspects of foreign language education of seniors**

The (Foreign language) education of (not only) disabled seniors has got its specific psychological features that must be observed and respected to make the education effective for all the participants. E. L. Thorndike held an opinion that the ability of learning decreases very slowly and very little – approximately 1% per year after the 25th year of life. Until that time the education of adults was significantly influenced by the idea that „the old dog cannot be taught new tricks“. However, later studies revealed that this fall was caused by the speed of learning and not by the intellectual strength and it was even minimized by the continual using of intellect (Knowles, 1980, in: Crawford, 2004). Therefore, the statement that the ability of a person to learn culminates in the young age and then it falls down slowly is simplified and it is not understood correctly how the process of aging influences the complex process of learning (Crawford, 2004).

As Zanovitová et al. (2015, p. 17) mention in their work, the process of the education of seniors must respect the differences and the distinctive features of this target group. In the old age there occur several physical, psychical, social and other changes that have an impact on the ability to learn and they also influence the general process of the education. According to Zanovitová et al. (2015, p. 17 – 18), the following characteristic features of seniors change their ability of learning and education:

- 15. the age** – it limits the ability to learn physiologically; the learning process becomes more difficult and more time is needed to acquire the learnt topics. However, the ability to participate actively in the process of education is not decreased;
- 16. the health condition and the kind of disability** – acute or chronic diseases, fear, anxiety, immobility etc.;
- 17. the psychical changes of decreasing character** – the decline of the concentration, the convergent thinking, the slowdown of the psychomotoric speed, the decline of the cognitive abilities, weaker perception, difficulties in recalling the information, etc.;
- 18. the psychical changes of increasing character** – deliberation, steadiness, patience, stability in opinions, endurance, wisdom etc.;
- 19. the social situation** – the family functioning and problems, the social isolation, the financial situation, the home or residential background, etc.;
- 20. the character traits** – the convenience, the tendency to think about the past memories, distrust, stubbornness, the emphasizing of negative character features, the feeling of inferiority, worse adaptability etc.;



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21. ***the type of the senior's personality*** – regarding the psychosocial adaptation to the old age.

We agree with the ideas of Vágnerová (2000) that the personal growth and wisdom gained through experience can progress even in the old age. There are many people who study a new language, Braille writing or they learn how to work with the PC in the old age. The psychological changes in the old age depend on the biological and also on the socio-cultural influences. However, the time when these changes start to be evident, their dynamics and the way how the senior reacts on them are differentiated individually. We will explain some of them in the following text:

1. ***The changes in the level of activity*** – older people are generally slower, the concentration of their attention is getting worse, they get tired more easily, their reaction time is prolonged. The processing of information, the decision making and the choice of adequate response require longer time than before. They need more time for making decisions and the fact that they must decide about something means for them a very stressful situation. The slowdown of their speed is reflected in their general ponderousness. On the contrary, their slowness might be positive as well, older people are more patient and judicious than they used to be before.
2. ***The changes in the orientation in the surroundings*** – the visual acuity and auditory acuity get worse with ageing. The difficulties in the area of perception may significantly affect other cognitive processes. The older person has to concentrate much more to see and hear all he needs. He must use compensation aids but very often they do not help him to orientate without problems;
3. ***The decline of the memory competence and learning difficulties*** – the general attenuation and the slowdown of all memory processes (storing and recalling) take place in the period of ageing. The decline of competence is evident mainly in the area of the episodic memory that is related to the personal experience (e.g. old people cannot remember if they have told something to their partner, if they have taken pills, etc.). The so called semantic memory containing general knowledge is usually more permanent. Its advantage is that it could be used as a compensation mechanism or, respectively, as the basis for the next learning. The decline of memory is differentiated individually and depends not only on the genetic background, but also on the current health condition, previous experience and the attitude towards learning, etc. It is valid also in this case that the activity, which is not used, falls down easily.

4. ***The changes of intellectual functions*** – the decline of intellectual abilities becomes evident in various ways. Older people keep the ability to use earlier acquired knowledge and ways of thinking. The trend of qualitative changes is the same as it was in the previous time: the so called fluid intelligence (i.e. the ability to process new information and search for a new solution) shows a bigger decline. More easily stored are the earlier acquired pieces of knowledge, the fixed strategies of thinking and the learnt ways of solving various situations that means the so called crystalline intelligence. This fact once again confirms the importance of experience - the more one has learnt, the more he can apply in the old age.
5. ***The changes in the emotional experiencing and emotional reactivity*** – older people are usually more unsteady emotionally and they cannot control their emotions well. They might be more suggestible and have higher tendency to anxiety and depressions. The changes and emotional swings affect other psychic functions – they limit the motivation to learn; the quality of concentration and memory functions get worse, the using of brain functions declines. Older people very often have worse emotional tuning which might cause a feeling of the complex personal discomfort (complaints like „I don't feel very well"). The causes of this mood may differ, but usually they are the result of several smaller stressful situations and personal dispositions. The change of emotional reactivity may be also caused by different somatic changes (changes in blood pressure, etc.).
6. ***The changes in the volition*** – in the old age there take place typical changes of volition processes. While the active will is usually inhibited, the passive will (patience, endurance and stability) is sometimes even stronger than it used to be before. Generally, the old people do not like making decisions or they decide very slowly. We can observe that they are also stubborn or they often cling on certain things. They might emphasize their formal will by insisting on their decision for every price. This might be considered as a less adequate protective reaction – the old person needs to show his will in this way to confirm his personal value. On the contrary, the stubbornness might indicate the decline of judgement or, respectively a signal of the lowered ability to assess the situation adequately.
7. ***The changes in the personality*** – by older people the characteristic features such as carefulness, punctiliousness, anxiety, fear, hesitation and the tendency to impatience are often emphasized. Some characteristic features exhibited in relation to other people are also changed – the egocentrism which is often understood as selfishness, the extreme extroversion which might seem as familiarity and bothering, suspiciousness, touchiness, intolerance, meanness or deepened intrusion.

8. ***The changes of attitudes and social behaviour of an older person*** – older people are more isolated from the society in their private life and they might be self-centered on themselves or preoccupied with people in their nearest surroundings. The contact with others is very important for older people, but it must be adequate regarding the quality and quantity (Vágnerová, 2000).

The personality of the old person is the result of all the previous development, as well as the result of the present adaptation to an old age. We differentiate several types that affect not only the ability to cope with one's own ageing but also the general attitude to learning and education. The study of Reichard (1962, in: Langmeier, Krejčířová, 1998) describes five strategies (the ***constructive strategy, the addiction strategy, the defence strategy, the strategy of hostility, the strategy of self-hatred***) of coping with one's own ageing that people should accept in the similar way as they do it by individual coping with disability or serious life situations in every age period.

Older students have a wide scale of physical and psychological problems that may affect their learning ability. They can be related to the psychological and physical condition of the senior, his or health condition as well as the current life situation of the senior, his preferred strategy of coping with his own ageing, the motivation, the fear of being unsuccessful, of making mistakes, of being mocked, etc. The andragogue cooperating with a foreign language teacher or lecturer should identify these obstacles or barriers of effective learning and take adequate measures in the educational group in order to eliminate them.

The research supports the idea of lifelong learning of intact persons at least up to the age of seventy. Although no one is able to stop the process of ageing, there exist certain means connected with increased keeping of the mental processes: the education, the exercises and different activities stimulating the brain activity, the absence of chronic diseases and illnesses, etc. (Merriam, 2001, in: Crawford, 2004). While older people are not able to learn as fast as young people, they can compensate this deficit with their wide range of experience (Crawford, 2004).

More studies mention that the learning capacity is being kept on the active level up to the age of eighty. In fact, the disability to absorb new knowledge could be the first signal in the process of subclinical disease of the senescent person. Besides using different modifications of education (e.g. shorter lessons, slower speed, having more breaks etc.) it is important to give seniors the opportunity to show their life experience, and constantly support their motivation to study with a positive feedback (<http://www.euromedinfo.eu/teaching-older-adults.html/>).

Most of the contemporary conceptions of „successful ageing“ emphasize the keeping of the adequate activity of people in the old age. The negative impacts of idleness and emotional and suggestive deprivation are much more evident in the

old age and they lead to the acceleration of involuntal changes. The idleness is pathogenic physically, psychically and also socially. The researches show that with the adequate activation, many older individuals achieve a similar performance in the tests of fluid intelligence which is fully comparable with the performance of many younger people (Langmeier, Krejčířová, 1998). It has been proved that people with lower education have worse memory. If the memory is trained, its functions are less disturbed and they are kept for longer time (Tošnerová, 1998, in: Vágnerová, 2000). In general, it is valid that people with higher intelligence usually deal with intellectual activities which keep and develop their competences. People who do not dispose with so many abilities, choose such a kind of lifestyle which does not usually support keeping at least the rest of these skills (Vágnerová, 2000).

The educational programmes, including language education, should completely fulfil the requirements and expectations of seniors. Their structure should comply with the main educational rules and respect the personality of the seniors including their specific educational needs. Together with teachers of a foreign language, the andragogue should act as a facilitator who understands and helps to saturate the educational needs of the seniors.

### **Instead of conclusion**

We can talk about the active ageing in its true sense in relation to the institutionalised seniors with (not only) disability by means of intergenerational foreign language education only with certain limits but we consider this kind of education in the social facilities in order to provide the active living of the old age as absolutely real. Although the intergenerational learning has been mentioned recently in various contexts referring to various target groups, its usage in the language education of older people who are the clients of the social residential facilities, has not been adequately carried out in our conditions. The proper intergenerational foreign language education of senior clients creates the real bases for fulfilling of the educational/affective aims (forming of positive intra- and intergenerational relationships, easier accepting of one's own ageing and life in the residential facility, more active attitude to the selfcare, progressing socialisation, etc.), the cognitive objectives (to master the basics of the language – grammar, lexicology, stylistics, syntax etc., knowing the culture of the target country etc.) and also the training/psychomotor objectives (e.g. the development of communication skills such as reading with comprehension, writing, listening with comprehension, speaking etc.). In this way, the foreign language education of seniors realized by means of the intergenerational programmes/projects contributes to the development of the proper personality of older people as well as it enables them to participate more actively in the social life. It is possible to suppose that the

intergenerational foreign language education fulfils a therapeutic function as well – in this way seniors find the answers to their questions which have not been answered until now such as those concerning the meaning of life, they re-evaluate their previous, mostly negative attitudes to various life situations and also to themselves.

Although the experts pay less or no attention to the intergenerational foreign language education of the institutionalised seniors, which can be related to the entire society's perception of the social-service facilities for seniors as places of waiting for the end of their life, from the point of view of geragogy, gerontopsychology and linguistic didactics one can see in it a big potential undiscovered until now.

### Note

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