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Self-regulation and experience in foreign language learning: a comprehensive analysis of the older-learner classroom

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Contributions and originality of the dissertation

This dissertation offers a thorough and balanced account of all the aspects relevant to the study of the process of foreign language learning (FLL) in older adults. The thesis makes the following original contributions to the field of second language teaching and learning:

- 1) It is a comprehensive study on second language learning in older age and it is the first to adapt models of vocabulary learning that have been proposed for younger students to the older learner.
- 2) It is the first study on the process of acquisition of Spanish by speakers of Japanese who are 60 year old or over.
- 3) It proposes a new model for vocabulary learning in older students, the *experience-based vocabulary-learning strategy use model*, taking into account new variables that had been obviated in previous models conceived for younger adults.
- 4) It makes a concrete pedagogical proposal for implementation in the FL classroom for older learners, thus being the first application of critical geragogy to FLL.
- 5) In addition, it presents a thorough overview of all the factors at play in the L2 classroom for older learners: memory and learning, teaching methods in Japan, educational and work background, cognitive style, etc. This renders this dissertation a reference piece of work for future studies on the subject.

Description of the contents of the dissertation

The thesis is divided into seven sections, comprising a total of fifteen chapters. Each section introduces a relevant aspect of the FL process in older adults.

Section I (chapters 1 and 2) is devoted to analysing the literature on the field of FL learning in adults and older adults. After a thorough review of the literature on age and foreign language learning, chapter 2 analyses the factors that affect the learning process: aptitude, cognitive style, processing and learning style, developmental changes in older age, character, social and affective factors, motivation, educational level and working background, etc. Each one of these factors is dealt with in a separate section. Thus, the chapter constitutes a comprehensive analysis of the process of learning in older adults.

Section II (chapters 3 and 4) analyses the physical, psychological and educational characteristics of FL older learners, and includes a review of the evolution of foreign language teaching in Japan, in order to address the particular background of this cohort, the subject pool of the investigation of

this dissertation. It becomes clear that older learners' use of vocabulary learning strategies (VLS) is deeply influenced by their previous experience as FL students. Experience is a factor that distinguishes older from younger adults: it is longer and richer, and it may be a valuable asset in the classroom. However, it may also turn into an obstacle. Thus, the author proposes the following questions as research issues to be answered in this dissertation:

- How do past experiences influence the variables that participate in the use of VLS and their efficiency in older learners?
- Is it possible to predict how efficient an older learner will be in the use of VLS based on his or her past experience?
- Are there any mechanisms that could be employed to improve the success rate in the use of VLS among older learners?
- Would improving the rate of success in VLS use in older students transform their attitudes toward themselves as learners of an FL? Would this, in turn, transform their attitudes toward their general competence, or social attitudes toward elderly individuals in general?

Section III (chapters 5 and 6) poses the relevant challenges that affect older learners in the FL classroom. In order to identify these challenges, the author organized two courses for 60-year-olds and over in Kobe, and gathered data from several tasks. At this stage, the author explains the educational and working background of the participants and the types of tasks they participated in.

Section IV (chapters 7 and 8) is devoted to introducing the field of critical geragogy (CG) and critical educational gerontology. These fields propose that the reality of older adults must be approached from a critical perspective. In particular, older adults should identify, examine and reflect on their social situation and be empowered to transform it for the better. The author considers that due to limited research on FLL in older adults, the generalized pessimistic attitudes of learners and instructors that lead to unambitious goals and paternalistic attitudes on the part of the instructors are not based on empirical evidence. Therefore, the author proposes to question the inaccurate preconceptions through empirical research in order to transform them. This dissertation is an attempt in this direction.

Section V (chapters 9 to 11) analyses in depth one of the topics that are more relevant in the FL older classroom: memorization and vocabulary learning strategies. Chapter 9 introduces the literature on memory and language processing and learning. Chapter 10 introduces models of vocabulary learning strategies, with special emphasis on the one proposed by Tseng and Schmitt (2008). Chapter 11 presents the first badge of results from the original studies carried out for this dissertation. The results are from five different studies: 1) a questionnaire on self-regulation capacity, 2) a behavioral experiment on the use of vocabulary consolidation strategies (VCS), 3) a questionnaire on the use of those VCS, 4) a questionnaire on the perception of the learners of the efficiency of the VCS and 5) a set of vocabulary tests and evaluations of the creative production of the students.

Overall, the results suggest that Japanese older learners of Spanish show a low self-regulation capacity, which may negatively affect their emotional states, level of commitment to the tasks and engagement. Self-regulation capacity was positively correlated with degree of success or achievement. Low-achieving learners tend to have problems matching metacognitive strategies and the task at hand. In other words, Japanese older learners who exhibit low-level performance tend to be confused regarding what strategies are more appropriate for them or for each task.

In Section VI (chapters 12 and 13), the author introduces the concepts of trajectory and orientation based on Escandón (2012, 2013). These two variables are identified in her study of the results of a questionnaire administered to her subjects. Trajectory refers to the perception that the student has about his past experience as a FL learner. Orientation is closely related to it. It is the learner's ability to recognize instructional discourse (i.e., the goal behind each task performed in the class). The author identified eight groups of subjects according to the combination of their trajectories (formal and informal) and orientations (communicative, grammar, counfounded and comprehensive) and matched these categories with the level of success achieved in the course. The results show that trajectories and orientations are not related among older learners in the same manner as they are in younger learners. The author proposes to incorporate these two variables in a model of vocabulary learning for older learners, thus enriching Tseng and Schmitt's model on the basis of her empirical data.

Section VII (chapters 14 and 15) introduces the theoretical proposal of the dissertation, the *experience-based vocabulary-learning strategy use model*, an improvement over the previous models of vocabulary learning strategy use. The theoretical model includes six areas: 1) experience, understood as the learner's trajectory and orientation; 2) self-regulation, defined as the learner's ability to control and modify the vocabulary learning process, and formed by several variables that affect each learner differently; 3) need and motivation, which refer to the elements that trigger the strategy attempt; 4) outcome of the strategy attempt, which may yield comprehension (due to vocabulary discovery strategies), and increased vocabulary (due to vocabulary consolidation strategies) and to a transformed knowledge of strategies; 5) finally, strategy repertoire and knowledge. Furthermore, this section introduces the pedagogical proposal of the thesis, learner re-training, based on the critical geragogy principles of achieving self-control of the learning process and of empowerment of students. The author proposes a series of techniques to be used in the older-learner FL classroom: adequately managing attention focuses and lexical information, organizing lessons in a way that buffers the effect of absences, adapting visual and oral material and instruction, among others.

Oral defence

The oral defence took place on Feb 20th, 2015, from 10:15 to 12:00. The committee was headed by Dr. Montserrat Sanz, and was composed of Dr.

Noritaka Fukushima and Dr. Donna Tatsuki from Kobe City University of Foreign Studies, and Dr. Arturo Escandón, from Nanzan University. The candidate offered a thirty minute presentation of the dissertation. Questions were posed by the committee and several comments came from the audience.

The members of the committee all commented on the fact that the dissertation offers pioneering and important work on a neglected topic, foreign language learning in older adults, which is nevertheless an academically and socially important topic. They also admitted that the oral defence presented in a very efficient way the main premise of the dissertation, namely, the interface between VLS (vocabulary learning strategies) and experience and how experience mediates the language acquisition process in older learners. However, they criticized the fact that the thesis was too long and broad-scoped, too comprehensive and exhaustive, and that the main and original proposal came too late in the course of the dissertation, burdening the reader and making him exhausted. The problem was identified, as one member put it, as the fact that the dissertation seems like a collection of short papers, and presents different theories (methodological, observational, analytical and pedagogical) in different chapters, which was lacking in coherence and dissertation style. He suggested that the first part, identifying the problem, should be more dialogic and less descriptive of the literature at hand. The candidate admitted these problems, but contested that all the topics that remain in the thesis are necessary to understand the main proposal, and that the chapters on adult education (7 and 8) should be repositioned towards the end of the thesis, when the pedagogical proposal is discussed. She also agreed to collect all the theories in one more coherent chapter instead of four different ones.

Ramírez was also asked about the connection of her MA's thesis, on theoretical syntax, with the current work, and she expressed that the doctoral dissertation focused on vocabulary because of it being one of the more problematic topics in older adults FLL, but that in the future the materials created for this cohort should include syntax, semantics, etc. It was also pointed out that there are several errors in the questionnaires, but it was agreed that they would remind as they are in the appendix, since they were passed to the subjects in that way, and the author agreed to insert a footnote signalling those mistakes.

It was pointed out that there were references missing to Michael Breen, and that the dismissal of aptitude tests by the author was not justified, since aptitude tests measure abilities that do not change overtime, and since the subjects participated in the study voluntarily, which amounts to a self-selection. The author acknowledged that the subjects are not the average older adult, but rather the average older *learner*, which is the target of the study, and that, whereas it would have been interested to measure language aptitude, it was tangential to her study and she lacked the resources to do it.

Ramírez was asked to describe her subjects, since the reader has difficulty portraying them with the information in the thesis, and she described different learner profiles in relation to the learning tasks. She also pointed out that within "older" learners we have different age groups, and that there is now a "fourth age" worth analyzing and working for.

The audience, in which some of her subjects were included, praised the work and showed some astonishment at the results, which helped them re-evaluate their goals and their learning strategies.

Assessment of the value of the dissertation

Given that the aging of the population is a reality and a world phenomenon, and that more people achieve old age in optimal health conditions, educational programs are a must in order to ensure a high quality of life of these individuals. Furthermore, these members of society can be empowered to fulfill meaningful roles throughout high quality education. In this sense, the present work constitutes a pioneering and very valuable piece of work to orient institutions and public officials in designing better educational programs geared to the elderly based on solid scientific data. Overall, the members of the committee recognized the enormous academic and social potential for this work, which they deem seminal, the novelty of the empirical approach, which contrasts with previous work based on intuitions, and the efficiency of the candidate in gathering and analyzing the data. The criticisms were justified on the basis of the big potential of this dissertation, which can be turned in a good publication, and therefore the candidate was encouraged to try to publish it. Finally, the candidate showed her competence in answering questions about all aspects of her dissertation in the oral defence. Therefore, the committee renders this thesis and its oral defence worthy of a passing grade and therefore decided to grant Danya Ramírez the title of Doctor in Philosophy in Linguistics and Language Sciences at this university.

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