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RAEL: Revista Electrónica de Lingüística Aplicada

Vol./Núm.: 22/1
Enero-diciembre 2023
Páginas: 125-147
Artículo recibido: 24/07/2023
Artículo aceptado: 14/11/2023
Artículo publicado: 31/01/2024
Url: <https://rael.aesla.org.es/index.php/RAEL/article/view/583>
DOI: <https://www.doi.org/10.58859/rael.v23i1.583>

‘Why am I Learning Spanish at 65?’ A Multiple Case Study of L1 English Senior Learners of Spanish as a Foreign Language

«¿Por qué estoy aprendiendo español a los 65?» Un estudio de caso múltiple de estudiantes sénior nativos de inglés que aprenden español como lengua extranjera

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Many studies support the idea that language learning is a beneficial activity for senior populations. However, most studies conducted so far deal with the acquisition of English as a second language and age-related effects on linguistic gains; very few have analysed the acquisition of other languages with a focus on individual differences. The present study thus aims at exploring the beliefs, motivation and strategies displayed by mother tongue English senior learners of Spanish as a foreign language. The participants were nine learners of Spanish as a FL, who were following teacher-led online classes at the time of the study. A mixed-methods approach was followed, consisting of a background questionnaire, a questionnaire that encompassed 36 statements on beliefs, motivation, and strategies, and a semi-structured interview. Results show a variety of positive beliefs linked to learning Spanish, and the use of different types of strategies to build their own learning process and promote self-motivation.

Keywords: *Senior learners; Spanish as a foreign language; beliefs; motivation; strategies*

Numerosos estudios respaldan la idea de que el aprendizaje de idiomas es una actividad beneficiosa para las personas mayores. Sin embargo, la mayoría de los estudios realizados hasta la fecha tratan el aprendizaje de inglés como segunda lengua y sus efectos relacionados con la edad; muy pocos han analizado la adquisición de otras lenguas centrándose en las diferencias individuales. Por lo tanto, el presente estudio tiene como objetivo explorar las creencias, motivaciones y estrategias de estudiantes sénior con inglés como lengua materna que aprenden español como lengua extranjera (ELE). Los participantes fueron nueve estudiantes que tomaban clases de español en línea en el momento del estudio. Se siguió un método mixto, que constaba de un cuestionario de información personal, un cuestionario con 36 afirmaciones sobre creencias, motivaciones y estrategias, y una entrevista semiestructurada. Los resultados muestran creencias positivas vinculadas al aprendizaje de ELE, y el uso de diferentes estrategias para construir su proceso de aprendizaje y potenciar la automotivación.

Palabras clave: *estudiantes sénior; español como lengua extranjera; creencias; motivación; estrategias*

1. INTRODUCTION

The elderly population is projected to double today's number by 2050, growing from 771 million people aged over 65 to 1.6 billion (The United Nations, 2022). Humankind is thus experiencing many age-associated physical and cognitive changes, ageing being a major risk for neurodegenerative diseases, as claimed by Niccoli and Partridge (2012), and for social effects such as a financial burden on governments brought on by retirement (see Ramírez Gómez, 2016). Consequently, as Ramírez Gómez (2016) explains, there is a growing need for mechanisms that will improve the ageing group's social, physical, and psychological wellbeing. In this sense, language learning is seen as a stimulating activity that may improve senior learners' cognitive functions and aid in healthy ageing. As Griffiths and Soruç (2021) claim, age interacts with other individual differences (IDs) such as beliefs on language learning, motivation, and strategies. Such IDs might be fundamental to explain seniors' language learning processes and may not only help to make age-related changes be less visible (Mackey & Sachs, 2012), but may also contribute to senior learners' overall wellbeing, as can be observed in Pfenninger and Polz's (2018) and Pikhart and Klimova's (2020), to name but a few.

The present study, therefore, aims at investigating mother tongue (L1) English senior learners' beliefs, motivation and strategies when learning Spanish as a foreign language (FL), an under-researched combination of languages and topic in said population.

2. SENIOR LEARNERS AND SECOND LANGUAGE ACQUISITION

Often referred to as *third age learners*, *older adults*, and *senior learners*, there does not seem to be a consensus on when an individual can be considered part of this population and how the group should be named. In the present study, the term used is *senior learners*, in line with most recent studies (Pikhart & Klimova, 2020; Schiller & Dorner, 2021, among others). As Gabryś-Barker (2018) states, it is generally believed that learning a foreign language can improve cognitive plasticity as it enhances memory load, concentration and the organisation of information in the brain, which, in turn, leads to better expression of thoughts and feelings and can improve lost brain capacity as well as social and affective skills. This can be observed in several studies, such as the one by Bubbico, Chiacchiareta, Parenti, di Marco, Panara, Sepedel, Ferretti, and Perruccil (2019), in which the researchers concluded that a short intensive foreign language course led to considerable improvement in cognition and an increase in functional connectivity, and in the study conducted in the Czech Republic by Valis, Slaninova, Prazak, Poulouva, Kacetl and Klimova (2019), where the researchers found a slight enhancement of the cognitive abilities of the participants who had received English language training for 12 weeks as compared to the control group who had not followed any training. Similarly, some studies report that bilingualism may delay neurocognitive diseases such as Alzheimer's Disease (AD). Craik, Bialystok and Freedman (2010), for instance, collected data from a total of 211 monolingual and bilingual patients with 21 different L1s who had been diagnosed with probable AD and were able to confirm that bilingualism is a cognitive operation that contributes to cognitive reserve and may, therefore, postpone the onset of symptoms of AD.

Moreover, as Pikhart and Klimova (2020) found, language learning does not only improve brain functions but also increases quality of life, as it is closely linked to subjective feelings of happiness. In their study, the researchers explored the aspects of

positive psychology related to second language learning (English or German at the time of the study but a wide range of other languages were studied previously) and observed that senior learners (105 participants who were 55+ years old), in contrast to younger learners (102 participants aged 19 to 23), associated their feelings of happiness with the acquisition of the second language (L2) more than the younger group, and showed more improvement in wellbeing than the control group of other senior learners (102 participants) who had several hobbies but were not involved in second language learning. Similar results appear in Pfenninger and Polz (2018) where the researchers examined the potential linguistic, socio-affective and cognitive benefits of language learning in a group of L1 German speakers aged 63 to 90 after participating in a four-week English as a foreign language (EFL) course for beginners. Their results confirmed the enhancement of cognitive abilities as well as linguistic self-confidence, communicative skills and subjective wellbeing. A large percentage of the participants saw the English course as an activity that positively affected their social life by increasing conversations with family, friends, and neighbours. Some of them also expressed an improvement in their personal wellbeing and emphasized that their self-confidence had improved, and that they generally considered language learning a valuable experience and “not just as a goal in itself but as a means of promoting social interaction and integration” (Pfenninger & Polz, 2018: 10). It is important to mention here that the proficiency tests used in the study were written tasks, so as to rule out the effects of hearing loss and reduced processing speech and working memory (WM) capacity, which are features seniors present, as will be seen below.

To further analyse the acquisition of foreign languages by the senior population, a general understanding of their emotions is necessary. As Oxford (2018) explains, some of the positive emotions that characterise this period of life are happiness, curiosity, pleasure, and joy. However, ageing may come with other more difficult emotions, such as the loss of many financial, social and psychological elements: salary, role in society, social networks, and a life purpose, among them (see Ramírez Gómez, 2016). Some of these emotions can be seen in the results of the interviews conducted by Andrew (2012) with Hector and Felix, two retired Mexican EFL learners. In this study, Hector claimed that he felt more alone and less attached to his family and friends, something that he describes as a ‘flattening of affect’. Felix admitted plunging into a severe depression after being abruptly asked to retire at the age of 56 and feeling distressed after noticing the downturn of some cognitive and physical capacities.

Ageing also brings about some biological changes, both physical and cognitive. According to Oxford (2018), some of the physical changes imply a reduction in vision, audition, and coordination, whereas changes in cognition, as Drachmann (2006) explains, may involve memory decrease, slowed responses, prolonged reaction times, and decreased “creativity” as well as some gross and microscopic brain changes. The central question between ageing and memory seems to be related to WM, which is in charge of manipulating, processing and maintaining information during cognitive processes and is essential to transfer new information to the long-term memory (Singleton, 2018). Mackey and Sachs (2012) investigated the communicative performance of native speakers of Spanish who learned English as an L2 and who interacted with native speakers (NSs) of the language. This group of NSs also provided interactional feedback in response to non-target like question forms. In their results, the researchers observed that participants with a higher WM showed an improvement on the target question forms. Similarly, in a study conducted by Kliesch, Guiroud, Pfenninger and Meyer (2018), the authors found both WM and L1 fluency to be strong predictors of L2 proficiency after they had conducted an intensive 3-week course with Swiss German EFL senior learners. However, it is

important to emphasise that in both studies the researchers also found that IDs could be more predictive of L2 progress than age. In this sense, we can also claim that “other cognitive abilities, such as vocabulary, past knowledge, previously acquired skills, considered to be “crystallized intelligence” or wisdom, often remain intact until advanced age” (Drachmann, 2006: 1341).

3. SENIOR LEARNERS AND INDIVIDUAL DIFFERENCES: BELIEFS, MOTIVATION, AND LEARNER STRATEGIES

As Dörnyei (2006: 42) put it: “IDs are a prominent feature of SLA because a great deal of the variation in language learning outcomes is attributable, either directly or indirectly, to various learner characteristics”. The researcher states that the construct of ‘individual differences’ (IDs) is believed to contain a few main core variables, such as *aptitude*, *personality* and *motivation*, and some optional ones, such as *learning strategies*, *learner styles* or *mood*. It follows that IDs may have a very relevant role in the second language acquisition (SLA) process in this population, since it is very important to stress that these factors may help to make differences in cognition less visible between groups of different ages (Mackey & Sachs, 2012) and may be decisive in how successful a learner of an L2 is. Therefore, the IDs chosen to be analysed in the present study, namely, *beliefs*, *motivation* and *strategies* can be considered factors of importance in the language classroom (see Griffiths & Soruç, 2021) that interact with age.

Barcelos (2003: 11) defines the term *beliefs* as “preconceived notions, myths and misconceptions” about language learning. In the previously mentioned interviews conducted by Andrew (2012) with Hector and Felix, they both acknowledged feeling disadvantaged in relation to younger learners due to their age. However, Felix expressed that enthusiasm may help to counteract other age-related cognitive losses. In the case of Hector, he linked his study of English with an increased status and self-esteem, and questioned whether learning a foreign language at an older age requires an age-related learning ability, or whether you only need motivation. Researchers such as Pikhart and Klimova (2020) have investigated senior learners’ thoughts on language learning and how they experience it. In their study, participants answered a questionnaire that consisted of 20 statements about the possible impact language learning can have on their lives. From their results, not only can we infer that those respondents see language learning as an activity that brings cognitive benefits, increasing their memory and concentration, but also that it enhances feelings of happiness and satisfaction, as it improves social relationships.

Another ID involved in L2 learning that seems to be determinant to the learner’s achievement of a language is *motivation*, or the reasons for engaging in language learning. In its definition in Gardner’s socioeducational model (see Bernaus, Wilson & Gardner, 2009), two types of motivation can be identified: *instrumental*, and *integrative motivation*. A language learner with an instrumental motivation may study a language for a practical reason, such as a salary bonus or better career prospects. On the other hand, the latter refers to the learner’s interest to communicate and be part of a target language community by speaking their language. After Gardner’s motivational model, other theories have been developed to explain this construct. Dörnyei (2005), for instance, developed a theoretical framework of an *L2 Motivational Self System*, whose most relevant concept is the *ideal L2 self*, which represents all the L2-related attributes and qualities a person would like to possess as an L2 learner.

Motivation impacts the learners' success, if understood not only as ultimate attainment but also as other behavioural outcomes such as persistence in learning (Ushioda, 2019). However, to the best of our knowledge, little attention has been paid to senior learners' motivation and most of them included participants who studied English and not Spanish as a FL as in the present study. This is the case of the study conducted by Schiller and Dorner (2019), in which they investigated 30 L1 Hungarian senior learners' motivational profile by means of a 93-item questionnaire about language learning motivation. From their results, we can observe that the most influential factors were positive attitudes towards EFL, as well as having defined goals with the language. However, unlike young adult language learners, integrativeness does not seem to be one of the main motivational factors, as senior learners engage in language learning to integrate into the target language's community less often. In a study with both monolingual and bilingual L1 German senior learners of English, Pfenninger and Polz (2018) found that the main motivation for monolinguals was a general interest in the English language, a desire to read and understand written English, communicate with English speakers, travel, and take up a new challenge. With regards to the bilingual group, the main motivation was to communicate with English speakers. They also observed that all participants developed their own personal goals with the language that could involve "mutual learning", "being able to communicate with others", "ambition and thirst for knowledge", "curiosity", "fun", "reading", "thinking", "writing" and "laughing" (Pfenninger & Polz, 2018: 7).

Finally, the other ID analysed in the present study, namely, *strategies*, has also been found to counteract age-related losses (see Oxford 1990), although the analysis with senior learners is still scarce. In Piechurska-Kuciel and Szyszka (2018) the four learners analysed, with L1 Polish and L2 German or English at beginner levels, used compensatory strategies to counteract age-related losses. *Compensation* in SLA encompasses those strategies used by a learner in order to make up for the deficits in linguistic knowledge during the development of foreign language acquisition.

Similarly, the study by Mora, Quito, Macías, Fárez, and Quinde (2018) investigated the strategies used to learn EFL by 66 Equadorian senior learners through a questionnaire and concluded that learners use metacognitive strategies more often than they use memory, cognitive, compensation, affective or social strategies. This implies that senior learners tend to have clear goals and planning to maximise their productivity with the language, and seek opportunities to practise it.

Bearing in mind the ideas reviewed above, and contrary to the increasing research on young learners' L2 acquisition, we can claim that there is an urgent need for empirical studies on senior learners, the individual differences that may affect the L2 learning process, and the interplay between age and other contextual, environmental and affective factors (see, however, Dörnyei, 2005, and Griffiths & Soruç, 2021). The present study (of an observational nature) poses, therefore, the following research questions:

1. What beliefs do L1 English senior learners of Spanish as a FL hold about learning Spanish?
2. What motivates senior learners to engage in Spanish FL learning?
3. What strategies do L1 English senior learners use when learning Spanish as a FL?

4. THE STUDY

4.1 Participants

The participants in this multiple case study are nine L1 English learners of Spanish as a FL who are based in the United Kingdom and were taking online classes because of the COVID-19 pandemic. They are three females and six males, and their ages ranged from 61 to 81 years old. To ensure the homogeneity of the sample, a background questionnaire was administered to 11 potential participants, and two of them were excluded because they were not L1 English-speakers. Table 1 below presents an overview of the participants in terms of their gender, age, L1, country of origin, occupation, knowledge of other languages, years spent learning Spanish and level of proficiency according to the Common European Framework of Reference (CEFR).

Table 1: *Participants' features*

Participant number	Gender	Age (y/o)	L1	Country of origin	Occupation	Other languages	Years learning Spanish	Level of proficiency
1	Female	61	English	Ireland	Retired	German; French	3	B2
2	Male	63	English	UK	Retired	French; Italian	2	A2
3	Male	63	English	UK	Full-time	French	5	B2
4	Male	64	English	UK	Retired	None	7	B2
5	Female	66	English	UK	Retired	None	8	B2
6	Male	69	English	Ireland	Retired	None	2	A2
7	Male	78	English	UK	Retired	French; German; Russian; Catalan	8	C1
8	Male	79	English	Ireland	Retired	Irish; French	4	A2
9	Female	81	English	UK	Retired	French	2	A1

4.2 Instruments

A mixed-methods approach was followed to gather the data. The instruments used were a background questionnaire, a questionnaire on beliefs, motivation, and strategies, and a fifteen-minute semi-structured interview with each participant, which are described below.

4.2.1 Background questionnaire

The background questionnaire was designed to collect personal data of the participants as well as some general questions about their previous and current use and experiences with languages. The information provided is displayed in Table 1.

4.2.2 *Questionnaire on beliefs, motivation, and strategies*

In order to explore senior learners' beliefs about language learning, motivation for studying and strategies to tackle the difficulties encountered in the learning process, a questionnaire that consisted of 36 statements to be rated on a five-point Likert Scale was distributed (see Appendix 1). Ten statements explored participants' beliefs such as the existence of a link between Spanish language learning, cognitive enhancement, social circle widening and positive feelings (statement 1 to 10); 14 statements explored participants' motivation by covering different topics related to goals, integrative motivation, and general thoughts on their Spanish lessons (statements 11 to 24), and the other 12 explored the use of memory, cognitive, metacognitive, compensation and social strategies (statements 25 to 36). Most of the statements included in the questionnaire were adapted from previous studies, mainly those by Pikhart and Klimova (2020), Pfenninger and Polz (2018), and Mora et al. (2018), but eight of them were designed *ad hoc* by the researchers (numbers 10, 12, and 19 to 24). The questionnaire was delivered in English to ensure participants' comprehension, and it also included a final section for the participants to leave any comments they wished to make, which also helped in the development of the semi-structured interview, as described in section 4.2.3.

4.2.3 *Semi-structured interview*

The outline for the interview was designed following the information obtained from the background questionnaire and the questionnaire on beliefs, motivation, and strategies. In these fifteen-minute interviews, the researchers emphasised their goals with the Spanish language, their interest in travelling and/or potentially integrating into a Spanish-speaking community, some of the strategies and resources they found useful and, in the case of those who had studied other languages in the past, how all of these compared to their previous experiences with other languages. All interviews were conducted in English, their L1, so as not to stress the participants.

4.3 *Procedure*

Potential participants were contacted via email and signed a consent form. After reading the responses to the background questionnaire and excluding two potential participants (see 4.1), the final number (nine) answered the questionnaire on beliefs, motivation, and strategies. From the information extracted from the questionnaire on beliefs and the comments added at the end of the questionnaire by the participants themselves, a guideline for the semi-structured interview was designed. The fifteen-minute semi-structured interview was conducted online with each participant and then transcribed using Otter. The three instruments were piloted with a senior learner who shared the same characteristics as the participants in the study.

5. RESULTS

5.1 *Results from the questionnaire on beliefs, motivation, and strategies*

For the sake of clarity in the explanation of the results, the responses have been merged into three blocks; *Strongly agree* and *agree* have been analysed as *Agree*; *Neither agree nor disagree* are defined as *Neutral*; and, finally, *Disagree* and *Strongly disagree* have been merged into *Disagree*.

Questions 1 to 10 investigated the participants' beliefs about the learning of Spanish as a FL (see Figure 1 and Appendix 1). From their responses in questions 1 to 3, we can observe that most participants (8/9) find this activity beneficial for their cognitive skills,

whereas just one of the participants remained neutral. However, this participant added a comment in the last section of the questionnaire where he expressed the impossibility to answer this question, as he did not recall having any difficulties remembering things or concentrating before he started learning Spanish. Out of the nine participants, three of them link this activity with an enhancement of their capacity to learn other things, whereas the rest appear to be neutral, as seen in the results from question 3.

Questions 4, 5, 6 and 7 reflect their subjective thoughts on how learning Spanish may improve their social life (questions 5 and 6) and bring positive feelings such as an increase in self-confidence and joy (questions 4 and 7). In total, six respondents acknowledge finding this activity useful to enhance social bonds and four of them state that it helps them to understand other realities, whereas the other five remain neutral. All participants agree that learning Spanish brings them feelings of joy and six of them express increased self-confidence linked to this activity. An improvement in wellbeing and life activity is also perceived from questions 8 and 9, where five of the respondents agree that this activity contributes to their overall wellbeing and seven of them find that it helps them to remain busy and active.

In relation to age differences in question 10, six of the respondents express that learning Spanish may be easier the younger you are. However, it is important to emphasize that three of them had no previous experience learning other languages, whereas the participant who disagreed has a wider experience of studying languages in the past.

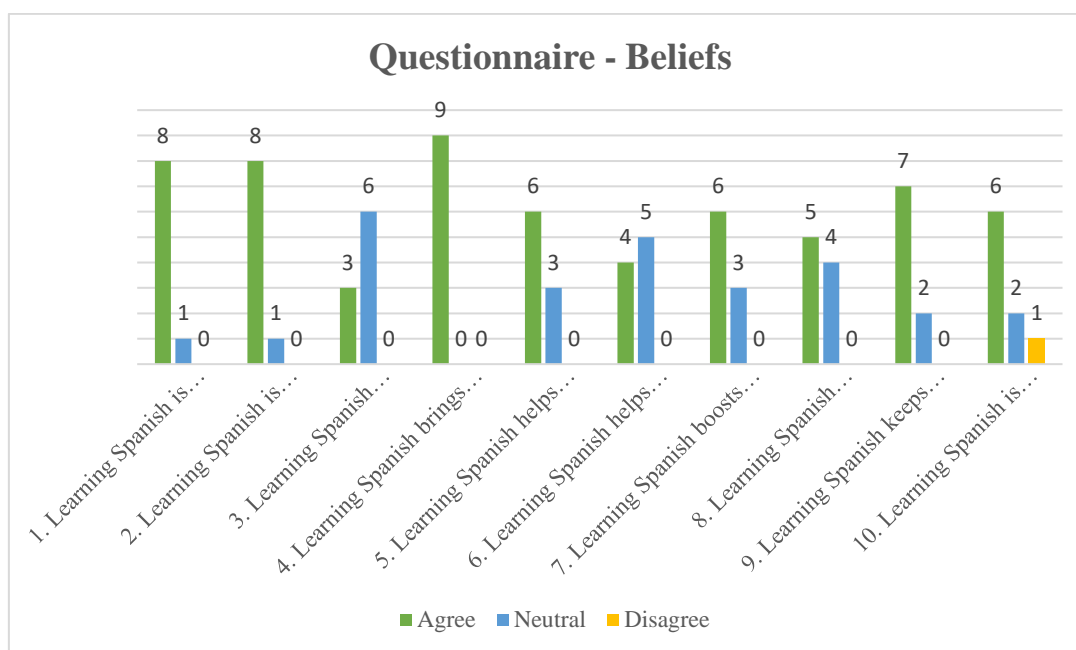


Figure 1: Overview of the responses to the questions on beliefs

Questions 11 to 24 covered different topics related to goals, integrative motivation and general thoughts on their Spanish lessons (see Figure 2 and Appendix 1). Question 11 shows that six respondents set themselves goals with the language. These goals, as seen from questions 12, 13 and 14, express a desire to understand both oral and written Spanish, but only five of them see fluency as a main goal. Question 15 shows that all respondents wish to travel and communicate with native speakers, but only three of them have an actual desire of integrating in a Spanish-speaking community (see question 16). From questions 17, 18 and 19, we can perceive a general interest in both language and

culture, and a general desire for learning new things, as seven of the respondents express being interested in the language, seven of them in the culture and six of them state a desire to learn new things. Even though five participants acknowledge feeling unable sometimes to learn the language (questions 23 and 24), none of them have reported thinking of dropping their classes nor feeling discouraged by the challenges of the language. Instead, seven of them express feeling happy with their progress with the language.

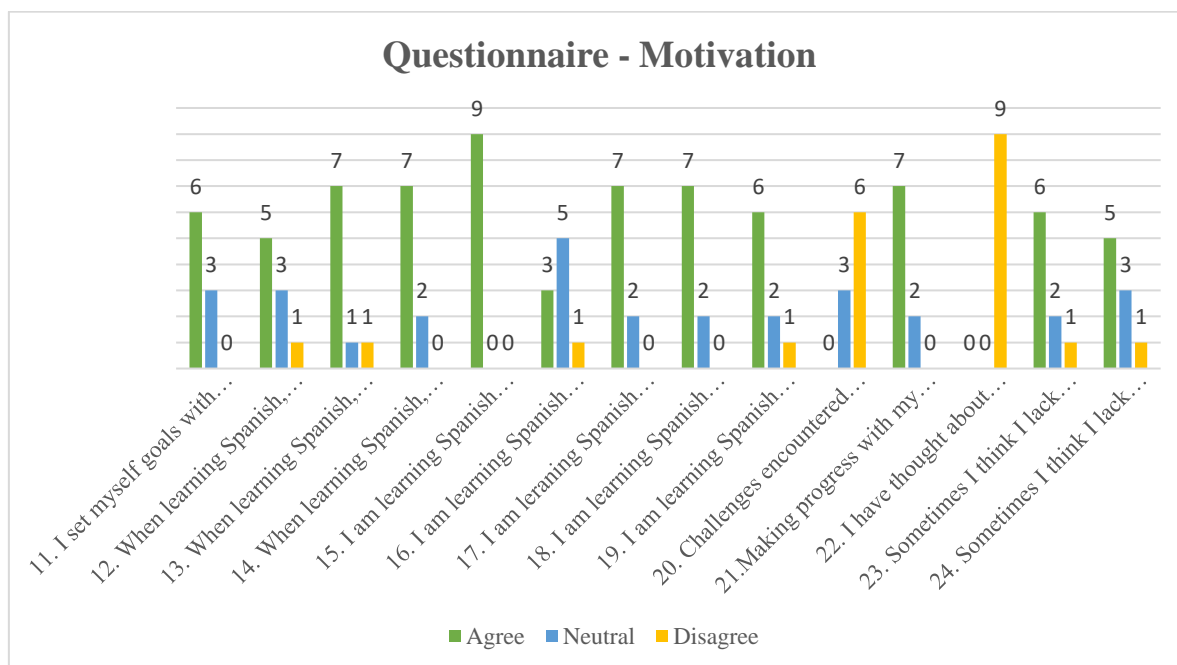


Figure 2: Overview of the responses to the questions on motivation

Regarding learner strategies (see questions 25 to 36 in the Appendix 1 and Figure 3), answers to question 25 show that three participants associate new knowledge in Spanish with languages they have learned previously, three of them are neutral and the other three do not seem to employ this strategy, which is in line with the fact that two of these three participants have no previous experience learning other languages. Moreover, participants do not often employ memory strategies, since only four participants say they use the sounds of English to remember new words in Spanish (question 26) and only one of them seems to use the images of a word to recall new vocabulary (question 27). Results from question 28 and 29 reveal that five participants review their Spanish lessons periodically and five participants take notes during their classes. From responses to question 30, we can observe that most participants use their reasoning to find patterns in the Spanish language. Question 31 shows that five participants out of the nine attempt to find ways to talk to native speakers. Regarding questions 32, 33 and 36, participants' responses reveal a frequent use of the target language as a compensation strategy when encountering gaps in their knowledge, as in the three questions, eight participants acknowledge inferring the meaning of new words from context, attempting to formulate differently, and asking interlocutors to slow down or to repeat. Finally, in question 34, four participants acknowledge code-switching to English when they do not know the word in Spanish.

Participants also make use of other resources such as gesturing (question 35), as six respondents agreed with the statement. Question 36 shows that respondents interact with

native speakers in the target language, as eight of them agree that they ask their interlocutors to repeat or slow down when they do not understand.

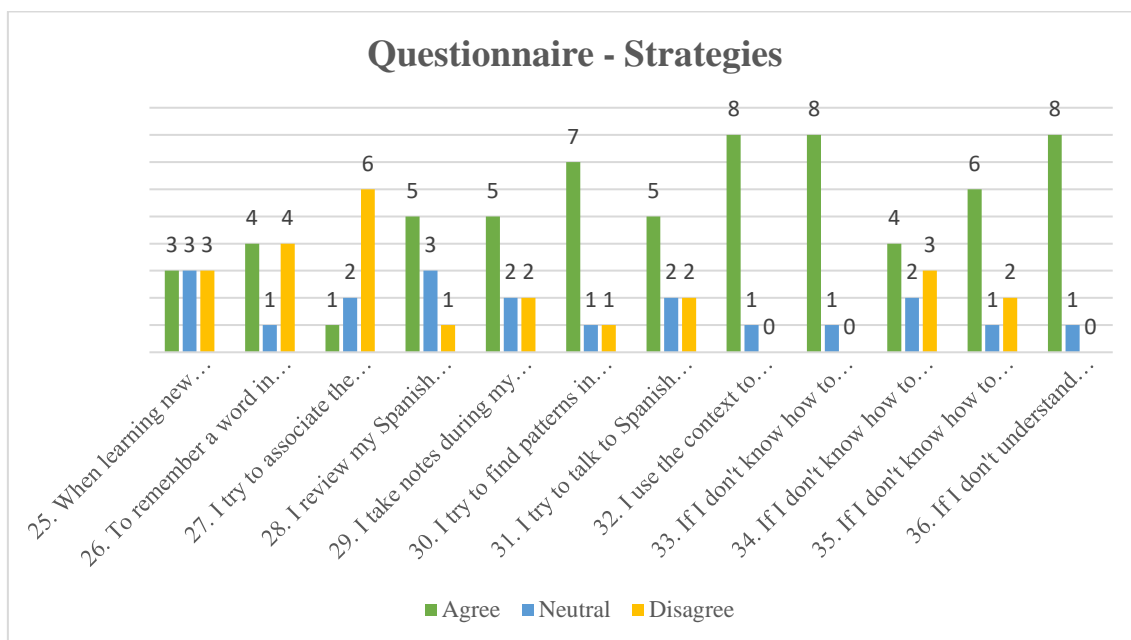


Figure 3: Overview of the responses to the questions on strategies

5.2 Results from the semi-structured interviews

Following the division used in the previous questionnaire, the semi-structured interview aimed at gaining deeper knowledge on each participant and their beliefs, motivation and strategies used to learn Spanish FL, and therefore each interview can be divided into these three topics.

During the interviews, three of the participants mentioned seeing their age as a handicap to learn Spanish and believe this activity is much easier to do at a younger age. However, one of the participants said that, even if learning a language at an older age might be slightly more difficult, you can still do it (Example 1):

- (1) There is a view that you can't learn a language as an adult, because you just can't. And I think that's wrong. I think that's wrong. I think it's a bit more difficult, obviously, than for a 17-year-old or a 12. But if you make the effort, you can get somewhere. (Participant 3)

Four participants also expressed the benefits of conducting this activity at an older age, emphasising the amount of time they now have to do different activities as well as feeling relief from external pressures (Example 2):

- (2) Because I'm now retired, I can organise my day the way I want to organise my day. So for many people, it's a case of after a hard day of working and not having much time and having family to take care of them... For them, it's much more difficult. And for me, this is now a very good time for me to get stuck in and properly immerse myself. (Participant 1)

All participants stated that learning Spanish is an activity that brings benefits to their life; at least three of them believe this activity is beneficial for cognition, as seen in Example 3:

(3) I think if you want an activity that is going to keep your mind alert, then one of the things you can do is to do crosswords, and Sudoku puzzles and things like that. And the other thing you can do is start to learn a language. (Participant 7)

Moreover, seven participants expressed that this activity brings positive emotions such as happiness, enjoyment, pleasure, willingness to travel, openness, interests, and activeness to their lives, even if it can be frustrating at times (Examples 4 and 5):

(4) I think it's definitely changed my life because it's like having a presence, a friend. [...] It's made a difference, huge difference. (Participant 3)

(5) The reality of getting older is that your life does get narrower. You do less things, you meet less new people. You just do less things. And whilst Spanish has some frustrations or many frustrations with viability, I know that it's also stretching me and expanding my mind and my life. (Participant 4)

Increased social relationships or the possibility to interact with speakers of the language was also mentioned by four participants, two examples of which are shown below:

(6) It's an opportunity to talk to people. And it's also an opportunity to see the way other people react in relation to the events of the world. (Participant 7)

(7) If I'm in London, and there's some Spanish people in there and they're lost, or they don't understand something, I've often been able to help them and they've been like oh, amazing that I've been able to help them and speak to them in their language. (Participant 5)

As regards motivation, among the different main reasons to learn Spanish, the one most frequently mentioned had to do with travelling around Spanish-speaking countries, which was expressed by all participants. Other reasons mentioned were speaking to family and friends, increasing cognitive practice, and interest in the language, as seen in Examples 8 and 9 below:

(8) I suppose initially, it was being in Menorca with Caroline, my wife, Caroline plays bridge. But this meant that while she was playing bridge, I didn't really have anything to do. But nor could I talk to the local people other than in English. And I much prefer to speak in their own language. And so I therefore began to speak Spanish or to learn Spanish. And that was the start. (Participant 7)

(9) It's not just the language, it's learning about Spain and learning about a different culture. Because I think so much of our history is in common. (Participant 9)

Six participants talked about the use of English around the world both seen as a native speaker and as someone who travels around the world and wishes to practise a language. Some of them referred to the fact that since English is the language of communication, native speakers of the language often become lazy to learn other languages and were critical about the learning of foreign languages as part of the curriculum at school (Example 10):

(10) In general, at school in the UK, languages are not learned very well. They do not have the same importance in school, as Maths and English and other subjects. (Participant 4)

Another question posed in the interview dealt with the goals each participant had with the Spanish language. From their responses, we can observe that most participants (8/9) see native-like fluency as nearly unachievable:

(11) I'm not interested in fluency because I'm not particularly brilliant at languages. It's never interested me too, because people will always know I'm English. (Participant 2)

Two participants also referred to the importance of grammar and speaking correctly, as seen in Example 12:

(12) I know that grammar is not everybody's cup of tea. And I know people say 'look, it's not important. The communication is the important thing. And, you know, don't worry about the grammar.' But I do worry about the grammar. I want to speak correctly. (Participant 5)

In the interviews, close attention was paid to the motivation to learn other languages in the past, in contrast to their motivation to learn Spanish. In this line, six participants said that learning French or German was imposed on them at school, as it was part of the English school system: out of them, three claimed not having learned anything at all. Others continued to learn the language for different reasons, such as for work or to live in a different country for a while. When remembering past times learning other languages, some participants commented on how different it would have been with the existence of the internet and being able to find a method and strategies that worked for them.

In this sense, in relation to strategies all the participants claimed to have found materials that worked for them, as seen in Examples 13 to 15:

(13) I watch absolute rubbish on Netflix. The *telenovelas* for me are fantastic because you get used to the characters, and then you get used to the phrases that they use, because each personality within telenovela has a particular way of speaking and a particular vocabulary that they use. And the more I hear that, the more I'm able to understand what they say. (Participant 1)

(14) I know, an awful lot of people don't agree with it, or don't think it's very good, but I still do Duolingo every day. (Participant 1)

(15) It was very difficult before the internet; the internet is a great help. Well, I think it's been a help. (Participant 8)

Besides the internet, six participants said they made frequent use of cognitive strategies, since they read graded books, Spanish literature or English literature translated into Spanish, listened to oral Spanish using different resources such as apps to listen to the news, watch series, listen to podcasts, or watch videos. In terms of strategies used to improve their Spanish and acquiring new words and structures, Bill, who has studied at least 5 different languages, commented on how his knowledge of different languages can be helpful to understand and retain new rules and structures in Spanish (see Example 16):

(16) You know what you're looking for when learning a foreign language, particularly one which has the same roots. So you'll know that there are masculine and feminine, you know that the adjectives go with those masculine and feminine nouns. You know there are different tenses. Whereas a lot of British people without language knowledge, they may know it, but it's not an active part of their way of being, until you know that, and you know what you're looking for. And when it comes up, you say 'ah, that's the way they say it in Spanish, or that's different'. (Participant 7)

6. DISCUSSION

The present study aimed at answering three research questions. For research question 1, namely, "What beliefs do L1 English senior learners of Spanish as a FL hold about

learning Spanish?”, we have seen that senior learners consider learning Spanish as a valuable activity that brings positive feelings and emotions, and may improve cognitive skills and that they do not feel discouraged by the implications of ageing and the challenges encountered learning the language. Results from both the questionnaire and the interviews suggest that most participants associate learning Spanish with the enhancement of cognitive skills or, at least, as an activity that might be good to carry out at an older age. Not only do they believe it improves cognition, but they also experience an increase of positive emotions such as joy, pleasure and enjoyment. Such findings are in line with those in Pikhart and Klimova (2020), who concluded that senior learners found that L2 language learning brought positive feelings such as happiness and satisfaction. In addition, most participants linked learning Spanish with increased self-confidence, a belief also expressed by participants in the study by Pfenninger and Polz (2018) and by Hector, the EFL senior learner interviewed by Andrew (2012).

Responses to the questionnaire and questions posed during the interviews may also point to the fact that most participants think that this activity increases their possibilities to interact with other people, and some of them also mentioned feeling valued by native Spanish speakers when making use of the language. In addition, most participants manifested finding this activity easier at a younger age, as they expressed feeling that their brains and memory used to function better in the past, something which conditions their expectations with Spanish as a FL. These thoughts were also expressed by the interviewees Hector and Felix in Andrew’s (2012) study, who saw their ages as a drawback to learning a language. Interestingly, even if some of the participants feel handicapped by their age, they also see retirement as the perfect time to engage in such an activity, as they feel relieved from external pressures such as work or children and have more time to organise their day. This idea also appeared in the interview that Andrew (2012) conducted with Hector, in which he stated that senior learners have more experience and time to dedicate to this activity, whereas younger learners do not see language learning as a priority.

To answer RQ2 (“What motivates senior learners to engage in Spanish FL learning?”), we see that their willingness to travel is the main incentive to learn the language, and that their goals with the language are mostly shaped by their needs and beliefs they hold about their own skills and progress. However, we can also perceive that the positive emotions brought on by this activity, together with the interesting materials that they have all found keep them motivated enough to continue engaging in learning Spanish. Despite encountering challenges or at some point feeling unable to learn Spanish, these senior learners still wish to continue to learn and do not feel discouraged by any of these, a feeling probably linked with the previously mentioned positive emotions brought on by this activity. In this line, the study by Pikhart and Klimova (2020) also reveals that senior learners see language learning as a major motivator, regardless of their outcomes with the language. In addition, the participants’ growing interest in travelling around Spanish-speaking countries is the primary incentive to learn the language, as in the findings in the study by Schiller and Dorner (2019), whose results revealed that senior learners have a general openness towards foreign cultures. Andrew (2012) also discusses travelling frequently to the United States as another main reason to learn English in the participants analysed, together with a desire to remain active after retirement. In the study by Pfenninger and Polz (2018), monolingual German-speakers seemed to have a general interest in the target language as well as a desire to travel and communicate with native speakers of the language, something that can also be seen in the responses provided by the participants of this study, regardless of having prior experience in L2 learning or not.

Finally, in relation to the strategies used by our participants to tackle the difficulties encountered in the process of learning Spanish as a FL (RQ3: “What strategies do L1 English senior learners use when learning Spanish as a FL?”), most participants seem to have goals with the language and to seek opportunities to put them into practice, and also seem to read for pleasure, watch video content or series, and employ compensation strategies to counteract the gaps in their knowledge. Their interest in travelling and interacting with NSs of the language reveals the frequent use of social strategies as well. The participants state they have found resources that help them to learn the language and to keep themselves motivated. From the participants’ comments about the materials they use, together with responses from the questionnaire, we can infer a high use of cognitive strategies since most participants acknowledged reading for pleasure or watching series or films in Spanish, as well as trying to find patterns in the language. Their interest in travelling and in the culture, as well as their willingness to communicate with NSs reveals a high use of social strategies as well. Moreover, the existence of defined goals, together with a determination to seek opportunities to practise, shows a frequent use of metacognitive strategies. On the contrary, memory strategies are used with less frequency. These findings are partially consistent with the ones by Mora et al. (2018); in their study, metacognitive strategies were the ones most frequently used by senior learners over other strategies. However, in this study, although they seem to be relevant, other resources such as compensation, social and cognitive strategies seem equally important.

7. CONCLUSIONS

The aim of the present study was to examine the beliefs, motivation and strategies used by nine senior L1 English learners of Spanish FL, an under-researched population with a foreign language other than English (the most frequently analysed language in SLA). In line with previous studies with senior learners, although with L2s other than Spanish as a FL, the main conclusions that can be drawn are that the nine participants in the present study consider foreign language learning as a valuable activity that enhances their feelings of joy and wellbeing, and that the main reasons to study Spanish are to use it for travelling and to remain active, especially after retirement. Hence, most of the strategies they use are related to interaction and practising the language (social strategies). As a final relevant conclusion, it is important to point out that these strategies seem to help them to compensate for deficits that appear in old age.

However, several limitations should be mentioned at this point. First, because it is a multiple case study, the sample is not large, and so results cannot be generalised. This implies that a larger number of participants would be needed to be able to validate these findings. Secondly, the participants’ ages ranged from 61 to 81, although they have all been considered part of the same population; a study with a larger sample may yield differences between younger and older senior participants, as well as from those who are retired and those who are not.

All in all, as explained by Pikhart and Klimova (2020), if positive emotions imply an improvement of quality of life, it is claimed here that this growing population should not be neglected and should be provided with the tools and activities that may both improve their overall wellbeing and help them to remain active. In addition, it also proves that positive feelings brought on by this activity and interesting materials can contribute to senior learners’ motivation and progress. In this line, further research on pedagogical factors, e.g. materials used in class and class dynamics, together with classroom

observation might throw more light both into the needs and the expectations of this growing population.

ACKNOWLEDGMENTS

The authors are grateful to the nine participants in this study and to the editors and the two anonymous reviewers for their feedback.

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APPENDIX 1. Statements from the questionnaire on beliefs, motivation, and strategies.

	Strongly disagree	Disagree	Neither agree nor disagree	Agree	Strongly agree
1. Learning Spanish is beneficial for my memory.	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>
2. Learning Spanish is beneficial for my concentration.	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>
3. Learning Spanish increases my capacity for learning other things.	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>
4. Learning Spanish brings me joy.	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>
5. Learning Spanish helps me to expand my social circle.	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>
6. Learning Spanish helps me understand other realities.	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>

7. Learning Spanish boosts my self-confidence.	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>
8. Learning Spanish improves my overall wellbeing.	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>
9. Learning Spanish keeps me busy and active.	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>
10. Learning Spanish is easier the younger you are.	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>
11. I set myself goals with Spanish.	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>
12. When learning Spanish, my main goal is to achieve fluency.	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>
13. When learning Spanish, my main goal is to be able to understand written Spanish.	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>

14. When learning Spanish, my main goal is to understand oral Spanish.

15. I am learning Spanish because I would like to travel and communicate with Spanish speakers.

16. I am learning Spanish because I would like to integrate in a Spanish-speaking community.

17. I am learning Spanish because I am interested in the Spanish language in general.

18. I am learning Spanish because I am interested in the culture.

19. I am learning Spanish because I would like to learn something new.

20. Challenges encountered while learning Spanish discourage me.

21. Making progress with my Spanish makes me happy.

22. I have thought about dropping my Spanish classes.

23. Sometimes I think I lack the ability to speak Spanish.

24. Sometimes I think I lack the ability to write in Spanish.

25. When learning new things in Spanish, I try to associate them with other languages I know.

26. To remember a word in Spanish, I associate the way it sounds with words that sound similar in the English language.

27. I try to associate the sound of a new word in Spanish with a picture of the word.

28. I review my Spanish lessons often.

29. I take notes during my Spanish classes.

30. I try to find patterns in the Spanish language.

31. I try to talk to Spanish native speakers.	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>
32. I use the context to guess the meaning of an unfamiliar word in Spanish.	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>
33. If I don't know how to say something in Spanish, I try to formulate it differently.	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>
34. If I don't know how to say something in Spanish, I switch to English.	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>
35. If I don't know how to say something in Spanish, I gesture.	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>
36. If I don't understand what someone is saying in Spanish, I ask them to repeat or to slow down.	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>