Older language learners: 'always too late' vs 'never too late'. A mixed-methods approach

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Abstract Research in second-language acquisition considers age as a major factor that has an impact on the ability of an individual to learn a foreign language. The debates are still dominated by the so called 'critical period' theory, developed in the sixties. According to this neuro-cognitive theory, there is an ideal window of brain development to acquire a language at a very young age, after which learning a language becomes much more difficult, and apart from some 'exceptional' cases, it is almost impossible to attain native-like proficiency. Much of this research has focused on those 'exceptional' learners, implying that for adult language learners it is 'always too late'.

While acknowledging this pure neuro-linguistic approach, this paper aims to go beyond this reductionist approach and to contribute to this complex and under-researched field. It explores two aspects of the relationship between age and learning a language within a university context: the impact of age on study trajectories of languages students using quantitative methods, and the lived experiences of language students drawing on a combination of qualitative research and phenomenology.

The findings of this study reveal some fundamental aspects of what it means to learn a language as an adult from the first-person perspective and show the importance of introducing an existential view of older language learners, suggesting that is 'never too late'.

Key words older language learners; age-related factors; lifelong learning; felt-age; lived language; second language acquisition

Introduction: Age-related research in applied linguistics

Age is a fundamental variable in learning a language. The record shows first and second language acquisition has been extensively researched starting with the studies based on the

'critical period hypothesis' and predominantly taking a neurological perspective.

The critical period hypothesis (CPH) proposes that there is a specific time in an individual's life when they are most receptive to language acquisition and that after this period, language acquisition becomes much more difficult. This hypothesis has been widely studied in linguistics and psychology and is supported by a range of evidence from both animal and human studies. One of the key figures in the development of the critical period hypothesis, Eric Lenneberg, argued that the critical period for language acquisition occurs during childhood and adolescence (1967).

Lenneberg's work on the critical period hypothesis was influenced by his observations of people who had suffered brain damage or delays in language acquisition. He noted that individuals who had not acquired language before a certain age were unlikely to develop normal language skills later in life, even if they received intensive language instruction. Lenneberg argued that this was because the brain undergoes a process of lateralisation during the critical period, in which language becomes localised to specific areas of the brain. After this period, the brain becomes less plastic and it becomes more difficult for individuals to acquire language.

Following Lenneberg's publication, studies on the effects of age on first language (L1) acquisition have been mainly focused on this view, which has been widely supported and discussed (Bialystok and Hakuta, 1994; Krashen, 2006; Singleton, 2006; Muñoz and Singleton, 2011; Harley and Wang, 1997). The CPH has also been applied to broader contexts. In 1989 the publication of Johnson and Newport´s work set a line of research, applying the CPH to the acquisition of a second language (L2).

In recent years, the term 'sensitive period hypothesis' (SPH) has started to be used by some researchers to give nuance to the CPH idea as 'the period during which a child can acquire language easily, rapidly, perfectly, and without instruction' (Richards and Smith, 2013, p. 145). The sensitive period is thought to be more flexible than the critical period and may extend into adolescence and beyond. While language acquisition may be more difficult after the sensitive period, it is still possible.

The idea behind the CPH/SPH has been attractive in applied linguistics research since it appears to offer an unambiguous explanation for age-related issues in long-term acquisition of language skills. Both theories seem to focus on the constraints that age imposes on L1 and L2 acquisition or learning. However, recent research seems to highlight that acquisitional limitations attributed to age under the CPH may have to do with other aspects such as language aptitude (De Keyser, 2000; Doughty *et al.*, 2010; Granena, 2014) or the consistency of language use (Kinsella and Singleton, 2014; Muñoz, 2014).

In Alene Moyer's words, these 'new insights from the empirical research highlight these relationships between age, affect, and linguistic experience, signalling a welcome shift in the critical period paradigm' (Moyer, 2013, p. 19), which opens up the exploration of L2 adult learners' acquisition from a wider perspective.

Nonetheless, Yates and Kozar (2017) point out the still narrow focus of CPH/SPH on the critical age paradigm without addressing other relevant, practical questions. They claim that works published over the last decade on age and language learning are still 'working in the shadow of the critical age hypothesis' (Yates and Kozar, 2017, p. 258), which means that neurobiological factors are still dominating the conversation, emphasising:

- 'Maturational constraints' are overestimated without studying their implications.

- The promotion of ageism as they highlight the deficits associated with older learners instead of working with them to provide solutions.

- Persistent use of native-like fluency as the ultimate attainment goal, which is not constructive and can be demotivating for learners. Besides, the use of 'nativeness' in L2 adult learners' success has been challenged for the last decades in applied linguistics.

- The privileging of 'exceptional' learners. This is a focus on unattainable goals instead of on the ability to communicate and be easily understood without difficulty, which is more relevant and attainable for adult language learners.

- The implication that all adult learners are deficient.

- It supports the belief that adult (older) learners are 'problematic', which does not offer solutions to the millions of adult learners or their teachers.

Yates and Kozar's review emphasises the need for a more comprehensive investigation of what it means to be a mature learner and to broaden the research agenda.

In response to this call, we have carried out the current study to contribute to this field by using both quantitative and qualitative data. The rationale behind choosing this mixed-method approach emerged in the first place from the gaps identified in the literature review and mainstream views on age and learning a language. Within most universities, anyone aged 25 and over is essentially considered an older student. We realised that Open University students are very often much older when they start and that the numbers of students studying should allow a statistical analysis that would provide an alternative authoritative view to augment the richness of the qualitative results from a very small number of participants. Our aim was therefore to maximise the amount and quality of data related to age and language learning.

Regarding the usefulness of a mixed-method approach, Malina *et al.* (2011) state that combined quantitative and qualitative methods enable exploring more complex aspects and relations of the human and social world. Taking into account that qualitative research typically answers research questions that address 'how' and 'why', whereas quantitative research typically addresses 'how often' and 'how many', this 'give(s) reason to suggest that a mix of quantitative and qualitative methods can be fruitful for obtaining profoundly new empirical insights'. (Malina *et al.,* 2011, p. 61). In particular, the approach followed in this study, which could be referred to as mixed methods phenomenological research, allows for a level of breadth, as well as depth, of data to be achieved within a single study and 'fits with both the discovery-orientated nature of the phenomenological research traditions and the traditionally explanatory nature of postpositivist approaches' (Mayoh and Onwuegbuzie, 2015, p. 100).

This paper is structured in the following way. It begins with the quantitative approach which analysed a relatively large dataset;

the university's undergraduate language students. Alongside this, the remainder of the student cohort was also analysed, providing a much larger dataset This considered whether age plays a role regarding the completion of a BA degree in languages and whether age is a significant factor in relation to completing a degree in general.

The qualitative method follows. It focuses on the analysis of rich data gathered from in-depth interviews from a phenomenological perspective and explores lived experiences of older language learners from their own perspectives while introducing an existential perspective.

This double perspective provides an insight into the impact of age on language students showing significance from a statistical point of view, as well as meaning from the point of view of the experience of the subjects.

Part 1: Age and degree success

This section of the paper uses standard statistical methods to consider whether older students are less likely to complete their study of the BA (Honours) Language Studies (LS) than younger students at university. We therefore set these two research questions:

1. Are older students less likely to complete their study of BA (Honours) Language Studies than younger students?

2. Are older students studying towards any other degree less likely to complete than younger students?

To undertake this analysis, we used study data from the academic years 2012/13, when the latest version of LS was introduced, to 2019/20, the latest data available in the model. The age of every student as they commenced their undergraduate study was calculated. This provides a single value for each student that enables us to view the distribution of ages at the beginning of degree study and compares this to the distribution of the same value when students complete a degree. As studies progress, some students inevitably drop out for multifarious reasons. If there are no age-related factors at play in this dropout, the distribution of the starting age for all those completing a degree will be the same, although with lower

numbers. Therefore, if there are differences in the distributions, it implies there are age-related factors involved in a student's likelihood to complete their degree study.

We initially divide all the students commencing their undergraduate study into two groups: students linking to LS as they commence degree study in one group, and those not making this link in the other. We then follow the study paths of each of these students until they have achieved 360 UK (180 European Credit Transfer and Accumulation System (ECTS)) credits. This is sufficient to claim an honours degree when students have studied the correct modules. By comparing the distribution of the 'age at start' for these completing students with the population commencing degree study, we can test whether the distributions are the same. The details of these four groups are set out in Table 1. We note the large range in size of these four groups.

Table 1. The four groups of students in the analysis

Degree intention	Number: at start	at completion
not BA (Honours) Language Studies	**A** (n=194,163)	**B** (n=20,693)
BA (Honours) Language Studies (LS)	**C** (n=2,932)	**D** (n=462)

Results

Descriptive statistics

We consider the distributions of the 'age at start' for each group. The chart in Figure 1 includes three features: a box plot for each group to give a summary of the distribution in a standard form; a point to indicate the mean (average) age; a violin plot is also included to show the relative numbers of students with each starting age. From this figure we see there are similarities between each of these distributions. The most apparent is that the median (indicated by the line dividing each box) is lower than the average age at start for each group. This indicates each

distribution is skewed in the same way, with a concentration of younger students and a tail of older students. The values of the medians are also all similar, particularly within each pair. This is also true for the means.
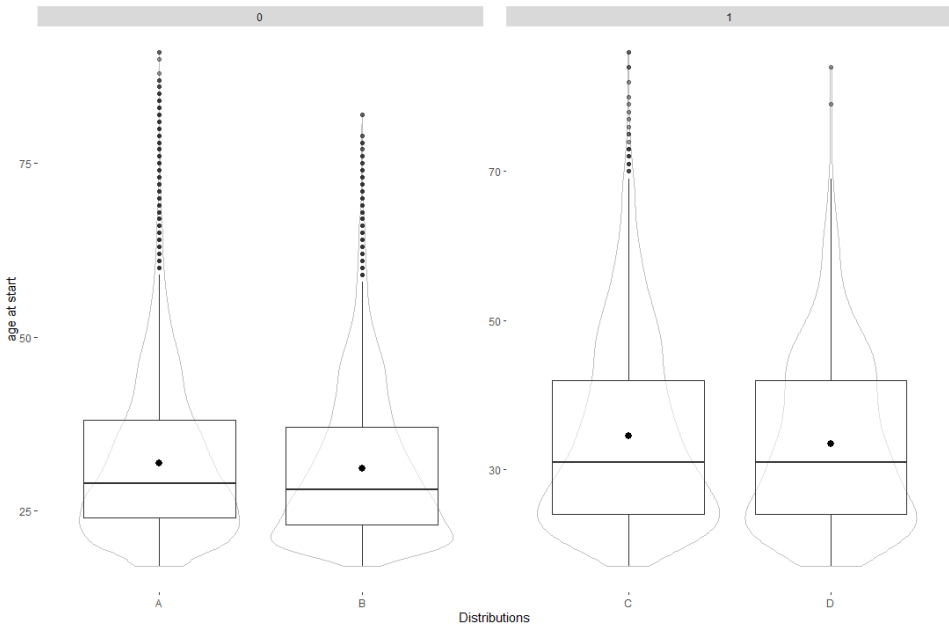

Figure 1. The distributions of age at start for each of the groups A to D.

The plots show the distributions both as box and violin plots in order to give a sense of the distribution patterns. The mean age at start for each group is also included as a point.

Changes in distribution over time

At this point we need to consider whether there is any change in these distributions over time. To do this we plot the values of the quartiles by academic year. These plots are provided in Figure 2 (below). The first impression is that there appears to be considerable volatility in the values for group D. Here, it is very important to take into account that the numbers for the first four years plotted are low. In fact, the first set of values, for 2014/15 is for just five students. That means each student's age at start defines one of the five quartile values. It is, therefore, important not to place equal weight on all four sets of values. If we set a threshold of 100 students (not considering values below this) we would need to ignore the data points for the first four years

(2014/5 to 2019/20) for group D. While considering the range in size of these different sub-groups we note that the smallest number of new students starting but not linking to LS (group A) is 21,316 in 2016/17, whereas the largest number of LS students completing is 130 in 2018/19. This large difference needs to be borne in mind as we continue the analysis.

While interpreting these results we also remember the plots in the first row contain the largest group sizes. This is reflected in the greater stability of the values over time. When one group size is 10 or 100 times larger than another, we would expect a greater consistency in values we see in these plots. In both groups A and C, we see a slight decrease over time of approximately 1 year in the 25th quartile (Q2), and the median value (Q3). In group A, there is a similar drop in the age of the 75th quartile. From the plot, it is unclear whether this is mirrored in group C.

The picture is more complex in groups B and D. The numbers of students in each of these two groups gradually increases over the years. In group B the increase is from 287 to 7,424 and in group D it is from 5 to 151. It is important to note that new degrees were launched across the university in 2012/13, with students beginning to complete them three years later in 2014/15. These new degrees overlapped their predecessors, which were withdrawn during 2017/18 and may therefore have an impact on these two plots because we are only including the new, and not the old, qualifications in D but all new and old
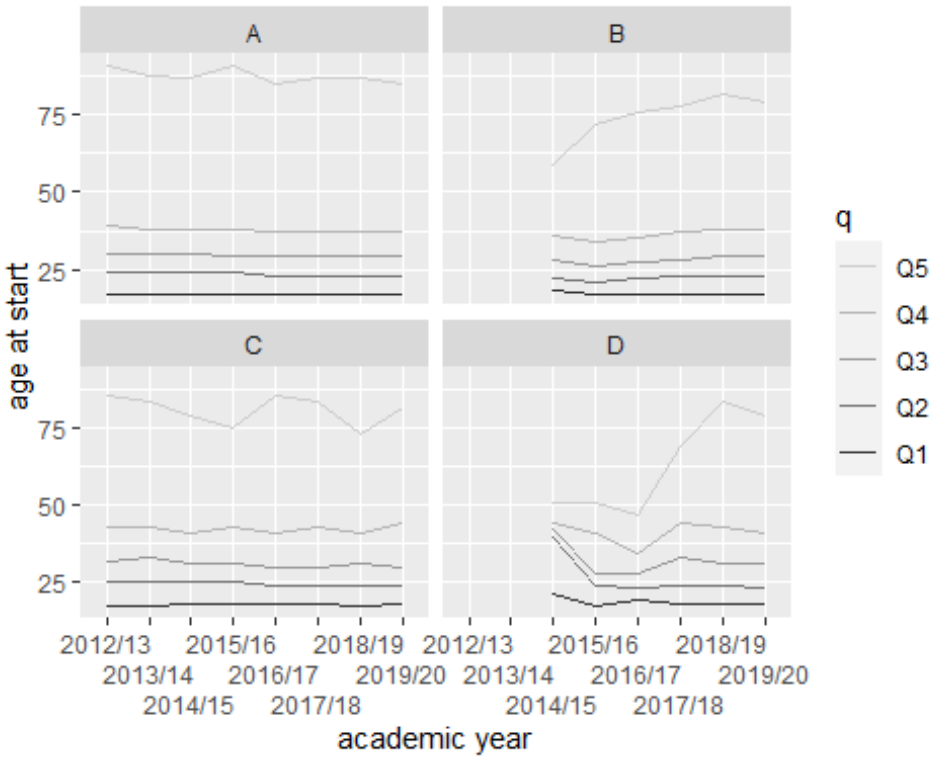
qualifications in B.

Figure 2. Plots of the values for each of the quartiles in each group by academic year. **NB**:(a) For group D, there are very small numbers (<100) from 2014/15 to 2017/18; (b) It takes three years to achieve the credit for a degree through study. Therefore, completed figures appear from 2014/15.

Average age

In addition to considering the quartile values, we consider the variation in average (mean) age for each of the four groups, as shown in Figure 3 (below). Both the starting groups (A and C) show a downward trend in the average age of students, of approximately 1 year over the 8 years covered by the data. Groups B and D again show a potential transition effect from the previous versions of qualifications, impacting the first four data points.
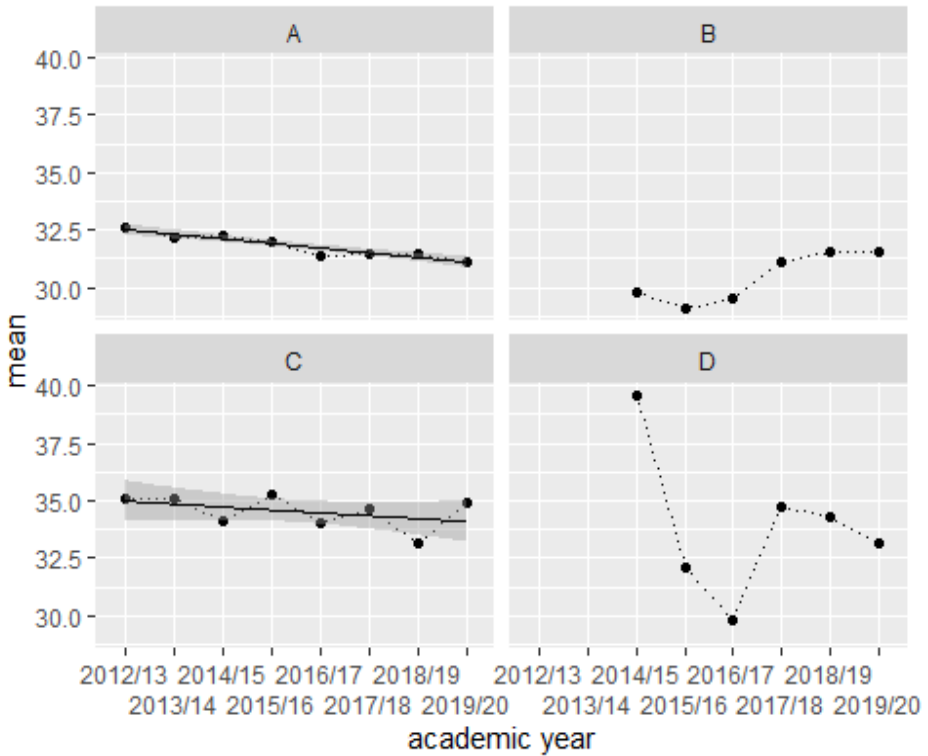
Figure 3. Plots of the mean age at study start for each of the groups A–D. Lines of best fit have been drawn on the plot for the two starting groups (Groups A and C).

Comparing distributions

The Brown–Forsythe test is an initial check, using the variance of the medians to assess whether the age distributions are not the same. The resulting value of p is 9.2 x 10-52 which is well below the critical value of 0.05 and gives confidence that these four age distributions are not the same. This enables us to move on to another test for non-normal distributions, the Welch's t-test.

Welch's t-test

Another way to compare the age distributions is to run the Welch t-test. This will tell us if we can exclude the hypothesis that two distributions are the same. When we run this test for the students that do not link to LS we get a value of p of 4.67 x 10-20, which is very much smaller than the critical value of 0.05. This is shown in the first column of Table 2. We can therefore say with confidence that these distributions are different. There are,

therefore, age-related factors impacting on the likelihood of students completing a degree other than LS.

Table 2. Welch's Heteroscedastic F Test (alpha = 0.05) for the data age_at_start

	Groups A and B	Groups C and D
statistic	84.255	3.339215
num df	1	1
denom df	25325.44	643.6672
p.value	4.671706e-20	0.06810972
Result	Difference is statistically significant	Difference is not statistically significant

When we do the same for the students who do link their study to LS, the value of p is 0.07 (0.0681), shown in the second column of Table 2. This is greater than the critical limit of 0.05. Therefore, this suggests – but with less than 95% level of confidence – that these are not the same distribution. It is quite possible that the low numbers of students so far achieving LS contribute to this lower confidence, or alternatively that the age-related effects for LS students are relatively smaller.

Evaluating age differences

As we are now confident there is an age-related effect in degree completion for students not linking to LS and suspect there may well be a similar effect for LS students, we can explore the differences in age profiles in more detail. Experimenting with different age ranges, to best represent the overall distribution, leads to the plots in Figure 4 (below). This figure has introduced five age ranges: 17–25, 26–41, 42–49, 50–65, 66–91. This selection of age ranges highlights the differences in the distributions between commencing degree study and completing a degree. The plots show the same trend in both those studying for the LS as for all other students. The magnitude of the differences varies between these two cohorts. However, this is very likely due in some measure to the large differences in cohort size. Therefore, as a first attempt at interpretation, we postulate that the two cohorts exhibit the same age-related effects. The

dominant features for those not studying towards LS are summarised as:

1. The proportion of students completing a degree who were aged 17–25 when they commenced studies is approximately 5 percentage points (pp.) higher than expected from the cohort at start. As no new students are added to the cohort, the number of students in this group cannot be larger than at the start. This change can therefore only be caused by a relatively greater loss of students at other ages.

2. There is a reduction in the proportion of students aged 26–41 completing a degree over those starting, of approximately 4pp. There are small differences in the other age groups but this is due to the relatively small numbers in these groups. The first two features dominate.
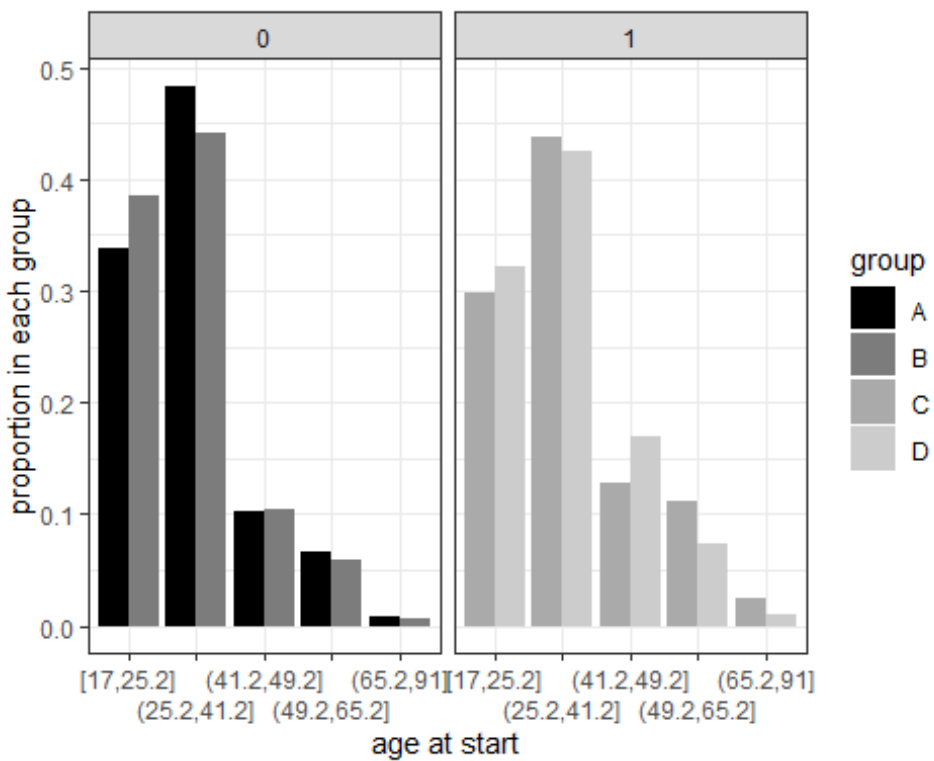

Figure 4. Age ranges that help explain the age-related effect of degree completion. The pair of plots show the proportion of each group within each age range of age at start. Students not linked to LS are plotted on '0'. Those who are linked are plotted on '1'. **NB**: the age ranges are not the same size.

Discussion of findings on age distribution

These findings show that in the larger, non LS student group, there is a correlation between age and likelihood of completing a degree. Also, the same pattern appears to exist in the LS group. However, the correlation is not of the simple form that suggests a diminution of the ability to learn a language with age.

Instead, there are two age groups that dominate in this relationship. Those aged 17 to 25 when they commence study are more likely – while those aged 26 to 41 are less likely – to complete their study than the initial distribution would suggest. The difference is approximately 4 or 5 percentage points higher, and lower respectively.

This pattern would support the position that, with regard to likelihood to complete, age might be acting as a proxy for life experiences relating to these two periods, and this can be explored further. For example, the younger students are following a normal path to embarking on a career and are well motivated to succeed. Those aged 26–41 will be studying alongside many other life events that might work against their success, like commitments to partners, parenting and establishing themselves in their professions.

According to a comprehensive review of older adults learning a second language the authors (Hejazi *et al.,* 2019) highlight the scarce number of studies in this field. Although there are numerous studies regarding the decline in some brain and physiological functions with increasing age, such as loss of sight, hearing or working memory, there are no conclusive studies on how this affects the language learning of older adults since other relevant factors are involved. These factors include the use of compensatory strategies (Obler *et al.*, 2010) or cognitive reserve (LaBarge *et al.*, 1986; Le Carret *et al.*, 2003). In their concluding comments Hejazi *et al.* (2019) state that the question of whether or not older adults really do have a harder time than younger adults learning a new language has yet to be definitively answered. Some studies suggest that older learners' instruction should fit their learning needs and cognitive abilities, and they conclude: 'it is not known whether there is any limit on the proficiency they will achieve' (Hejazi *et al.*, 2019, p. 420).

A search for related published work specifically on age at university graduation also reveals this is not greatly researched. This is completely understandable because, although an area of interest, numbers of older students are very low for most institutions. One recent paper (Willoughby *et al.*, 2021) has demonstrated a lower graduation rate linked to older students but has the crude definition of older students as over 25. Their findings do not contradict those we have established in this report. In our own analysis we found that a population of 3000 students was not sufficiently large to draw a firm conclusion on whether there is an age-related factor in non-completion. This analysis has raised new questions relating to age and degree study and a full literature review is warranted in the continuation of this work.

Limitations

This form of analysis benefits from larger numbers of students than we have studying LS. This is because students are spread over the full adult age range. This is mitigated by the much larger numbers studying all other degrees, but the mitigation involved the more subjective rather than statistical judgement that the patterns are similar

It is possible to repeat this with a larger dataset as two further years of data for the new LS qualification are now available. It may also be appropriate to include data from the previous version of the degree. This is because the reason for introducing the new degrees was the change in funding regime rather than changes in the subject.

Another limitation is to do with how representative are the students in each age group of the population at large. In other words, we suspect the larger numbers in the younger age groups represent a higher proportion of the UK population in this age group than those at the other end of the age range. Further checks on this aspect could be explored using national data.

Part 2: Exploring lived experiences of unexceptional older language learners: combining qualitative data and phenomenology

The approach followed in this part of the study is a combination of phenomenology and qualitative research which I will describe in the following sections.

The study

In this part, an approach inspired by phenomenology was used to enable new insights to understand the lived experience of older language learners.

Methodological approach

To be involved in phenomenological reflection means to find a way 'to problematize your ''everydayness'' and taken-for-granted ways of thinking, and constructively draw on prior as well as current phenomenological descriptions' (Ravn, 2016, p. 206). Phenomenology explores the lifeworld of subjects and 'seeks to understand what matters to them and how they make sense of what they experience' (Zahavi, 2019, p. 117). It is concerned with careful description, analysis and interpretation of lived experience, and therefore it provides a distinctively powerful approach to investigate how the body is experienced when speaking a foreign language from a wider human and existential perspective.

The participants

For this study 4 adult language learners, 2 male and 2 female, were interviewed between June and August 2022. One of the participants was in her twenties, 2 in their 50s and 1 in his 70s. The participants were selected because of an extensive experience of learning languages and their ability and willingness to explore and articulate their learning experiences. Two of the participants were students at the university and 2 were university staff.

The interviews

The interview questions were designed using a phenomenological approach, following the recommendations for a phenomenological interview (Englander, 2012; Hoffding and Martiny, 2016; Ravn, 2016). This involved being open, attentive and inquisitive in trying to understand the experiences of the

interviewees. The aim was to elicit detailed descriptions – helping the interviewee to obtain new insights into their own experiences.

I asked each of the participants for a description of concrete experiences or situations they recall as learners and speakers of a foreign language regarding their age. For example, if they have learned languages at different ages and their lived experiences of their age and learning languages. I also asked them whether they could remember any impact or awareness of their age when they were engaged in speaking or learning a foreign language.

The subsequent questions followed the particularities of the responses of the interviewee with a focus on their awareness of their age and learning experiences. Although the start of the interview was very open around the question 'How do you experience your age in relation to learning a language?', I subsequentially asked them to recall and describe concrete situations focusing on enabling or limiting experiences regarding their age, their bodily sensations, their self-awareness and so on. The aim of the interviews was to bring forth detailed and nuanced descriptions. As Hoffding and Martiny (2016) state, interviewers always actively participate in the knowledge-generation process, even in an open interview, and I was aware of the dynamics of co-generating knowledge.

I conducted one-hour online video interviews with each participant. The interviews were recorded and transcribed.

Analysis

The interviews were transcribed and meaning units were identified. As we were interested in the content of their descriptions, it was not necessary to produce a linguistic transcription. In some cases, where descriptions were not clear, we returned to the interviewee and asked them for clarification. Then the meaning units were analysed using phenomenological concepts. This is what Hoffding and Martiny call 'Tier two' in the phenomenological interview, where descriptions and interpretations of the interviewees' experience are related to phenomenological work already done a particular field. (Hoffding and Martiny, 2016). For this study we used concepts that phenomenologists call 'invariant' or 'existential' structures, which constitute human experiences (Heidegger, 1962; Koster and Fernandez, 2021) or 'constituents of the lifeworld' (Dahlberg,

2009). Examples of existentials are: selfhood, temporality, sociality and spatiality, among others. For this study we focused on temporality, self-agency and embodiment.

We will present the themes and the variations or meaning units in each one. Descriptions and quotes taken from the interview transcripts will be used to substantiate the content of these themes.

Temporality: lived time. Chronological age vs 'felt language age'

As described in the introduction, second language acquisition research on age focuses on chronological age; that is, a person's real age. Also, Part 1 is based on chronological age. However, the qualitative data gathered in the in-depth interviews show that when talking about their age in relation to learning a language, chronological age did not appear to be very significant.

In this context it is relevant to distinguish between chronological age and subjective age. The term 'subjective age' has been extensively used in sociological studies to define how old or young a person feels (Kotter-Grühn *et al.*, 2016). When the participants of this study described the lived experiences in relation to age and learning a language, neither the chronological nor the subjective age appear to represent what they were referring to.

The sensed age when learning a foreign language seems to have its own dynamic. Participants reported a sort of absolute point of reference located in their childhood and first language(s) and a very different experience afterwards when they learned foreign languages at school or as an adult. One participant said

> 'Beyond a certain age (being an adult) it doesn't make any difference how old I was when I learned a language.'

The experiences reported by the participants would confirm the fundamental difference between learning a language as a child (mother tongue(s)) and as an adult. This is in agreement with the critical period hypothesis (CPH). However, once a person became an adult there was no 'felt' difference between learning a language, whether one was 20, 40 or 60.

That means, according to what we could call 'felt language age', there seem to be two absolute poles – being a child or being

'old' as an adult – with no differentiation between young adult, middle-age or mature adult. In terms of 'language age' all adults are equally old. This 'felt language age' is completely different from chronological age, manifested in the interviews as a paradox where the youngest interviewee (25) felt a big distance between a younger member of her family (still a child), whereas the oldest interviewee (70) felt a sort of proximity and continuity regarding himself learning languages as a teenager or young adult.

As mentioned, the literature reveals limited studies regarding differences in language learning within adults. The mismatch between chronological and 'felt language age' clearly shows an area that needs further exploration.

Another theme that emerged in the analysis of the interviews was a feeling of age as being empowering. Contrary to the negativity normally associated with older age, participants did not feel age as a negative factor; they did not have any sense of having diminished faculties. One participant said:

> 'I started learning Spanish when I was 60-something, sixty one or two, and finished when I was about 68–69. I don't think my ability to listen and understand changed over those years, and it should have got better if anything (…) the age thing, I think it kind of works in our favour.'

On the contrary, they described how with increasing age, they felt clarity, perspective and resilience. They knew what they wanted to achieve, and they did not feel afraid or worried about what others might think. They developed strategies to counteract the negativity. Another quote from a participant:

> 'Now, with the with the age cap on me, with many decades of challenging experiences, I would happily take any language challenge without being scared or without having the feeling that I'm not clever or, you know, this kind of things that I used to think when I was a teenager. Especially when people correct you, this is a feeling of, ok, I'm not getting it, I'm not able to pronounce that particular word or, whatever, but with age, what I have realised, is that it doesn't matter.'

Embodiment: (Dynamic) tension between body limitations and self-agency

Participants were very aware of the difficulties of learning a foreign language as a young or older adult. They all had experienced the 'cognitive load', the 'frustration' of not getting things right, as well as the awareness of having a 'strong accent'. Several negative emotions were explored and manifested through the interviews, such as frustration, disappointment and different negative emotions regarding their limitations.

Participants reported 'not getting the right pronunciation' and the interference of their first language. Talking about learning a foreign language as an adult one participant said: 'We cannot reach ''elite'' language competence'. He reported that it was not possible to attempt to get the words, grammar and pronunciation right all of the time. It was not emotionally possible to sustain that amount of effort. There was a clear awareness of some areas that were out of participants' control that challenged their sense of agency. In this sense we could talk about the body 'letting us down' (Gilleard, 2022; McKee, 1998), where there is an apparent discrepancy between the subject's aspirations and the body itself.

Despite this, participants were able to turn this sense of limitation into a more proactive and optimistic attitude, accepting the fact of not being able to achieve the same level of proficiency as native speakers, and also acknowledging their love for the language, their firm decision to learn it.

> '…But then, as you're learning a language, if you're really, truly passionate about it, you want to learn it, you want to become fluent in it. And then that negativity changes into a more optimistic attitude where you're like, well, it just means that I have to put that more work in. I just have to put that extra effort'.

Participants described a sense of agency, a sense of being in control of their actions by putting in extra effort, by training themselves, by pushing themselves. They felt self-motivated and clear about their decision.

> 'I have trained myself not to be affected by these negative feelings of thinking that I am not good enough, and I feel in control.'

This tension between subjective experience and the bodily experience as an object has been studied by phenomenology since its origin and constitutes a 'dynamical tension inherent in

every human embodiment' (Wehrle, 2020, p. 514). This double aspect of embodiment, the difference between 'being a body' (as a subject experiencing the world) and 'having a body' (when the body is experienced as a thing) has been used in studies exploring the process of ageing (Wehrle, 2020; Heinämaa, 2016) where we, as subjects, are daily confronted by what we cannot do, and we experience a 'gradual loss of embodied agency' (Gilleard, 2022).

The analysis of the data gathered for this study suggests that older foreign language learners swing between experiencing the body as an object, with an awareness of deviating from the language standards, and experiencing themselves as a subject – acting, planning and performing.

The existential view: lived language vs applied linguistics

During the interviews participants described a holistic approach to language, which clearly differs from the second language acquisition research definition of a language based on phonological, syntactic and morphological closeness to native speakers' standards. They portrayed a much more comprehensive picture of the richness of aspects of learning a language and the meaning for their lives.

According to them, what is relevant is not the ability to have a 'perfect' or native-like pronunciation. Participants agreed that 'the accent is not important'. What is important is the ability to communicate to people in other cultures, to express yourself. To be able to fully function professionally using a foreign language. To be able to enjoy and love the language and culture. To develop new aspects of oneself and to challenge one's own ideas and prejudices. I am quoting a long passage from one of the participants, which from my point of view transmits the essential aspects of what is involved in learning a language:

> 'Every new language has given me the opportunity to change skin, adopt a new identity, see the world through different eyes. When I moved to France (…) knowing no French at all, I picked up French from the media, incredible books, my work colleagues, in the streets, museums and libraries… and the language intertwined with bread scents, different perfumes, colours and textures. Some words became linked to places and faces, feelings I hadn't

experience before and a sort of light that made me feel different. In Belize (…), creole expressions like 'Me no know' let me adopt a more playful and soulful attitude towards language and life that I have carried with me to this day. In Mexico (…), I lost all fear and prejudice to self-imposed language rules and fully embraced the great Spanglish jargon which allowed me to say so much more and with much more nuance. I felt fully unrestrained, and my heart and mind expanded beyond the confines of my hometown and nation. When I came back to the UK, in some of my interactions with people with a more purist view of language and identity, I could see how much I had changed and how impossible it was to inhabit my old self – I felt boundless and not really bothered about life and language restrictions and prescriptions that tightened other people up, like they did me in the past. I am now a freer, more accepting and more human than I've ever been before, through layers of other languages and cultures I have shed skins that separated me from enjoying the full beauty of this life and the many lives in it.'

This quote illustrates how being involved in learning a foreign language reveals aspects of the sense of self and identity, of being with others, of the sense of spatiality, of temporality, of bodily and emotional feelings; aspects belonging to the 'lifeworld' that characterise what it means to be human. These themes are called 'existentials' and have been extensively studied by phenomenologists.

According to the existential view of being human, which is based on phenomenological philosophers such as Heidegger or Merleau-Ponty, people are not just considered objects purely determined by natural forces, but there is 'an existential freedom that makes choice and agency meaningful'. (Dahlberg, 2009, p. 267). This also highlights another fundamental concept of the existential view, that as humans, we are beings who can transcend our determined circumstances. For older language students that means not being completely determined by neuro-biological constraints but being always 'in process' and open to the way they respond to their (learning) journey circumstances.

Conclusion

The aim of this paper was to expand the research agenda of studies on age and learning a foreign language, which have been characterised by a narrow focus overemphasising the neuro-linguistic perspective and drawing from the critical/sensitive period hypothesis.

While we are not contesting the neuro-biological facts that are the basis of the critical/sensitive period hypothesis we are challenging the reductionist approach that SLA research has favoured over recent decades, an approach that has overemphasised these neuro-linguistic factors and ignored other essential aspects of language learners and language learning. The current vision of the applied linguistics is clearly inadequate to approach the breadth and depth of human-existential aspects of the language learner and of foreign languages, as the findings of our study suggest.

In this paper we have followed two lines of research, one based on a quantitative approach to a large number of study trajectories, not only of the university's language students but also the whole of several cohorts, and one based on qualitative data which combines rich qualitative data and phenomenological concepts.

We consider that both lines complement each other and enable us to get a big general – and more detailed – picture regarding the perceptions of language students. As mentioned in the introduction we aimed at breadth as well as depth.

We are aware that the quantitative and qualitative do not exactly investigate the same question. While the former focuses on objectively quantifiable facts such as age and degree completion, the latter was interested in the lived experience of the students, looking for meaningful patterns that emerge from their own awareness. They do however, both offer valuable and relevant complementary insights.

The analysis of the quantitative data was definitive for the 194,163 students not studying a degree in Language Studies (LS). Age is related to likelihood of degree completion. When comparing these values with the results for the LS students, we felt it was fair to describe the patterns as similar, i.e. LS students

demonstrate the same age-related pattern in likelihood to complete. However, the pattern was not consistent with a gradual reduction of ability to learn language with age. The key features of this pattern are: those aged 17 to 25 when they commence study are more likely – while those aged 26 to 41 are less likely – to complete their study than the initial distribution would suggest. We suggest these differences may be due to life stages rather than cognitive ability, but recognise further study is needed.

The analysis of the in-depth interviews of older language learners has revealed some fundamental aspects of what it means to learn a language as an adult from the first-person perspective, which clearly challenges the current view of applied linguistics. One main difference refers to the understanding of 'age'. While SLA research largely refers to age as chronological age, the analysis of the lived experiences of the participants shows a much more nuanced and differentiated account of temporality; what we have called 'felt language age'. Participants also experienced their age not necessarily, or not only, as a disadvantage – as presented by the critical/sensitive period hypothesis – but as something empowering.

Regarding the experiences of the self, our study shows a dynamic tension between feeling the (bodily) limitations of learning a language as an older adult and experiencing a strong sense of agency. The characterisation of what it means to learn a language for the participants also revealed the significance of existential dimensions, such as freedom, embodiment, spatiality, temporality, agency and self-awareness.

The contribution of this study to the topic of age and older language learners shows the importance of integrating a more humanistic approach in this field of applied linguistics.

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