

GFL



German as a foreign language

**“It’s a challenge, but I like it”: why Australian seniors
want to learn German**

Bettina Boss, Sydney

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This article reviews the scholarly literature about older adults learning foreign languages, and then reports on a small-scale study of Australian seniors (average age 74) learning German at Sydney U3A (University of the Third Age). A thematic analysis of data derived from a questionnaire and individual interviews shows that the reasons given by the participants for wanting to learn German fall into four broad categories: an interest in the German language, or in languages generally; the wish for mental stimulation or an intellectual challenge; a personal connection, past or present, to a native speaker or speakers, and finally, the intention to travel to a German-speaking country, either as a ‘maybe’ or definitely. These findings are interpreted as evidence of the participants’ integrative orientation towards language learning in terms of Gardner’s 2010 Socio-Educational Model. A comparison with the only other empirical study of older adults learning German as a foreign language (GFL), Berndt (2003), shows that both groups were motivated by similar factors despite differences in their attitude to the L2 community. The article concludes with some recommendations for teachers of foreign languages to older adults.

1. Introduction

Learning a foreign language is a popular activity among older Australians; Sydney U3A, for example, a self-supporting University of the Third Age with some 6,000 members, regularly runs courses in ten languages, including English as a second language, in seven metropolitan regions. While no enrolment figures are available, the organisation’s records for the ten years from 2008 to 2018 list between 43 and 60 individual language courses offered each semester, with French the most widely taught, followed by German, Italian and Spanish.¹

After long being ignored by researchers and textbook authors, language learners of the third age are now considered a distinctive cohort worthy of scholarly attention and of teaching approaches tailored to their needs. Given the diversity of this age group, as well as the different source and target languages and educational settings involved, case

¹ Cf. <https://sydneyu3a.org/sydney-u3a/courses/course-list-archive/>.

studies of individual learner groups make an important contribution to the development of foreign language pedagogy.

This article reports on a qualitative study of 14 Australian seniors attending a course in German as a foreign language at Sydney U3A. Based on written responses to an open-ended questionnaire and individual interviews, it examines the learners' stated reasons for enrolling in the course.

2. Studies of older adults learning a foreign language

Concepts like active ageing and lifelong learning are relatively recent phenomena. This may explain why it took a long time for language learners aged 65 years and over – in what is known as the “third age” (Grotek 2018) – to come to the attention of researchers in the fields of second language acquisition and language pedagogy. Moreover, the Critical Period Hypothesis, which dominated much of the discussion about the relationship between the learners' age and their success or otherwise in acquiring a second language, did not offer much hope for seniors, even though it generally did not differentiate between younger and older adults. Although the Critical Period Hypothesis is now widely discredited (cf. Birdsong 2006; Singleton 2010), and Schleppegrell asserted in 1987 that, “contrary to popular stereotypes, older adults can be good foreign language learners”, scholarly studies about this group of learners only started to appear from the year 2000 onward. Not surprisingly, most of these involve older adults learning English as a foreign language, such as native speakers of Spanish (Mackey & Sachs 2012), German (Kliesch et al 2018; Pfenninger & Polz et al 2018), Polish (Pawlak et al 2018) and Korean (Kim & Kim 2015). Experimental studies of seniors learning languages other than English include Linhart-Wegschaider's 2010 thesis about German native speakers learning Mandarin, Ramirez Gomez's 2016 study of Japanese students of Spanish and van der Hoeven and de Bot's 2012 investigation of learning and re-learning French vocabulary by Dutch speakers. While it is impossible to summarise the results of these studies, it is noteworthy that their authors frequently find, as do Kliesch et al (2018: 58 ff.), that “age is by far not the only or even the strongest factor modulating [the] process” of learning a foreign language; and that instead, “cognitive factors and motivation appear to play a decisive role in L2 development”.

In addition to experimental and quasi-experimental studies, an increasing number of publications have investigated the learning of a foreign language by older adults in a

realistic classroom setting like an adult education institution or university of the third age. They include Andrew’s (2012) social constructionist study of adult Mexican learners of English and Neigert’s 2019 investigation of ‘Young-Old’ Germans learning English in the setting of a ‘Volkshochschule’ in Germany. To date, the only published studies dealing with older adults learning German as a foreign language are Berndt’s article (2000) and her monograph *Sprachenlernen im Alter* (2003), which is based on data from Italian seniors learning the language. Since Berndt’s publication involves the same target language as my study and uses comparable data, her findings will be discussed in the final section of this article.

3. Participants and data collection

The participants for this study were recruited among the members of a German language course offered by the Harbourside North Region of Sydney U3A and held at the Dougherty Community Centre in Chatswood, from 8th February to 26th April 2018. Entitled “German for real and near beginners”, the course consisted of 12 sessions of two hours each, totaling 24 hours of instruction. It was described as offering “a clear, step-by-step approach to German grammar, combined with speaking about everyday topics and reading about German-speaking countries” (Sydney U3A Talks Courses Events Semester 1, January – June 2018: 26). The course program was designed by the researcher, who was also the teacher.

The grammar progression of the course was informed by the research findings about acquisitional sequences in German as a foreign language by Pienemann (e.g. 1989), Diehl et al (2000) and others: in terms of the learning stages described by Diehl & Boss (2005), it covered stages I to III in the areas of the verb phrase, word order and case system, broadly corresponding to level A1 of the Common European Framework for German (Trim et al. 2001: 64 ff.). Instead of using a set textbook, the teacher prepared handouts which formed the basis of classroom activities and generally included instructions for an optional written homework task. In compliance with U3A rules, there were no formal entrance requirements or examinations, and the teacher was herself a retiree and U3A member.²

² (https://sydneyu3a.org/wp-content/uploads/2018/11/Charter_Sydney_U3A_2018-11.pdf).

15 U3A members attended the course regularly, and 14 of them, 10 women and four men, chose to participate in the study. As Table 1 shows, they were aged between 67 and 86 years (average age: 74) and 12 of them were monolingual native speakers of English; the two bilinguals, a Sri Lankan woman and an Armenian man, were both fluent English speakers. All participants had worked in occupations requiring specialist skills or a tertiary education, but were now retired or semi-retired, and were currently involved in adult education and volunteer activities.

TABLE 1: Participants' biographical data

Code*	Age	Country of birth	L1	(Past) occupation
F1	74	Wales (UK)	English	Education
F2	86	Australia	English	[not stated]
F3	75	UK	English	[not stated]
F4	70	Sri Lanka	Sinhala / English	Architect
F5	73	Ireland	English	Various, incl. educator
M6	73	Australia	English	Sea captain
F7	79	UK	English	Braille transcriber
F8	67	UK	English	Management, community work
F9	70	UK	English	Teaching, fundraising
M10	84	Iraq	Armenian / Arabic	Geologist, Geophysicist
F11	69	Australia	English	Nursing sister
M12	74	Australia	English	Accountancy Teacher
F13	70	Australia	English	Artist
M14	71	Australia	English	Architect

* F denotes female, M male.

The data collected from the participants consisted of a written questionnaire which was distributed on 22nd March and returned by 19th April 2018, and an individual interview with the researcher held at the conclusion of the course. Part I of the questionnaire consisted of 46 6-point Likert-type questions and Part II contained five open questions eliciting biographical details and information about the respondents' reasons for wanting to learn German, their contacts with native speakers of German and their experiences and views on learning German and foreign languages generally.

The interviews were based on summaries the researcher had taken of each participant's answers to these questions and were designed to clarify and flesh out their responses, as well as giving them an opportunity to add further information. Each interview lasted

approximately 30 minutes and took place in the cafeteria of the community centre in which the German course was held, or in a different coffee shop. The interviews were conducted, recorded and manually transcribed by the researcher.

The data collection was part of the research project *Learning a Foreign Language in the Third Age: Extension and Development*, led by Dr Alexis Tabensky, and approved by the Human Research Ethics Advisory Panel B of the University of New South Wales.

4. Data analysis

This article focuses on the participants’ responses to the fifth and final open question included in the questionnaire:

[...] what is/are your *main reason/s* for wanting to learn German?

In preparation for the analysis, the participants’ handwritten answers to this question were transcribed in a table format, to enable an initial coding following the method of thematic analysis as described by Braun & Clarke (2012). The transcripts of the individual interviews were coded to allow for correspondences and repetitions between the two data sets to become apparent. On the basis of this comparison, the following four broad categories of reasons for learning German emerged:

- An interest in the German language, or in languages generally;
- The wish for mental stimulation or an intellectual challenge;
- A personal connection, past or present, to a native speaker or speakers;
- The intention to travel to a German-speaking country, either as a ‘maybe’ or definitely.

As the above descriptions suggest, the categories listed as 1, 3 and 4 each consist of two components or sub-themes, e.g. participants either mentioned an interest in German, or in languages generally, and so on. However, most of them gave more than one reason for wanting to study the language, as shown in Table 2.

TABLE 2 Stated reasons for wanting to learn German

Reason	Interest in language		Mental stimulation	Personal connection to native speaker/s		Intention to travel to German-speaking country	
	German	General		Past	Present	Maybe	Definite
F1		X	X	X		X	
F2			X	X			
F3	X			X		X	
F4					X		X
F5		X				X	
M6				X			
F7		X	X			X	
F8		X					X
F9	X		X				
M10	X			X			
F11	X		X			X	
M12							X
F13	X				X		X
M14					X		X
Total	5	4	5	5	3	5	5

As it is not possible to include the interviews in their entirety, excerpts from the written and spoken utterances of each participant will be quoted to illustrate each of the categories, with the source of each quote indicated by the participant's code number followed by the abbreviation 'quest' for questionnaire and 'int' for interview.

Regarding the first reason, an interest in the German language, or in languages generally, it needs to be mentioned that at the time of the data collection, "German for real and near beginners" was the only foreign language course offered by U3A in that location, so it is possible that some participants might have chosen a course in a different foreign language, had it been offered. On the other hand, all but two participants had some formal instruction in German before starting the course, and the two who started from scratch expressed a definite intention to study the language.

Overall, five of the 14 participants gave *an interest in the German language* as one of their reasons for attending the course. Two of them justified their choice by referring to the cultural heritage of the German-speaking countries, such as the "many fundamental

works in science, philosophy, art, history and divinity” written in German (M10 quest); one of them wanted to read German literature in the original, and in fact was already doing so. A third participant expressed “a life-long interest in the German language and things German” (F3 quest), which presumably included cultural aspects. Other participants gave more pragmatic reasons for their interest in German, such as “a different language that is not so close to the romance ones and spoken in a number of countries” (F5 quest).

Participants who expressed *an interest in languages generally* had studied a number of other foreign languages previously and liked the experience: “I enjoy learning a new language and find pleasure in being able to use and understand it” (F7 quest). Others enjoyed the opportunity to compare different languages: “I’m interested in comparing and contrasting different languages” (F8 quest). Two participants wished to gain a better understanding of grammar by studying German.

Four of the five participants who expressed an interest in German or in languages generally also mentioned the *mental stimulation or intellectual challenge* of learning a foreign language as a motivating factor. One of them stated categorically that pursuing an intellectually stimulating activity was not just beneficial, but necessary for older adults: “I think the mental stimulation of learning German is both a positive health activity, and a necessary one at my (senior/mature) stage of life” (F7 quest). Similar sentiments were expressed by other participants: “I think anything that keeps you thinking is terribly important” (F2 int); “I think at our age you should be out doing things, [...], and if learning a language is interesting for you, then go and do that” (F8 int).

The theme *‘A personal connection to a native speaker or speakers’* was divided into two sub-themes, because for five respondents the connection was in the past, whereas for the other three it was current and ongoing. Two participants had a German parent; this motivated their decision to learn the language as adults, especially since they had not profited from an exposure to the language as children: F1’s father, who had to flee Nazi Germany because of his anti-government activities, refused to speak German while his children were growing up, while M6’s mother did not speak the language due to the prevailing anti-German attitude among her Australian neighbours at the time. For F2, whose husband was German, the main incentive for using the language ceased with his passing 26 years ago. Another participant had an early though brief exposure to the

language when, as the five-year old daughter of a British army officer stationed in Hamburg after World War II, she had a German nanny: “It was this waterfall of words coming at me, a new experience for a child and I think I took that in” (F5 int). But the exposure came to an end when the family left Hamburg after a few months, leaving the child with “a great curiosity about the German language” (F5 quest). A personal connection, though not with a native speaker of German, was also mentioned by M10, whose father had taught himself the language and surprised his son by speaking it fluently when an opportunity arose. Thus for these participants, wanting to learn or re-learn German was in part motivated by what Ammon (1991: e.g.156) called the “nostalgia motive” (“Nostalgie-Motiv”), i.e. the wish to reconnect with their past lives, and in some cases with their heritage: “It gives me back the bit of culture I had” (F1 int).

Three other participants currently had relatives or friends in Germany, Austria or Switzerland, with whom they wanted to converse in their language. Two of them mentioned exchanging emails with a friend or relative in a German-speaking country, with each party writing in their own language: “I write in English, they write in German; and we understand it” (F1 int).

Given the reputation of older Australians as ‘grey nomads’, it is surprising that only five of the participants had a definite *intention to travel to a German-speaking country* at the time of the data collection. All but two of the participants had visited a German-speaking country before, an experience to which some of them attributed their interest in the language. But now they either planned to travel to other destinations or not at all anymore; moreover, some of them mentioned that as anglophone tourists, especially when travelling in a group of English speakers, they would have few opportunities to speak German to the locals, who “kind of expect you to speak English” (F9 int). Nevertheless, one participant had a policy of attempting to learn the language of each country she intended to visit, while another wanted to be prepared without having definite travel plans: “I hate going to a place where I cannot speak or be understood” (F5 int). Five participants mentioned definite plans to travel to a German-speaking country; in some cases this was a regular annual event, involving visits to relatives or friends living there. For them, having German language skills, while not a prerequisite for survival as tourists, made “the holiday more enjoyable” (M12 quest).

As mentioned before, most respondents gave more than one reason for wanting to learn German, with the most common combinations of reasons being an interest in languages and the wish for mental stimulation, an interest in German and a past personal connection to a native speaker, or a definite intention to travel to a German-speaking country combined with a current personal connection to a native speaker or speakers. As mentioned before, most respondents gave more than one reason for wanting to learn German, with the most common combinations of reasons being an interest in languages and the wish for mental stimulation, an interest in German and a past personal connection to a native speaker, or a definite intention to travel to a German-speaking country combined with a current personal connection to a native speaker or speakers.

5. Discussion

So far, this article has avoided the term “motivation” in discussing the reasons given by a group of older adults for wanting to learn German as a foreign language. Indeed, choosing to study a particular language is only the initial step in a much longer, more complex process within what Dörnyei & Ottó (1998) have called the “preactional phase” in their model of L2 motivation. A precursor of this model, and of the L2 Motivational Self System Dörnyei later developed (Dörnyei 2009), Gardner’s Socio-Educational Model of second language acquisition, describes two main orientations for language study, instrumental and integrative. Despite the numerous critiques of this model, most of which Gardner addressed in his book of 2010, his model is better suited to a small qualitative study than Dörnyei’s models. Thus it may be said that the most of the reasons, and combinations of reasons, expressed by the participants in my study point to a predominantly integrative orientation, namely “an open and accepting orientation toward the other language community, [...] favourable attitudes toward the learning situation, and a heightened motivation to learn the language” (Gardner 2010: 202). Instrumental reasons like the wish to communicate with German speakers in their country were mentioned too, but they were generally combined with an integrative orientation like an interest in languages or the wish for intellectual stimulation.

While my study may well be the first investigation of older Australians learning German, several earlier publications surveyed Australian university students of German, such as Ammon’s large 1991 study, and Schmidt’s doctoral thesis, published in 2011. The results of both studies showed that their young subjects were motivated to study

German by a combination of integrative and instrumental factors. Indeed, Schmidt found “a general interest in the German language and culture paired with a joy and an appreciation of learning languages” (2011: 110) to be one of three reasons most often stated by her respondents.

As mentioned earlier, the only other empirical study of older adults learning German is Berndt (2003), which is based on data from a mixed group of Italian seniors studying the language at an Università della Terza Età in Rome. The reasons her 48 subjects gave for choosing the language are very similar to those mentioned by the learners in my study: they had a current or past connection to a native speaker or speakers, they had travelled to a German-speaking country or were intending to do so; several of them expressed a passion for German literature or for languages generally, with one describing herself as “a kind of linguistic maniac” (“quasi una maniaca linguistica”, Berndt 2003: 80). Others said they enjoyed the intellectual challenge of learning a foreign language.

Although Berndt did not apply Gardner’s model of language learning motivation, it can be said that the participants in her study, like their Australian counterparts, had a predominantly integrative orientation. She also found that her subjects had a very positive image of Germany and its citizens, partly based on their memories of encounters with German soldiers during the Fascist period, which would constitute a nostalgia motive for learning the language. By contrast, some of the Australian seniors in my study had a more complex or critical attitude towards Germany, based on their experiences in that country: F2, who is Jewish, was horrified to see Jewish candlesticks on sale in post-war Hamburg, and F1 (int) found her German grandmother “absolutely furious” that her granddaughter did not speak German. M14 (int), who lived in the Netherlands for several years, thought that German architecture was “sort of familiar [...] “not a revelation”. While critical views of the L2 community may be the opposite of an integrative orientation towards the target language, Gardner stressed that the concept of integrativeness does not necessarily include wanting “to integrate with the other language community”, but instead involved having “an affective predisposition [...] to take on linguistic features of another language community” (2010: 208). The difference between the Italian and the Australian learners’ attitudes towards Germany may be due to the influence of contextual factors like the “cultural milieu” and the relative status of the target language (Clément & Kruidenier 1983) on the learning

situation in different settings. (Incidentally, the Australian seniors appreciated the fact that the course materials reflected a pluricentric view of the German-speaking countries, rather than concentrating on Germany, as Berndt’s course seems to have done.)

Finally, it should not be forgotten that a crucial motivating factor acknowledged by both Gardner (2010) and Dörnyei (2019) is the learners’ enjoyment of the language learning experience per se; this is especially the case with older adults such as retirees, who are able to study a language without time constraints and the pressure of exams or other imposed goals. Interestingly, the view that German is a particularly difficult language, which is expressed by both the Italian and the Australian seniors, as well as by GFL learners worldwide (cf. Riemer 2016), does not act as a deterrent; rather, it enhances the prestige of the language and the challenge involved in learning it, as stated by F9 in her questionnaire response: “I find it difficult, so I like the challenge”.

Understanding the reasons why a group of learners has chosen to study a particular foreign language naturally has implications for the way in which it is taught. The principles and practical suggestions for foreign language pedagogy developed by Berndt (2000, 2003) can easily be adapted to other educational settings. Her call for learner centred teaching approaches is borne out by the findings from my study. As this article showed, seniors have very definite expectations of a language course, and the course design should be flexible enough to meet their needs. Teachers should respect the fact that older adults have more life experience and expertise – frequently including prior foreign language study – than children and young adults; they should also be aware that for many seniors, the experience of learning another language, whether as a social activity or an intellectual exercise, is as important, if not more important, than the outcome. Ultimately, the language learning experience should be enjoyable for all concerned.

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Biographical Information

Dr Bettina Boss is Honorary Senior Lecturer in German Studies in the School of Humanities & Languages at the University of New South Wales, Sydney, Australia. Her current research area is learning a foreign language in the third age. Selected recent publications: Boss B. (2018) Swiss travellers in nineteenth century Australia. In: T. Lay et al. (eds.) *WORLD WITHIN. Self-perception and Images of the Other in German Literatures and Cultures*. North Melbourne: Australian Scholarly, 321–38; Boss B. (2015) Nationalsymbole der Schweizer Gemeinschaft in Sydney von 1870 bis heute. In: B. Studer et al. (eds.) *Die Schweiz anderswo – La Suisse ailleurs Ausland-schweizerInnen – SchweizerInnen im Ausland Les Suisses de l'étranger – Les Suisses à l'étranger*. Edn. 29. Chronos: Zurich, 187-202.

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