

Danya RAMÍREZ GÓMEZ. *Language Teaching and the Older Adult. The Significance of Experience.*

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The title of this book immediately draws the reader's attention to a very current issue. Not only is the world population rapidly aging, but also a diverse range of training programs have been offered, intended to ensure lifelong learning that can sustain the quality of life of adults at an age when, generally, they enter retirement. In this case, Danya Ramírez Gómez elects foreign languages as the object of learning. Indeed, in "A Note to the Reader" (pp. vii and viii), the first section in the book after the "Contents" (pp. v and vi), the author immediately informs the reader that "This book is about learning a foreign language in old age" (p. vii). The proposal is all the more challenging, especially if we remember a well-known saying among the Portuguese "*Burro velho não aprende línguas*" ("You can't teach an old dog new tricks"). It translates quite clearly one of the misconceptions about older people that scientific research has come to dissipate and Ramírez-Gómez aims to refute, with certain vehemence, in *Language Teaching and the Older Adult. The Significance of Experience.*

The author, Adjunct Professor at the Ferris State University in Michigan, shows clearly her experience with older adults throughout the book, and seeks to reconcile her training in Linguistics and Language Sciences with the teaching of foreign languages, from the perspective of geragogy. This term, as Lemieux (1999) clarifies, shares the same root as geriatrics, which could lead one to think that geragogy depends on geriatrics. For this reason, the term gerontagogy may be more appropriate to describe learning by senior citizens, by drawing away from connotations related with the geriatric domain (for more information about the terms discussed, see Lemieux 1999: 30-31). Critical geragogy, however, as it is presented in Ramírez Gómez's work, comes close to that which Lemieux understands by gerontagogy. It offers a new perspective on learning among senior adults, as upheld by educational gerontology. This latter term was apparently used for the first time in 1970 at the University of Michigan (Whitnall 2003). However, still according to Whitnall, it is Peterson who, in 1976, gives the first definition of educational gerontology, a discipline whose focus falls more on the older learner than on the education in itself (Lemieux & Sánchez Martínez 2000). It is, though,

within the prism of critical geragogy, a notion taken as comparable to gerontagogy, the discipline in which education is a name and not an adjective (Sáez Carreras 2005), that the author of this book places the teaching of foreign languages. This is clear when she states, in an attempt to refute prejudices and less optimistic attitudes to the teaching-learning of senior citizens, “the *educational mission* of foreign language geragogy should be to transform older learners’ attitudes toward their learning abilities” (p.108). This citation highlights education as a mission within a geragogy that encompasses the teaching of foreign languages. It thus confers education the status of name rather than adjective, in line with the advocates of gerontagogy, as opposed to educational gerontology, and prepares the reader for the title of chapter 5 “Part 2: Learner Re-training” (pp. 112-158).

The high point of this book by Danya Ramírez Gómez, published in 2016 by *Multilingual Matters*, can be found in this passage: “Learner re-training is built on the idea that older learners should reassess strategies and study habits developed in the past, determine whether these are appropriate for their current circumstances and, if not, adopt new ones” (p. 112). The choice of this passage is rooted in the relevance of the approach selected to take action on the target population, from a gerontagogical perspective, or critical geragogy in the author’s terminology. It intends to take advantage of the potential older adults may possess regarding their acceptance of their limitations, their ability for reflexive and integrating thought, their ability to question and relativize contradictory situations, as well as their metacognitive abilities (Pinto 2005). This reveals a view of old age as construction and not as a stage (Escarbajal de Haro 2003). Only a line of action like the gerontagogical one described above can overcome prejudices and myths (Withnall 2005) regarding language learning on the part of senior citizens. In other words, using the terminology employed in this book for the teaching of foreign languages, a critical foreign language geragogy should be pursued, according to which “FL education should provide older learners with a context wherein they may identify sources of limitations on their learning process, challenge those limitations, transform them and improve their learning experience” (p. 198). This opposition to prejudices (and myths), which only scientific studies can operate, is the leitmotif of *Language Teaching and the Older Adult. The Significance of Experience*. This work puts forward teaching approaches which are undoubtedly promising, rooted in “FL geragogy as a field in its own right” (p. 202), given that “the limited research on age-related cognitive effects on the FL classroom renders many of us defenseless against popular beliefs and social prejudices regarding older adults’ abilities, even if these preconceptions are not perceived consciously” (p. 202).

The target population in this book poses a great challenge, as it encompasses a highly heterogeneous age group, which may include in its different stages (Bäckman *et al.* 2000) diverse life paths and influences of the cognitive or neurological order,

or of other origins. Also, the author focuses on foreign language learning, an area in which a wide range of profiles can be found (Paradis 2004), resulting from the individuals' different language backgrounds which may have been influenced by, among other factors, the teaching methods used and interferences among the languages acquired and learnt (Hammarberg 2001).

Language Teaching and the Older Adult. The Significance of Experience is divided into two main parts. It has a Dedication (p. iv) preceding the first part, as well as the "Contents" (pp. v-vi), "A Note to the Reader" (pp. vii-viii), and a "Glossary" (pp. ix-x), which is basically a list of abbreviations in the book. It is not therefore the typical glossary which accompanies scientific works and which, in this case, would have actually been highly beneficial to the reader who is less familiar with the terminology used.

The first main part of the book comprises three chapters. The "Introduction" (pp. 1-37) introduces the reader to the scope and structure of the book and, before entering the section "Foreign Language Education and the Older Learner" (p. 25), offers interesting insights into the effect of aging on memory and language, taking into account individual differences. Apart from critical period hypothesis (CPH)-L1 and CPH-L2, it would have been interesting to have mentioned the phenomenon of attrition and to show how L1 attrition may suffer a degree of regression with age (Schmid & Keijzer 2009), even though more studies are required to confirm this tendency.

The second chapter, "Characteristics of the Older Learner: Whom Are We Teaching?" (pp. 38-56), intended to prepare a line of action in FL geragogy, presents the different dimensions which contribute to better understanding the students: the physical dimension, the cognitive dimension, the psychological dimension, and the experiential dimension. The latter describes different teaching methodologies from the 1960s to the 1980s, as well as aspects of older adults with regards to experiential background.

The third chapter, "Experience, Foreign Language Learning and the Third Age: The Case of Japanese Older Learners of Spanish" (pp. 57-88), describes a study on the influence of experience based on vocabulary learning strategies (VLS) conducted with older Japanese learners of Spanish. At this stage, it seems relevant to question the reason for an approach so highly centered on vocabulary and why the study was not broadened to include also, for example, pronunciation. Advantage could thus have been taken of an approach adapted to the circumstances, such as the multisensorial and multicognitive one of Odisho (2007), which does not collide, on the contrary, with the perspective of FL geragogy, and which the author seeks to implement with the target population.

The second main part of the book, "Toward a Foreign Language Geragogy" (pp. 89-202), comprises three chapters (4, 5 and 6), and a seventh chapter closes the work and concludes, "Recapitulation and Conclusions: The Criticality of a

Foreign Language Geragogy” (pp. 195-202). The author expresses here her reservations regarding the definitude of her proposal for FL geragogy, given the lack of experimental studies performed in this domain.

Chapter 4, “Part 1: Lifelong Learning and Education for Older Adults” (pp. 91-111), is dedicated to adult education and ends with the learning approach followed in this work, i.e., a foreign language geragogy, which establishes very pertinently the difference between learning and education.

Chapter 5, “Part 2: Learner Re-training” (pp. 112-158), is a seminal contribution in the perspective of a “post-formal style of thought” (“style post-formel de pensée”), as defined by Rybash, Hoyer and Roodin (1986, cited by Lemieux 1999: 39). It is furthermore compatible with the “dialectical thought characterized by the principle of contradiction of all reality and by the principle of relativity of all knowledge” (“une pensée dialectique caractérisée par le principe de contradiction de toute réalité et le principe de la relativité de toute connaissance”) (Lemieux 1999: 39, quoting Rybash, Hoyer and Roodin (1986: 56)), in line with that which the FL geragogical programs intend to implement, rooted in a critical foreign language geragogy. Essentially practical in nature, this chapter offers a proposal for learner re-training, detailing a course made up of seven lessons on vocabulary, divided into aims, activities and homework. The author’s cautious attitude should be noted, as she consistently refers to the limitations of her work, as we can read near the end of the chapter: “It is important to emphasize that the information offered regarding this pilot program should not be viewed as a strict model, but more as examples of possible activities” (p. 155).

Chapter 6, “Part 3: The Foreign Language Lesson” (pp. 159-194), is this book’s most pragmatic contribution, according to Ramírez Gómez. It provides a wide range of recommendations for instructors of FL geragogical courses and lessons, taking the dimensions mentioned in the second chapter of the first part of the book as the point of departure. In the form of general adjustments, checklists are also provided, which the instructors can answer to evaluate their performance. There are also checklists on listening, speaking, reading and writing activities.

Particularly worthy of note is the manner in which the readers are offered, at the end of each chapter, a conclusion which adeptly enables them to more easily follow the reading of the chapters. The (general) conclusion, referred to as chapter seven, does not follow this pattern, as it is intended to conclude and recapitulate.

The Conclusion is followed by a section called “Appendix” (pp. 203-208), made up of four lists (“List of Individual Differences”, “List of English Textbooks”, “List of Spanish Textbooks” and “List of VCSs Evaluated”. The “References” (pp. 209-228) follow, which reveal the level of theoretical grounding of the book. These are undoubtedly essential for all those who intend to enter the world of teaching senior adults, particularly in the area of foreign language teaching. The “Index” (pp. 229-235) closes the work and is indubitably a valuable instrument for

any reader who intends to study the publication here reviewed with the attention it deserves.

Finally, there is the back cover. It contains information on the book and the author, as well as three brief reviews by specialists from three continents (Europe, Asia and America), who unanimously refer to the interest and timeliness of the publication. Marvin Formosa, Loran Edwards and Scott Thornbury attest to the relevance of the choice of the target population and the teaching process proposed.

Conducting research on older adults in their several dimensions means, above all, that those who do so come to know themselves better as well. To follow approaches such as critical geragogy or gerontagogy, depending on the terminology adopted, will contribute to an increased self-awareness of those who conduct research in this area, because they will have to study aging in-depth, to which all beings are subject as a fact of life. In other words, *Language Teaching and the Older Adult. The Significance of Experience* is compulsory reading for all individuals involved in the teaching of older adults, considering furthermore that educational programs focused on this segment of the population are rising significantly. If those programs intend to be credible, they cannot be coordinated by individuals who lack the theoretical preparation conveyed in Danya Ramírez Gómez's work. This preparation confers seriousness on the programs, guaranteeing they are taught by qualified professionals, and not by people who feel that just because they are able to communicate the contents intended, without the required training, they are already gerontagogues, instructors of FL geragogical programs, thus placing the quality of the offer at risk.

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