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## Exploring subjective well-being of older adult foreign language learners: Results of a pilot study

### Abstract

Societies are ageing and there is a growing desire in people aged 60 and more to continue their education in late adulthood. Yet, there is still a scarcity of research related to Foreign Language Geragogy and to the relationship between well-being and foreign language (FL) learning in later years. The results of recent studies show that learning another language can be not only related to maintaining, slowing down, or, to some extent, even improving the decline of cognitive functions in older age, but it might also have a positive impact on the quality of life of healthy, normally ageing older adults (Klímová et al. 2021; Pikhart/Klímová 2020). The main aim of this research, conducted at the University of the Third Age in Wrocław, was thus to evaluate the level of subjective well-being in a group of 31 Polish beginner and pre-intermediate level learners of English and to suggest classroom implications that might enhance positive functioning. The study adopted a mixed-methods approach: the quantitative data was presented using descriptive statistics and the qualitative data was analysed using nVivo software. A thematic analysis of the data set was done to identify patterns of meaning. The results indicate that FL courses can affect older adults' quality of life and should, therefore, focus not only on the development of linguistic abilities, but that they also need to offer opportunities for socializing, and fostering emotional and social well-being. The teachers' role is thus to improve third age learners' FL skills alongside autonomy and agency, as well as to strengthen a sense of community and connectedness, and to promote positive ageing.

**Keywords:** positive psychology, foreign language geragogy (FLG), older adults, older adult foreign language learners, lifelong learning.

## 1. Introduction

The past two decades have seen an increasing scientific interest in the fields of Positive Psychology and Foreign Language Geragogy (FLG, i.e. foreign language learning and teaching to older adults). Awareness of the importance of lifelong learning in ageing societies has also gradually increased not only among scholars, but perhaps most importantly, within the older adult cohort itself. Indeed, the extent of the voluntary pursuit of knowledge and self-improvement can be exemplified by both the number of people at the age of 60 and older who are currently interested in continuing their education in later life, and the wide range of educational opportunities designed to answer the particular learning needs of this age group.

At present in Poland there are 640 Universities of the Third Age (U3A), which is a substantial increase of more than 500 in only a decade (GUS, 2018), and numerous other senior centres as well as private language schools offering foreign language (FL) courses to older adults (OA). The data presented by Statistics Poland (GUS, 2020) shows that English as a FL is currently the most popular subject at the U3As. The five main reasons for this, enumerated by OAs, are as follows: the need to communicate with family and friends living abroad, to socialize with peers, to travel without seeking help of others, to understand the increasingly hostile linguistic environment, and, finally, to slow down age-related cognitive decline (see Słowik-Krogulec 2019a, 2019b, 2020).

Learning a foreign language may positively affect the lives of healthy, i.e. normally ageing, older adults as it can be related to maintaining or slowing down cognitive decline or, as reported by Antoniou/Wright (2017), it may, to some extent, even improve cognitive functioning (see also Bubbico et al. 2019; Klímová 2018; Valis et al. 2019; Ware et al. 2017; Wong et al. 2019). However, caution is needed as there are also studies which prove that the opposite might also be the case – learning a FL in later life may have little to no effect on our cognition (Berggren et al. 2018; see also Pfenninger/Singleton 2019).

At the same time, since Seligman's inaugural speech as the President of APA devoted to Positive Psychology (PP) in 1996, studies in this branch of psychology have also started to gain popularity. As a result, quality of life in the third and fourth age has also become the centre of research (see, among others, Bar-Tur 2021; Cwirlej-Sozańska et al. 2018; Kivi/Hansson/Bjälkebring 2021; Owen/Berry/Brown 2022). In fact, foreign language learning has been shown to affect personal development, but at present,

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the research on subjective well-being (SWB) in the context of older adulthood and second language acquisition is scarce and any study devoted to it is still filling the gap (see Klímová/Pikhart/Cierniak-Emerych et al. 2021; Klímová/Pikhart/Dziuba et al. 2021; Matsumoto 2019; Pikhart/Klímová 2020).

## **A review of the literature**

### **2. Positive Psychology**

Positive Psychology (PP) is a branch of psychology that gained prominence at the beginning of the 21st century. Seligman (2002:7) defines it as “a psychology of positive human functioning that achieves a scientific understanding and effective interventions to build thriving individuals, families and communities.” Yet, as described by Peterson (2006), it is rather a young field with a long history (see MacIntyre 2021:4) as happiness and the good life (or more specifically eudaimonia) were already a subject of interest in ancient Greece (McMahon 2006). The term itself was first used by Maslow in 1954, and it was later popularised and brought into the limelight by Seligman/Csikszentmihalyi (2000), who defined this new branch and presented their arguments for its initiation in their seminal paper in the *American Psychologist*. The three main reasons for the need for PP delineated by the authors are as follows: “increasing well-being and happiness, balancing the research agenda, and avoiding quack cures and unsubstantiated self-help advice” (MacIntyre 2021:4-5). The role of PP is thus to introduce a new perspective to the otherwise imbalanced research, which has so far concentrated too much on what goes wrong instead of what goes right in life (Peterson 2006:4) and its main objective is to build on positive emotions and an appreciation of life instead of dealing with negative experiences (Budzińska 2021:116).

There are three pillars on which positive psychology has been built: positive experiences, positive character traits, and positive institutions (Seligman/Csikszentmihalyi 2000). The first two pillars have been given a lot of scientific attention in the past few years. As a result, there are many publications related to positive emotions (see, among others, Fredrickson 2004, 2010) and to various ways of capitalising on individual differences (Park/Peterson/Seligman 2006; Budzińska 2021). In contrast, positive institutions, which in the context of FL education concentrate on the flourishing

of families, classrooms, schools, and policy makers, has so far received much less attention (see Budzińska 2021).

### **3. Positive Psychology 2.0**

As pointed out by its critics, the binary representation of either positive or negative emotions is limiting and does not encompass the complexity of what it means to be human. Thus, in recent years there has been a call to complement Seligman's original concept and to refocus attention by introducing PP 2.0 (Wong 2011; see also Lomas 2016). Instead of addressing mainly the concepts of happiness and positive emotions, the role of PP 2.0, or the second wave of positive psychology, is to draw on previous research into negative emotions and to present the two as complementary and not mutually exclusive aspects of human experience as our "well-being is fundamentally about joining of these two realms" (Ryff/Singer, 2003: 279, qtd. in Wong 2011:70; see also MacIntyre et al. 2019). The interplay between the positive and the negative in social contexts makes it possible to paint a more holistic picture, which, according to its proponents, should replace the somewhat problematic and less accurate black-and-white representation. It is a "more nuanced approach to the concepts of positive and negative, and by a subtle appreciation of the ambivalent nature of the good life" which is "above all epitomised by a recognition of the fundamentally *dialectical* nature of wellbeing," as pointed out by Lomas/Ivtzan (2016: 1758). Along similar lines, Gregersen et al. (2014:329) argue that "it is not the presence of positive emotion but the ratio of positive to negative emotion that is especially important for wellbeing."

### **4. Positive Education (PE) and Positive Language Education (PLE)**

MacIntyre (2021), who is considered the father of PP in SLA, enumerates three reasons why the studies of PP are important in relationship to language learning. The author argues that PP studies not only elucidate less often discussed aspects of FL education, but also introduce new approaches to research, and exemplify activities or interventions that have been successfully used in PP and which might be applied to learning and teaching another language (ibid.: 4). MacIntyre/Gregersen (2012:193) discuss the role of emotions in FL learning and claim that although "positive emotion facilitates the building of resources because positive emotion tends to broaden a person's perspective, opening the individual to absorb the

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language,” and “negative emotion produces the opposite tendency, a narrowing of focus and a restriction of the range of potential language input” there needs to be a balance between the two (see also Fredrickson 2004).

In their article, Mercer et al. (2018:11) argue that there is a need “for an empirically validated framework of PLE” to be developed and practically implemented, in different cultural as well as linguistic settings. The authors also highlight the importance of promoting well-being, which is vital for both FL learning and an improved quality of life, and they also add that this crucial life skill can be taught. In fact, PLE interventions can be successfully implemented by FL educators to bridge the gap between linguistic and non-linguistic competences (such as broadly defined and often discussed 21st century skills), which are an integral part of language learning. Well-being should thus not only be an approach to, but also the result of education, including learning a foreign language, as it is a key skill that is vital for life both within and outside the class (ibid.: 13). Finally, Mercer et al. (2018:24) pose the question of whether fostering such a core life skill as well-being “is especially ‘positive’ language education, or simply what good language education ought to be anyway.” Hence, incorporating well-being aims and introducing PP interventions in SLA is vital at all stages of teacher training and student development. Moreover, promoting well-being and combining its aims with those of language learning has become crucial in the context of the broadly understood 21st century skills. In fact, the foreign language classroom offers good conditions for positive language education to flourish.

## 5. Well-being

In recent years there has been an increasing academic interest in the relationship between psychological factors and FL education. As pointed out by Mercer/Ryan (2016), “[i]n terms of both practice and research, language education has been moving away from solely language or teaching-based models towards a greater focus on the various contributions learners make to their own learning (Breen 2001:2), as is evident in the shift towards more learner-centred models of learning.” Hence, self-reports of people’s subjective well-being (SWB) have become a centre of scientific attention.

The rapidly growing body of research into well-being has led to a multiplicity of theories. The vagueness results, on the one hand, from the changing understanding of the basic concepts of happiness, well-being, or quality of life, and on the other, from the theories that have evolved

around them and include various components (Wong 2011; Jayawickreme/Forgeard/Seligman 2012:327). SWB quickly substituted the early concepts of positive psychology – happiness, and authentic happiness (Seligman 2002; Scorsolini-Comin et al. 2013). Moreover, while the earlier studies equated happiness with SWB, nowadays there are two different approaches that can be distinguished: hedonic and eudemonic well-being. The former type concentrates on self-perception of one's quality of life including "both affective measures of positive affect and negative affect as well as a cognitive measure of life satisfaction," and the latter measures SWB by analysing, for instance, "constructs such as meaning, purpose, engagement, and flow" (Jayawickreme/Forgeard/Seligman 2012:328; see also Ryan/Deci 2001). In other words, the difference between these two approaches is in the subjects' judgement of their own feelings and moods, vs. meaning and purpose of life (Steptoe et al. 2015), or "feeling good," vs. "doing well," respectively (Jayawickreme/Forgeard/Seligman 2012:332). However, the authors (2012) also note that by focusing solely on SWB, this distinction is blurred (*ibid.*). Steptoe et al. (2015) add the third aspect of SWB, namely evaluative WB, which as the name suggests is an evaluation of one's life or, for instance, job satisfaction. In addition, in the past decade, Diener (2006:400) has redefined subjective well-being and proposed his description, in line with which this concept should be viewed as "an umbrella term for different valuations that people make regarding their lives, the events happening to them, their bodies and minds, and the circumstances in which they live."

There are two models of well-being. The first one, i.e. Seligman's (2012) PERMA model, is an acronym that encompasses five elements: positive emotion, engagement, relationships, meaning, and accomplishments. Although originally introduced within the context of PP, all its aspects have important implications for FL studies and education. The second model, EMPATHICS proposed by Oxford (2016:73) adapts and draws on PERMA theory, but it simultaneously extends it so that it is more directly applicable to SLA studies. As such, it has been designed to reflect the complex and dynamic nature of the language learning experience and to "open up a discussion about a psychology of well-being for language learners" (*ibid.*: 11). Oxford's model also highlights the existence of interrelationships and "connections within and across the nine EMPATHICS dimensions," which are as follows: emotion and empathy, meaning and motivation, perseverance, agency and autonomy, time, hardiness and habits of mind, intelligences, character strengths, and self-factors (*ibid.*: 71).

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Subjective well-being is usually measured by self-report with the use of Satisfaction with Life Scale (SWLS) (Diener et al. 1985; Pavot/Diener 1993), the Self-Anchoring Striving Scale (Cantril 1965), Fordyce's Happiness measure (1977), the Positive and Negative Affect Scale (PANAS) (Watson/Clark/Tellegen 1988), and the Scale of Positive and Negative Experiences (SPANE) (Diener et al. 2009). However, as the currently available measurement scales do not reflect the reality of a foreign language classroom experience, especially that at the U3A, it is difficult to apply them to FL students, and to older adult learners in particular (see sec. Instrument and data analysis procedure).

## 6. Lifelong learning and well-being

Since the endorsement of the Active Ageing Framework by the WHO in 2002, policies and practices regarding ageing have been affected worldwide. At the same time, both the opportunities and the challenges of active ageing have been highlighted and its three equally vital elements – physical health, mental health, and social connections – advocated. Unlike the traditional activity theory, which assumed that older adults should “maintain the same levels of activity as they did in middle age by ‘denying the onset of old age’ (Walker 2002:122)” (Narushima 2016:654), the new framework concentrates on *any* type of activity, whether social, economic, cultural, or civic, performed within one's abilities. As a result, both the governments' role in enabling older adults to remain active by creating an age-friendly system, and the third agers' right to be given opportunities are highlighted.

Instead of seeing old adulthood as the time of general decline, nowadays it “is viewed as period of opportunity and wellbeing, with retention or development of the psychological and cognitive resources to cope with life's challenges” (Bowling/Illiffe 2011:13). However, it should be noted that not everyone ages normally (i.e. without any pathologies) and with age this number decreases (Deary et al. 2009; Kirkwood 2005). As noted by Grant (2014), there is a relationship between people's level of education, socioeconomic status, or even baseline intelligence, and the different degree of resistance to age-related pathological brain changes (see *cognitive reserve hypothesis*). Cognitive loss might be affected by various life experiences, health, psychomotor abilities, or even physical exercise (Hultsch et al. 1998). Thus, there is a relationship between the degree of cognitive impairment and an active life (including exercising, socialising,

or taking up intellectually stimulating tasks, such as FLL) (see *lifestyle-cognition hypothesis*, Harada et al. 2013). According to Singleton/Pfenninger (2018:256), “[t]he current consensus among cognitive scientists is that the brain retains plasticity throughout life, and that it may be modified by experience at any age,” while learning a FL, “may contribute to active and healthy ageing, being a cognitively challenging activity that seems in specific circumstances to promote neural plasticity and to foster social interaction and individual mobility” (Pfenninger/Singleton 2019:2; see also Antoniou et al. 2013). Along similar lines, Birdsong (2006) argues that there are age-related regional and cognitive brain changes which may affect late-life FL education.

According to Diener and Ryan (2009:392) there is a “growing body of evidence [which] suggests that high well-being and life satisfaction significantly improve life within the four areas of health and longevity, work and income, social relations, and societal benefits.” Along similar lines, Jayawickreme/Forgeard/Seligman (2012:2) argue that there is a relationship between each of the aforementioned three aspects of SWB and lower mortality rates, health (including improved cardiovascular function, or feelings of depression), or job performance. Foreign language education in later years concentrates to a large extent not only on acquiring linguistic abilities, but also on building social bonds, strengthening connections with peers, and advocating positive ageing (see *successful ageing*, Ba Tur 2021). It might thus be argued that improved self-reported well-being could affect FL education and the likelihood of better performance and enjoyment of the benefits accrued from learning a language in a friendly and non-threatening learning environment. Pikhart et al. (2021:1194) argue that for older adults meeting with peers while being in a cognitively stimulating environment can lead to an “increased sense of achievement, sense of life purpose and future prospects.” As already mentioned, there is also research suggesting that learning foreign languages in later life might affect the quality of life, health and well-being of older adults, but these studies are still very scarce. According to Pikhart/Klímová (2020) “FLL cannot dramatically improve memory and cognitive deterioration of older adults, however, it can improve QoL [quality of life] by increasing subjective happiness that is connected to improved wellbeing” (abstract). In fact, Narushima et al. (2018:651) refer to recent research aimed at examining the relationship between psychological well-being and late life education, whose results point to long-term positive effects of continued participation in informal and engaging activities on older adults’ well-being, even in



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the case of the “most vulnerable,” as it equips them with a compensatory strategy that strengthens their reserve capacities. This, in turn, allows OA learners to become more autonomous and affects their sense of fulfilment beyond the classroom.

## **The Study**

### **7. Study aims**

This pilot study was carried out in April 2023, at the University of the Third Age (University of Wrocław) in Poland. The aim of the research, which employed a mixed-methods approach, was to investigate older adult learners’ opinions regarding their self-perceived well-being in the FL classroom (as compared to other classes at the U3A), to explore the students’ needs, reactions to and opinions on the experience of FL learning after two semesters, and to define the basic principles of a student-friendly and effective FL course from OAs’ perspective. Its subsidiary aim, however, was also to test the data collection tool and to discern potential limitations of the research, all of which are discussed in the following sections.

### **8. Participants**

There were 31 older adults (29 females and 2 males), aged 61-84 (see Table 1 below), who took part in the research. All of the participants agreed to having their information processed and informed written consent was collected. At the moment of data collection, 22 participants attended classes for Beginners (CEFR A1) and it was their first year of studying English at the U3A in Wrocław (later referred to as B#, B1-B22), and 9 were in the Pre-Intermediate group (CEFR A2). The latter group of learners (from now on described as PI#, PI1-PI9) had between 5 and 15 years of FLL experience at the U3A in Wrocław. Each group was taught by a different teacher. Currently some of the participants are also studying German (n=5), Russian (n=1), and Spanish (n=1). They also had previous experience of studying other languages (mainly at school) before attending classes at the U3A. These languages include Russian and German (n=29 of each language), Latin (n=3), and French (n=2). 22 of the respondents had completed higher education and the remaining 9 had finished secondary school.

Age	Number of students	Percentage
50-60	0	0
61-70	19	61%
71-80	8	26%
81+	4	13%

Table 1: Age of students. Source: own research

## 9. Instrument and data analysis procedure

As pointed out by Tove et al. (in press), subjective well-being, which is to be measured in this study, comprises both affective and cognitive components. The former group includes mainly positive and some negative feelings, and the latter is related more specifically to an evaluation of one's life satisfaction.

The study presented in this article is divided into two parts. Part I is an original 5-point Likert scale questionnaire (consisting of 6 items), showing the degree of agreement or disagreement with the given statements. Each item is followed up by an open-ended question. Its aim is to establish the reasons for learning a FL in later life and to get a more in-depth analysis of the subjects' beliefs associated with the relationship between FLL and their SWB. Part II consists of 55, 4-point Likert-scale statements adapted from Woll/Wei's (2019) report on cognitive benefits of language learning as well as Pikhart/Klimova's (2020) research on OAs' well-being, and is inspired by a review of the literature. As a result, in the study in this article there is no control group of university students and the questionnaire has been expanded and divided into cognitive, affective and other components that can affect OA learners' self-perceived well-being in the FL classroom.

The study adopted a mixed-methods approach. The results of both Parts I and II of the questionnaire include quantitative data computed in MS Excel and presented with the use of descriptive statistics (percentages). The qualitative data has been analysed with the use of nVivo software. Thematic analysis of the data set was done and the recurrent themes, topics, ideas, and patterns of meaning were identified (Braun/Clarke 2012). The responses of participants provided in the interviews were transcribed and translated into English by the author.

## 10. Presentation of research results and discussion

### Part I

The first part of the study consisted of 8 open-ended questions, 6 of which had an additional option of showing one's disagreement or agreement with the given statements (see Table 2). All of the respondents agreed that the English classes offered at the U3A are student-friendly. Similarly, nearly everyone ( $n=93.5\%$ ) showed their agreement with the fact that these classes affect their well-being. When asked if there is a difference between English classes and other classes at the U3A in terms of their influence on students' well-being, 67.7% of the participants agreed that that English classes have a greater impact, (41.9% strongly agreed and 25.8% agreed), but the same number of the respondents disagreed ( $n=25.8\%$ ). Experiencing FL anxiety was reported by 22.6% of the learners, however, when asked if it is different to other classes at the U3A, only 3.2% (one participant) expressed their agreement that English classes are more stressful. The last question showed very different reactions, with nearly the same number of the learners agreeing ( $n=41.9\%$ ) and disagreeing ( $n=38.7\%$ ) with the statement that teachers can do something to affect their well-being. The varied responses were later clarified by the respondents in their comments (see below).

	%	Strongly disagree	Disagree	I don't know	Agree	Strongly agree
1	Why do you study English?	an open-ended question only				
2	Are English classes OA student-friendly?	0	0	0	25.8	74.2
3	If you were to change something in your English classes what would it be?	an open-ended question only				
4	Do the English classes affect your well-being?	0	6.5	0	25.8	67.7
5	Do the English classes have a greater effect on your well-being than other classes at the U3A? Why? Please explain.	0	25.8	6.5	25.8	41.9
6	Have you ever felt anxious during your English classes? Please explain.	32.3	41.9	0	22.6	3.2
7	Are your English classes more stressful than other classes at the U3A? Please explain?	58.1	38.7	0	3.2	0
8	Do you think that your English teacher could do something to affect your well-being?	16.1	25.8	19.4	12.9	25.8

Table 2: General questions related to OAs' FLL experience and their SWB

The first open-ended question regarding the reasons for studying English at the U3A confirmed the majority of earlier findings (see Słowik-

Krogulec 2019a, 2019b). Older adults often study English to understand their family members who live abroad (PI3: “*I’ve always enjoyed learning new languages, so I decided to learn English. My son married a foreigner so my knowing the language is also beneficial for my family*”), but also for self-reasons, which also include a relationship with their immediate family (B14: “*Attending U3A is the best decision I have made recently. I did it for myself, but also to do homework with my grandchildren*”). Another aim is to travel without the need to seek help from other people, which is also related to an awareness of the role of English as a lingua franca (B6: “*I love travelling and it’s impossible if you don’t know English. It is necessary to know English as it is an international language*”). Along similar lines, an ability to understand an increasingly hostile and foreign linguistic landscape was mentioned (PI6: “*We live in an English-speaking world. Maybe even I will be able to understand something? It’s really satisfying when you know the basis of a foreign language – the practice made me aware of that*”). Another important aspect highlighted by the participants was the need to socialise and spend time with others, especially in a difficult situation (B11: “*I was depressed and I wanted to spend more time with other people after my husband suddenly passed away*”), but also to feel valued and connected (B6: “*I wanted to learn new things in a friendly environment in which we are not assessed, made to feel anxious, and we can finally feel that we are needed*”). The respondents also showed their awareness of the benefits of lifelong learning in later life, which can be pleasurable or exciting and allows them to continue active living in their third age (PI5: “*I like learning I am still interested in a normal, active life*”; B17: “*My daughter once told me that in London even 80-year-olds learn new languages, so I thought ‘why not’ and here I am. It’s been great!*”). Finally, there are also those who treat their FL classes as a remedy for memory problems, a meeting place and a way to improve their overall well-being (B2: “*To practise memory, meet new people and to improve my well-being. I want to be able to communicate with others, to travel abroad and not get lost in another country*”).

When asked if English classes are friendly for older learners, the respondents pointed mainly to the teacher as an important factor affecting their feelings (PI2: “*The teacher is very nice and friendly*”; PI5: “*Our teacher is a professional and she teaches extremely well, which is why all the students are very happy to attend these classes*”). Other comments were related to the teacher’s role in creating a non-formal and non-threatening learning environment (B9: “*Definitely yes – it is a very friendly environment,*

*the teacher is open and helpful*"; B12: *"I like the 'informal' atmosphere of these classes, as well as the patience and kindness of our teacher"*; B15: *"Definitely. The classes are nice, informal, and interesting, everyone feels comfortable, and we laugh a lot"*).

The comments with suggestions for improvement, in question 3, were offered mainly by pre-intermediate students, who felt uncomfortable with the level of classes, which according to the participants were too difficult for some of the learners. This problem, however, reappears every year and is related to the University's policy of not introducing any form of placement evaluation – at present the learners decide which group they would like to join. Introducing some form of assessment (even if only done by the teacher at the end of each year) could solve this issue (PI2: *"Classes should be divided into stronger and weaker students, at present it is a mixed-ability group labelled as Pre-intermediate"*; PI4: *"Everything is ok when it comes to the teacher, but there should be more groups – there should be more levels available"*). Also, the size of the groups should be reconsidered (PI3: *"The classes are great, but if the group was smaller learning would be more effective"*). In addition, the learners discussed the coursebook which was chosen by their FL teacher, who seems to be flying with the fastest in a mixed-ability group (PI6: *"The book is far too difficult"*; PI7: *"More speaking and an easier course book. It's very stressful to use this one as I don't understand many things"*). Finally, an interesting suggestion was made by both groups of the respondents who expressed their need for online and hybrid classes, which would allow them to take part in classes in case of, for instance, an illness (PI5: *"The English classes are taught by very competent teachers, but there should be more classes online so that we can attend even when we are feeling not too well. Also, it's a pity that we are not using computers during the classes"*; B6: *"More hybrid classes – in-class and online options should be available at all times"*).

The aim of question 4 was to establish whether EFL classes can affect the learners' well-being. Some of the respondents simply described their positive experience related to these classes (B8: *"Yes, I like these classes very much – they most definitely improve my well-being"*), while others mentioned such aspects as the feeling of belonging or connectedness, which is experienced even beyond the classroom after the classes are over (B4: *"It's great to be able to understand other people and cultures. The classes have a great influence on our well-being as thanks to them we don't feel lonely, and a lonely person is often depressed"*; PI5: *"Absolutely. Know-*

*ing English is crucial nowadays – I feel so much better now that I know I am not 'left out', after every class I feel so excited and positive*"). Other comments were related to an improved self-confidence, satisfaction, and motivation (PI6: *"English classes affect my well-being. I feel more active and self-confident, I feel motivated to work as I can clearly see the effects of my learning"*; B7: *"Yes. I always wanted to learn this language. I feel really satisfied and motivated now that I have started"*). Once again, the learners' family is also mentioned as an important encouraging and motivating factor (PI3: *"Definitely! I am very happy that I'm gaining new skills, my family is very proud of me. I also have a better relationship with my English-speaking daughter-in-law thanks to that. I am not afraid to use English anymore. Now I am more encouraged to use English and to talk to other people"*).

Some of the respondents clearly stated the role of EFL classes in affecting their well-being when compared to other classes at the U3A (B20: *"Definitely, these are the only classes I am really waiting for"*). Once again, the respondents highlighted the effect that English classes have on their overall self-perceived well-being which extends outside the classroom (B15: *"I think they really do affect my well-being as I feel more self-confident and really satisfied every time I leave the room"*; PI6: *"I think so, after English classes I am happy the whole day and I am waiting for the next ones"*). Other participants showed the difference between EFL and other classes at the U3A and pointed to the feeling of connectedness that is the result of the ability to understand the world better and of the feeling of belonging to a widely understood English-speaking community (B17: *"Yes, because learning English allows me to understand the world better – watch films, TV commercials, understand words and expressions used in everyday discussions"*). Knowing English also positively affects their sense of autonomy (B22: *"These are the only classes that make me feel that I can manage by myself. I like travelling and now I am not afraid to do it alone"*). In addition, the role of the teacher and peers in creating a friendly learning environment is mentioned (B11: *"Yes, because the teaching style and attitude of our teacher makes us feel much better"*; PI6: *"I am over 80 years old, so I think more slowly and function more slowly, but thanks to our teacher, my peers and a general positive atmosphere in class, I feel comfortable and I can keep up with everyone (most of the time)"*). When learning English, the learners also reported the feeling of flow and engagement, which seems to be specific to these classes (B16: *"The group is small, the atmosphere is really good, friendly and informal."*

*I feel really good during these classes and I forget about everything else when I'm there. I feel the same after all of my English classes*"). However, there are also learners who think that all classes at the U3A are comparable and positively affect their well-being (B14: *"I am not sure as I feel great after all of the classes at the U3A"*).

FL anxiety, as an example of negative affect, was researched in order to see whether it affects the learners' subjective well-being. Memory problems were mentioned as one of the reasons behind experiencing anxiety in an EFL class (B15: *"The classes are very interesting each time - new words, new expressions, some I manage to recall from high school. More difficult things are repeated many times. Nice atmosphere, good teacher. Though, I feel slightly anxious when I realise that I forgot something even though I spent time at home studying it"*; B17: *"Sometimes when I know that I studied at home and should remember something, but I can't due to memory problems"*). Another reason enumerated by the participants was once again related to the level and pace of the classes in the pre-intermediate group (PI6: *"I rarely feel anxious, but if I do then it is caused by too difficult topics, too fast explanations, or an inability to understand the teacher"*). Similarly, other, more advanced students, make weaker students feel stressed and discouraged (PI7: *"We are covering the material too fast. Also, other students (who know English better) make me feel anxious"*; PI2: *"I feel a bit anxious because of the different levels of students. Also, sometimes I do not understand our teacher when she talks to more advanced learners"*). Some of the learners noted the lack of preparation for classes as a factor that contributes to their FL anxiety (B8: *"When I am not prepared - I feel stressed"*). On the other hand, there were comments made by those who do not feel anxious and show their appreciation of the atmosphere, with the teacher once again mentioned as a contributing factor in creating a good learning environment (B10: *"No, because classes are great, other students are really nice and the teacher is really good"*; B11: *"Friendly atmosphere, and an open and communicative teacher make the classes not stressful at all"*; B14: *"No stress, only pure pleasure!"*; B3: *"No, but I would like to know more to feel more comfortable"*).

When asked whether English classes are more stressful than other classes at the U3A, the participants highlighted their awareness of agency and control in FL learning (B9: *"There is no need to feel stressed - we are adult students"*; B3: *"No, because I know that it is just the beginning, and it will become easier with time"*; B2: *"I don't think so. Learning a foreign language is much more demanding than any other subject, but that's*

*obvious*”). Other respondents wrote about their English teachers as those who make learning a foreign language anxiety-free (B11: “*Absolutely not, but that is mainly thanks to our teacher; otherwise learning a foreign language could be rather stressful*”). Finally, some of the learners once again mentioned the role of their EFL classes in their improved overall self-perceived well-being (B10: “*On the contrary, English classes are very relaxing and I feel much better after them*”).

The last question, which on the Likert scale showed the most varied responses, was related to the teacher’s role in affecting the learners’ well-being. The comments clearly show that the question should be phrased in a different way as every participant understood it in a different way. Overall, however, despite the differences in the answers to the questionnaire (with a nearly equal number of the participants agreeing and disagreeing with the statement), in their written comments all of the respondents unanimously agreed that there is no need for the teacher to do anything else to improve their WB and they are very happy with the present rapport with their teachers, who already make them feel better. Examples of learners’ negative answers are as follows – B15: “*I don’t think there is a need to do anything else. Everyone feels great during these classes – which is noticeable not only for us, but I think also for our teacher*”; B4: “*No. The smile of our teacher is the best way to improve our well-being!*”; B20: “*Nothing more than what we already get – after these classes I am always very happy and cheerful*”). An example answer given by the respondent who chose the option “I don’t know” expresses the same feelings towards his/her teacher as those of other students (B22: “*There is a really good and friendly atmosphere. We have a very understanding teacher who treats us individually and understands the difficulties each of us has*”). Finally, the positive answers also express the same general belief that the teacher already does everything she can to make her learners feel good in the EFL lesson (B6: “*Absolutely yes! The teacher is great, she knows how to talk to us and teach us. She is veeery patient – we are often much worse than kids!*”). The responses to this question clearly show that in future research it should be rephrased or left as an open-ended question.

## Part II

The second part of the study is a 4-point Likert scale questionnaire with 55 items showing one’s disagreement or agreement with the given statements (see Tables 3 and 4). First, the participants were asked to assess the degree



to which their FL classes affect them by choosing the preferred answer for each of the listed items (see Table 3 below). Nearly all of the respondents agree that FL classes positively affect their motivation, enjoyment, satisfaction and engagement. Autonomy was seen as a positive outcome of learning English by 70.97% of the respondents, with the rest disagreeing that there is any relationship between the two. Both anxiety and frustration are not linked to learning English according to 83.87% of learners in each case, which is in line with the findings presented in the qualitative part above. Health is seen as a more ambiguous factor, with 48.39% of the learners disagreeing and 51.61% agreeing that it can be affected by learning a FL. In contrast, the social aspect of FL education, including building positive relationships with others, the feeling of belonging to the group, getting to know new people, understanding the emotions of other students and of other cultures seems to be related to learning English by the majority of the respondents. Similarly, self-reasons (such as self-development, accepting oneself or self-fulfilment) were seen as related to learning English by the majority. The ability to express oneself and multitask, however, was seen as unrelated to FL education as reported by 29.04% of learners, just as in the case of the development of analytical abilities, with which 29.2% of the participants showed their disagreement. Learning English gives the feeling of aim to 90.33%, and it helps OAs to deal with changes (80.65%). Finally, the respondents believe that learning English can positively affect memory, creativity, concentration, time management, persistence, and conscientiousness.

	%				
		1	2	3	4
1.	Motivation	0.00	0.00	<b>25.81</b>	<b>74.19</b>
2.	Enjoyment	0.00	3.23	<b>25.81</b>	<b>70.97</b>
3.	Satisfaction	0.00	3.23	<b>29.03</b>	<b>67.74</b>
4.	Engagement	0.00	12.90	<b>38.71</b>	<b>48.39</b>
5.	Autonomy	6.45	<u>22.58</u>	<u>29.03</u>	<b>41.94</b>
6.	Anxiety	<b>58.06</b>	<b>25.81</b>	12.90	3.23
7.	Frustration	<b>70.97</b>	12.90	12.90	3.23
8.	Health	<b>32.26</b>	<u>16.13</u>	<u>19.35</u>	<b>32.26</b>
9.	Positive relationships with others	0.00	3.23	<b>38.71</b>	<b>58.06</b>
10.	Feeling of belonging to the group	0.00	6.45	<b>41.94</b>	<b>51.61</b>
11.	Getting to know new people	0.00	9.68	<b>25.81</b>	<b>64.52</b>
12.	Understanding emotions of others	9.68	6.45	<b>51.61</b>	<b>32.26</b>
13.	Understanding other cultures	3.23	9.68	<b>32.26</b>	<b>54.84</b>
14.	The ability to express oneself	3.23	<u>25.81</u>	<b>41.94</b>	<b>29.03</b>

15.	Self-development	0.00	3.23	<b>22.58</b>	<b>74.19</b>
16.	Accepting oneself	6.45	6.45	<b>45.16</b>	<b>41.94</b>
17.	Self-fulfilment	6.45	0.00	<b>45.16</b>	<b>48.39</b>
18.	Learning new things	0.00	0.00	<b>35.48</b>	<b>64.52</b>
19.	Analytical abilities	<u>12.90</u>	<u>16.13</u>	<b>51.61</b>	<b>19.35</b>
20.	The feeling of aim	3.23	6.45	<b>41.94</b>	<b>48.39</b>
21.	Ability to deal with changes	3.23	<u>16.13</u>	<b>48.39</b>	<b>32.26</b>
22.	Multitasking	6.45	<u>22.58</u>	<b>58.06</b>	<b>12.90</b>
23.	Memory improvement	0.00	3.23	<b>25.81</b>	<b>70.97</b>
24.	Creativity	3.23	6.45	<b>51.61</b>	<b>38.71</b>
25.	Concentration	0.00	3.23	<b>29.03</b>	<b>67.74</b>
26.	Time management	0.00	6.45	<b>45.16</b>	<b>48.39</b>
27.	Persistence in striving for a goal	0.00	6.45	<b>29.03</b>	<b>64.52</b>
28.	Conscientiousness in task performance	3.23	3.23	<b>41.94</b>	<b>51.61</b>

Table 3: On scale from 1 to 4 (1= Strongly disagree, 4= Strongly agree), mark if English classes you attend affect your...: Source: Own research

Next, the respondents were asked more specifically about different elements related to FL education that might affect their SWB (see Table 4 below). The categories include the physical learning environment, the teacher, other students, the atmosphere, positive emotions, learning strategies and some elements related to learning English that appeared to be problematic in the previous studies (see, for instance, Słowik-Krogulec 2019b). On the whole, the learners agree that the physical environment (place, room or time of classes) plays a role in their SWB. Similarly, the use of appropriate materials and topics that are chosen specifically for this age group makes the classes more student-friendly according to the majority of the participants. Additional equipment is less important to 22.58%. Other students, the level and the size of the group were also chosen as important by most learners (which was also visible in the comments made in the open-ended questions). The FL teacher, and his or her openness, attitude, and professionalism (the qualities which also appeared in the qualitative part), as well as the way of teaching and rapport, were seen by nearly every respondent as very important factors affecting the learners' SWB. Promoting positive emotions and activities and being introduced to learning and memory strategies also seem to play an important role in the overall sense of well-being. Finally, once again, testing was argued as having a negative impact on SBW (to learn more about the reasons behind OAs' dislike of tests see Słowik-Krogulec 2019b). But, according to the learners, the relationship between formative assessment or the lack of grades and their SWB is less distinct, with 70.97% disagreeing that there

is such a connection in the case of the former and 51.61% in the case of the latter. Finally, using both Polish and English makes the learners feel more comfortable than using mainly the foreign language, according to all but three respondents (n=90.32%). However, in order to understand the relationship between the aforementioned elements and OAs' SWB better and to elucidate some of the responses, in the proper study interviews with the participants will be necessary.

	%				
		1	2	3	4
1. The use of appropriate materials		0.00	6.45	<b>51.61</b>	<b>41.94</b>
2. The use of additional equipment		3.23	<u>19.35</u>	<b>54.84</b>	<u>22.58</u>
3. Place of classes		3.23	6.45	<b>38.71</b>	<b>51.61</b>
4. Room		3.23	9.68	<b>32.26</b>	<b>54.84</b>
5. Time of classes		3.23	<u>16.13</u>	<b>38.71</b>	<b>41.94</b>
6. Other students		3.23	12.90	<b>48.39</b>	<b>35.48</b>
7. Level of the group		3.23	12.90	<b>54.84</b>	<b>29.03</b>
8. Size of the group		6.45	3.23	<b>32.26</b>	<b>58.06</b>
9. Friendly atmosphere		0.00	0.00	<b>16.13</b>	<b>83.87</b>
10. Teacher		0.00	0.00	9.68	<b>90.32</b>
11. Way of teaching		0.00	0.00	<b>25.81</b>	<b>74.19</b>
12. Teachers' preparation		0.00	3.23	<b>22.58</b>	<b>74.19</b>
13. Teachers' competence		0.00	0.00	<b>22.58</b>	<b>77.42</b>
14. Attitude to students		0.00	0.00	<b>19.35</b>	<b>80.65</b>
15. Openness		3.23	0.00	<b>22.58</b>	<b>74.19</b>
16. Easy contact with the teacher		0.00	0.00	<b>16.13</b>	<b>83.87</b>
17. Good rapport with the teacher		0.00	3.23	6.45	<b>90.32</b>
18. Promoting positive emotions and activities		6.45	3.23	<b>48.39</b>	<b>41.94</b>
19. Being introduced to learning strategies		6.45	9.68	41.94	41.94
20. Being introduced to memory strategies		3.23	6.45	<b>35.48</b>	<b>54.84</b>
21. Repetitions		3.23	12.90	<b>48.39</b>	<b>35.48</b>
22. Topics		3.23	0.00	<b>48.39</b>	<b>48.39</b>
23. Tests and quizzes		<b>41.94</b>	<b>35.48</b>	16.13	6.45
24. Formative assessment		<b>38.71</b>	<b>32.26</b>	16.13	12.90
25. No grades		<b>38.71</b>	<u>12.90</u>	<b>29.03</b>	<u>19.35</u>
26. Using Polish and English in class		<u>22.58</u>	9.68	<b>29.03</b>	<b>38.71</b>
27. Using only English in class		45.16	45.16	0.00	9.68

Table 4: On scale from 1 to 4 (1= Strongly disagree, 2= Disagree, 3= Agree, 4= Strongly agree), mark which of the following affect your well-being in your English class. Source: Own research

The results indicate that EFL courses can affect older adults' SWB. The study (and later comments of the participants) also showed that OAs ap-

preciated being able to voice their opinions and feelings, talk about their needs and FLL experiences. The comments presented in the open-ended part of the study clearly show that the main emphasis is placed on the teacher's role in creating an informal learning environment which clearly affects OAs' self-perceived well-being. In general, there were varying (but mainly positive) responses to course content. Pre-intermediate students offered suggestions for improvement, which should be introduced before the course (including more levels being available, and the size of groups being reconsidered) and during the course (such as pace and the amount of material covered). Moreover, both groups of respondents expressed their interest in attending hybrid classes, which would allow them to participate in classes and be up-to-date with the material covered in case of, for instance, an illness.

Older adult foreign language learners can find it difficult to do tasks that are based on remembering the last vocabulary item or a string of digits. Similarly, tasks that require retaining and processing information from STM in a given time, or that are related to the intentional retrieval of, for example, new vocabulary or an unfamiliar grammatical structure, can be much more challenging for late-life learners than for younger adults. Finally, complex tasks that include different actions to be performed simultaneously, such as a listening practice during which it is necessary to match the speakers and the answers in the course book or discuss and take notes in too short a period of time, can prove (to be) stressful and impossible to finish without additional help from the teacher or a change to the instructions. Therefore, using FL coursebooks that are usually aimed at younger adults and are not adapted to answer the specific needs of older learners should be rethought to ensure a better quality of teaching.

The results of both parts of the study have considerable classroom implications that should be taken into account by foreign language teachers. Firstly, the materials need to be adapted so that it is easy to use them, for instance: (1) the font and gaps for answers in the text need to be enlarged; (2) colours changed to the red-green spectrum, so that the learners can easily distinguish between them; (3) the background noise in the recordings that is often used for authenticity needs to be removed (if possible the dialogues could be recorded again), or (4) replaced by videos which allow the learners to see the lips of the interlocutors. Secondly, the classroom needs to be prepared for this age group: (1) good lighting in the classroom has to be ensured; (2) the equipment should be of good quality so that it can be loud enough (as highlighted by Sweetow (2009), 3-5 dB higher than in

case of younger listeners); (3) the seating has to be rearranged to prevent problems with movement, but also (4) to create optimum conditions for the learners to see the board, listen to the recordings, work in pairs, etc. Finally, foreign language educators need to be aware of various problems that older learners might encounter and in order to avoid them should pay additional attention to, among others: (1) their diction, so that they speak slowly and clearly (but avoid shouting); (2) always face the learners when talking; (3) introduce various listening techniques and strategies so that the learners can compensate for the lack of visual cues and aural disorders; and (4) show their understanding, patience and support. A good rapport and an awareness of the age-related changes that might affect the process of learning is vital to lower the level of FL anxiety and create a propitious learning environment. EFL courses should thus focus not only on the development of linguistic abilities, but also on the need to offer opportunities for socializing, and fostering emotional and social well-being, to strengthen a sense of community and connectedness, to improve autonomy and agency, and to promote positive ageing.

There are some limitations of this pilot study which should be addressed in the future. The data collection procedure should be refined by further triangulation, i.e. introducing interviews with the participants to clarify some of their answers, which will ensure a more in-depth analysis. The data collection tool (the 55 item-questionnaire) should be further tested and improved by adding the fifth option in the Likert-scale (“I don’t know”), which was not used on the assumption that with such a long survey it might cause confusion in OAs. Unclear statements need to be removed or rephrased. In the open-ended part, there should be questions related to other issues/aspects than emotions of anxiety experienced in the FL classroom. Also, a control group of other OA learners might be helpful in order to distinguish between the benefits of socializing, FL learning and learning a new skill in general (e.g. while attending IT or sport classes). Finally, a more reflexive approach to the thematic analysis of the data should be employed (as described by Braun/Clarke 2021).

## 11. Conclusions

Lifelong learning in later life has become an important part of the everyday lives of many older adults who decide to continue their education in their 60s, 70s and 80s. FLL, and EFL in particular, has become an active way of spending free time with peers, an opportunity to understand the linguistic

landscape and to communicate with family and friends from abroad, all of which, in turn, heighten the sense of belongingness. As a result, it not only allows older learners to improve their linguistic abilities, but it also heightens students' feeling of autonomy, agency and self-perceived well-being.

Therefore, the objectives of the FL courses at the U3As should be to provide OAs with a motivating and friendly learning environment, as well as with opportunities for the development of social networks, meaningful discussions with other motivated and likeminded people, and a way of filling in their spare time instead of merely acquiring a particular academic qualification, i.e. FL skills. This can only be achieved by challenging the existing ageist stereotypes, addressing the problem of age discrimination in education, and presenting old adulthood as the period of opportunity and not of general decline. In contrast, promoting positive ageing and placing high value on the OAs' vast learning and life experiences might improve their daily functioning and overall well-being.

As there is a strong correlation between teachers and their students' well-being, the role of educators is to improve OAs' FL skills, but this should be done by: answering students' particular learning needs, considering their current linguistic and cognitive abilities, following suggestions and learning preferences, and finally by creating an informal and non-threatening atmosphere. Well-being should thus, as recommended by Mercer et al. (2018), be seen as an important component of FL education, and a key skill vital for the lives of older students in this case both in and outside the class. In order to create such a friendly, cooperative and non-authoritarian environment, SWB has to be promoted and integrated into the aims of FLL, and needs to underpin the principles of FLG. In sum, an increased emotional and social well-being might positively affect third age learners' overall performance, as well as heightening their sense of connectedness, improving cooperation, agency, autonomy, and even their daily functioning and physical health.

The results of this study further highlight the value of continuing one's lifelong education in later years and the need for the promotion of inclusivity, active and positive ageing, as well as a non-discriminatory and informal FL education for older learners. Therefore, developing the awareness of older people's presence in society, together with their specific learning needs, abilities and preferences, should be of concern not only to FL educators, but also to researchers and language education policy makers.

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