THE OBSTACLES IN TEACHING ENGLISH FOR ELDERLY LEARNERS: A CASE STUDY IN SEWING GROUP

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Abstract: This study treated elderly learners in one of small village in Sragen Regency who joined the sewing group. In recent years, this sewing group has experienced very significant development. This could be seen from their participation in making bags and wallets, making Solo Batik Carnival clothing, and participating in the carnival fashion exhibition to commemorate Indonesia's Independence Day. Therefore, they took the initiative to learn English to face future challenges related to their sewing performance. In this case, this study was conducted to investigate several obstacles faced by elderly learners in learning English. The type of this study was a case study using three methods of collecting data, namely observation, interviews, and field notes. In this study, the researchers found that there are several obstacles experienced by elderly learners in learning English in class. Among these problems are lack of confidence, lack of learning motivation, nervous, psychological factors such as poor memory, response time, and failing eyesight.

Keywords: Elderly Learners, Learning English, Obstacles.

INTRODUCTION

In this era of globalization, interaction between individuals and other individuals throughout the world occurs to collaborate in the fields of economics, education and research, and culture. This is where English is used as the official language and the main language in international relations between countries. A language is designated as a global language when it plays a unique role that is acknowledged in every country on the earth. When people from different backgrounds or countries meet, they must converse using a specific language called a lingua franca. A lingua franca, according to Jenkins (2007), is a contact language used by people who do not speak that language as their first language, usually understood as the speaker's second (or subsequent) language.

English is one of the subjects covered in the Indonesian school curriculum. This lesson is presented by elementary, junior high, and senior high school teachers. Some schools even apply English language material in extracurricular activities. This is done by teachers to increase students' knowledge of English so that students can master in English. According to Sharma (2021), English skills are classified into four parts namely: writing, reading, listening, and speaking skills.

Nowadays, there are many practitioners who teach English skill in outsides. In this case, they are teaching English for elderly learners especially for elderly who work as a tailor. Apart from that, many products sold to the wider community also use English, whether in terms of title, ingredients, or how to prepare or use them. This indicates that English has blended into society. This means that it is important for all ages to understand English vocabulary which can make it easier for them to understand certain instructions that can help them carry out daily activities. Furthermore, learner difficulties include a lack of vocabulary knowledge, low concentration, a lack of discipline, student boredom, and speaking difficulty (Songbatumis, 2017).

Teaching English for elderly is a different case. There are many obstacles in teaching English instead of internal or external factor. According to Izquierdo (2011), neurons typically die as people age, which can lead to cognitive function loss, such as memory loss. According to Huang (2004), the elderly's learning obstacles include health issues, delayed movement, failing eyesight and hearing, and poor memory. Furthermore, Wolf (2009) claimed, based on extensive study, that there is growing evidence that older persons who are mentally stimulated suffer less decrease in memory and continuing development in linguistic knowledge well into their late seventies. Abrisqueta (2013) presents a general debate on memory and aging, addressing elements such as a decline in processing speed, lower resources in-memory processing, age-related inhibitory impairments, and deterioration in cognitive control. Lin (2002), on the other hand, claimed that learning barriers were created by a lack of confidence, believing oneself to be too old, a lack of learning motivation, quickly becoming worried or apprehensive, and psychological variables.

There are many reasons why elderly learners decide to learn English in their advanced age. For reasons, it is caused of curiosity about language itself and social factors (Pizzolatto, 1995). It means that they can learn English by socializing with other people at the same age. In this context, elderly students always meet in the same place called sewing group in Sragen. Based on to According to Purnawati (2019), every problem students encounter has a remedy; as indicated, students should study hard and practice speaking English. As previously noted, Kirk et al. (2015) suggest that drilling may only be a viable strategy for some students due to difficult-to-remember knowledge. According to Arifuddin (2010), various elements influence the development of English language learning, including age, talent, assumptions, features of cognition, motivation, self-confidence, and personality. Then there are the external elements, which include the linguistic context, learning strategy, teacher, and surroundings. Then, the researchers also found that there

are many obstacles for elderly age 45-50 years in sewing group to learn English. As a result, it becomes a challenge for an English teacher.

There are several reasons why researchers chose the topic of English elderly learners in this research. The first reason is the enthusiasm that the participants have. They are a sewing group who are very enthusiastic about participating in fashion events such as the Solo Batik Carnival and other fashion carnivals. Where it requires extensive communication with several cultures and even people abroad who consciously guide them. From these experiences, they should get what they want to know, namely learning English from zero in the hope that the fashion businesses they produce will develop further on the national or international stage, which can make it easier for them to communicate in a wider network. From there, researchers are very interested in investigating some obstacles faced by English elementary learners.

METHODOLOGY

This research employed qualitative research with a case study type. A case study is described as an in-depth, comprehensive research of a single social phenomenon that is carried out in great detail and relies on multiple data sources (Feagin, Orum, & Sjoberg, 2016). In this case, the researcher described some obstacles faced by the elderly learners in learning English. Participants of this research were twenty women aged 45-50 years. There are the most sources of information namely interviews, observations, and documents (Creswell, 2003). To collect the data, the researchers used observation and interviews. The observations are used to determine responses, obstacles, and challenges faced by early learners. In this case, the researchers use field notes to make it easier to process data. Apart from that, interviews were also used by researchers to find out learners' interests and motivation in learning English. The interview is an in-dept interview where researchers can ask in-depth questions about things during the English learning process such as what they complained about, obstacles, their interest in English, etc. The objectives of this study are the obstacles faced by easier learners. In analyzing the data, the researchers used three steps according to Miles and Huberman (1994) namely: collection, drawing conclusion, and verification.

FINDINGS AND DISCUSSION

Based on the final results of this study, the researcher founds some obstacles according to Lin (2002) and Huang (2004), Gass and Selinker 2008.

Lack of Confidence

Not all learners in this study feel a lack of confidence when learning English takes place. Only a few people were seen nervous and tended to be quiet during the English lesson. Based on the observation, someone feels nervous because they feel older than other friends who look smarter than themselves. Apart from that, several learners said that differences in educational background were also one of the causes of lack of self-confidence. This is in line with Lin (2002), learning difficulties are caused by a lack of confidence, believing oneself to be too old, a lack of learning motivation, quickly feeling apprehensive or anxious, and psychological issues. According to the interview result of the participant P.8.1 below.

> "Well, she graduated from high school, it's definitely different, sist. I only graduated from junior high school. That's all, before that there was no English subject".
>
> (Participant, P.8.1)

Participant P.8.1's answered that educational background really determines a person's intelligence in learning English. The higher the school, the easier it is to take English lessons. From the participant's answers, he believes that people who are senior high school graduates find it easier to adapt English lessons in the learning class than junior high school graduates.

Figure 1.Teaching and Learning Process

Although there were some of the learners looked less of confident, many elderly learners appear to have high motivation in learning English. This is proven by several things they do when learning English takes place. Some of them said their English vocabulary very loudly even though the pronunciation was wrong. Some of them took the initiative to save the vocabulary. And some of them also took the initiative to spread this knowledge to their families, such as their children, grandchildren or even their families.

This is also supported by participant P.13.1's answer when the teacher asked him at the end of the lesson about his opinion on learning English.

"At first I felt that English was complicated, complicated, difficult, a foreign language that I had never heard of, and it felt like it was impossible to learn it. So, I think English is only for smart people. But while studying, it turned out that my friends were also happy, paying attention and enthusiastic".

(Participant, P.13.1)

Participant P.13.1's answer indicated that the learners have different perceptions before and after learning English. At first, they thought that English was very scary. They said that English was a foreign language that was impossible to learn. This language could only be learned by smart people who were used to studying. However, in the end of the learning time they admitted that learning English could actually be learned by anyone of any age. And learning it isn't as scary as they think.

Apart from that, participant P.1.3 said something different at the end of the study:

"Don't throw away my paper, I will take this home, so that my son will be good at English, so he isn't like me".
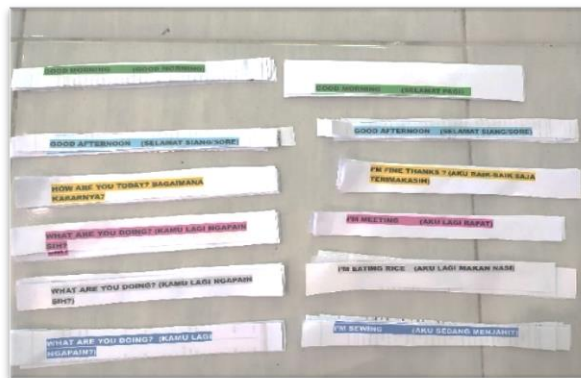
<div align="right">Participant, P.1.3</div>

This statement indicates that participant P.1.3 is very happy to gain new knowledge that he had never obtained before. This feeling of joy can be seen from the way he took the initiative to save the small English vocabulary words given by the teacher when teaching in class. She took the vocab and brought the material to her house so she could share knowledge with her son. Moreover, he also really hopes that his son will be able to master English so that he can become a smarter and better person in the future. The participant P.1.3 means having the idea that mastering English is one of the very important things that needs to be developed.

Psychological Factor

Psychological factors are those that come from within an individual. Aptitude, age disparities, personality traits, motivation, anxiety, and learning tactics all influence second language learning, according to Gass and Selinker (2008). In this case, it is very clear that age is a factor that greatly influences the success of a learning process. In this study, the researchers found that older people tend to find it more difficult to learn English in class. They seem pretty good at motivation. However, most of them seem to have difficulty attending English lessons. This is clearly seen when the teacher gives them English vocabularies and they easily forget it and find it difficult to remember. It takes quite a long time to memorize new English vocabularies and it also takes repetition until they really understand and memorize what they are learning.

Table 1. Vocabulary Used

List of Vocabularies Used:
Good morning
Good afternoon
How are you today?
I'm fine. Thanks.
What are you doing?
I'm meeting
I'm eating rice.
I'm sewing.

This is also supported by the interview script conducted by the participant. The participant P.1. 6 said that:

"Sist, I am too old, sist. It's really difficult to think about new vocabulary especially English vocabulary. So, I mainly think about family, my financial, cooking, children, husband, and many more, sist…".

<div align="right">Participant, P.1.6</div>

From this statement, it is known that age has a big influence on parents' thinking. Because they think many things, they have many responsibilities in their own life, such as: economic conditions, children's needs, husband's needs, etc. This finding is in accordance with Morford and Mayberry (2000) note "individuals exposed to language at earlier ages consistently outperform individuals exposed to language at earlier ages for first and second languages of both signed and spoken languages." That assertion implies that older learners will learn less efficiently and quickly than younger learners, particularly in language learning. This assumption holds that people perform well in language learning at a young age; the younger, the better.

Nervous and Anxious

Table 2. New Vocabularies Used
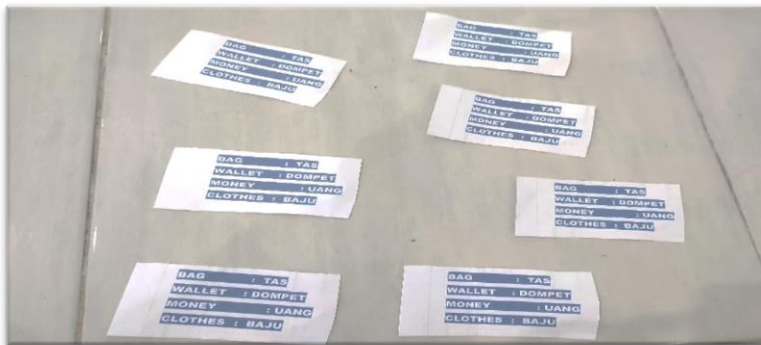
List of New Vocabularies Used:
Bag
Wallet
Money
Clothes

For some people, memorizing foreign vocabulary that has never been memorized is something that is not easy. This is also experienced by elderly learners. Some of them feel worried and nervous when faced with learning English. Even though the vocabulary provided is actually simple vocabulary that they usually see every day. This was also expressed by participant P.1.22:

> "I'm nervous, sist, because writing and speaking are different. So, I'm really afraid that I'll make a mistake".
>
> Participant, P.1.22

In this statement, participants felt inferior about the new vocabulary they encountered. Even though his vocabulary is very simple, his mindset says that it is something difficult. Apart from that, speaking in public/groups also makes him feel inferior. This can be seen from the participant P.1.16's answer below:

> "The other thing is that he is still underage, so he is smarter than me. I think it's normal, sis. Sometimes I get nervous when I have to talk in front of them".
>
> Participant, P.1.16

This is in accordance with Morandi (2002), one of the most common concerns of older learners is that they are forced to participate in groups with persons of varying ages. Learners frequently express embarrassment in front of younger individuals due to their challenges.

Poor Memory

Learning at an old age is something that is more difficult than learning at a young age. In this study, when the researchers observed the elderly learners, they seemed very enthusiastic. When the teacher tried to ask them to imitate the pronunciation of English vocab, they seemed to remember but only briefly and to repeat it they easily forget. This did not just happen on one occasion during the learning process, but it often happens naturally between them. At the second meeting at the beginning of the lesson, the teacher recalled the vocab material taught at the first meeting. There are some who still remember because they read, there are some people who spontaneously say the English vocabulary out loud. However, most of them seem to forget even though their curiosity is very high in learning English. This may be closely related to age. Older age tends to be an obstacle in learning English for English learners. This is in line with Izquierdo (2011), neurons naturally die as people age, which can result in cognitive function loss, such as memory loss.

Poor Eyesight

During the observation, the researcher saw that there was one person P.1.17 who tended to look at the vocabulary but she did not read it and mumbled.

"This is what writing says, it can't be read because I can't see it clearly".

Participant, P.1.17

After hearing that, the researchers asked the person whether she needed glasses to read. As the result, the person said that if she read, she had to wear glasses first and coincidentally she left his glasses at home. Therefore, she tended to be more passive in class compared to other friends. However, she was tried several times imitating what the teacher was pronouncing. The case of failing eyesight agrees with Huang (2004) that failing eyesight is one of obstacles to learn in the old age.

Discussion

The findings of this study reveal several significant obstacles that elderly learners face in learning English, corroborating previous research on adult language acquisition. The identified challenges include lack of confidence, psychological factors, nervousness and anxiety, poor memory, and poor eyesight. Each of these obstacles is examined in relation to existing literature, highlighting both the uniqueness of this case study and the broader applicability of its findings.

The lack of confidence observed in some participants aligns with Steadman (2021) findings, which indicate that self-doubt and a belief in being too old to learn new skills are common barriers among older adults. The participants' educational background also played a crucial role in their confidence levels, as noted by Participant P.8.1, who felt inferior due to having less formal education compared to peers. This phenomenon is supported by Ahmadi (2018), who emphasized that perceived educational inadequacy can significantly impact learning confidence. The hesitancy and quietness observed in some learners during class reflect a broader trend where older adults often struggle with self-esteem in educational settings.

Psychological factors, including age, motivation, and anxiety, were evident among the participants. The research of Mackenzie and Clifford (2020) underscores that age-related cognitive decline can impede language learning, as seen in this study where older learners had difficulty

retaining vocabulary. Participant P.1.6's admission of struggling with memory due to age-related responsibilities supports the notion that psychological stress and cognitive load are intertwined. This finding is consistent with Shi and Deng (2024), who asserted that younger individuals typically outperform older learners in language acquisition due to greater neuroplasticity and fewer life distractions.

Nervousness and anxiety were prevalent among the participants, particularly when faced with new vocabulary and public speaking. This aligns with Ellis (2015) findings that older learners often feel embarrassed and anxious in mixed-age groups, leading to performance anxiety. Participant P.1.22's expression of inferiority when encountering new vocabulary underscores the psychological barrier that anxiety poses in language learning. This observation is also supported by Bashori et al (2022), who noted that anxiety can hinder the acquisition of a second language by affecting memory and cognitive function.

Memory issues were a significant barrier for the participants, with many struggling to retain new vocabulary despite their enthusiasm. This aligns with Mackenzie and Clifford (2020) findings on age-related cognitive decline, where neuron loss contributes to reduced memory capacity. The recurrent forgetting of vocabulary noted in the observations parallels the broader understanding that aging affects the efficiency of learning new languages. The necessity for repeated exposure and practice highlights the need for tailored teaching strategies that accommodate memory challenges in older learners.

This study highlights the multifaceted obstacles that elderly learners face when learning English, confirming and extending the findings of previous research. The challenges of lack of confidence, psychological barriers, anxiety, memory issues, and poor eyesight are all significant factors that educators must consider when designing curricula and teaching strategies for older adults. By acknowledging and addressing these obstacles, educators can better support elderly learners in overcoming barriers and achieving success in their language learning endeavors. The insights from this case study contribute to a deeper understanding of adult education and provide practical implications for enhancing the effectiveness of English language programs for older adults.

CONCLUSION

This research reveals many obstacles in teaching English for elderly learners. There are some aspects of challenges including lack of confidence, physical factors, nervous, poor memory, and poor eyesight. Although, they experience several obstacles in learning English. However, they remain motivated to learn. This can be seen from their expressions, their solidarity when answering questions from the teacher. Their teamwork in memorizing vocabularies out loud, and their efforts in saving several vocabulary texts that they got from the teacher in the hope that they could use them to pass on their knowledge to their family. This research is still related to the various obstacles experienced by English elementary learners. The researchers hope that one day researchers can also contribute to writing articles related to the solutions provided to English elementary learners. In this way, problems related to the obstacles faced by old learners in learning English will be solved.

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