


1983

55 and Over: A Study of Success for the Senior Student

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55 AND OVER:

A STUDY OF SUCCESS

FOR THE SENIOR STUDENT

Kathleen Watson Quinby

Submitted in partial fulfillment of the
requirements for the Master of Arts in
Teaching degree at the School for Inter-
national Training, Brattleboro, Vermont.

August, 1983

ABSTRACT

The following paper is a report on a class that was taught to elderly Cambodian refugees in the Philippine Refugee Processing Center in 1981. It covers the development of the class from its inception to its final party for "graduation". There were many hurdles for the students to overcome in their learning. The strategies that were used to aid the students in overcoming these are discussed and described. Relevant curriculum, a supportive environment in the classroom, and achievable goals are the three key elements that are noted as necessary for success in such a class.

Kathleen Watson Quinby

TABLE OF CONTENTS

I.	Introduction	1
II.	Background	2
III.	The Impetus	3
IV.	The Support and Work Credits	5
V.	The Choice of Classroom	6
VI.	The Students	8
VII.	Student Hurdles	10
VIII.	Working Strategies	14
IX.	Format and Presentations	17
X.	Pace Versus Progress	19
XI.	The Interludes	22
XII.	The Conclusion	23
XIII.	In Summary	24
XIV.	Appendix A: 25 Hours of ESL	25
XV.	Appendix B: A Case for Extending ESL Training to the Elderly	27
XVI.	Endnotes	35
XVII.	Bibliography	37

"HOW OLD WOULD YOU BE
IF YOU DID NOT KNOW HOW OLD
YOU WAS ??"

Leroy "Satchel" Paige

INTRODUCTION

The following paper is a report on the development of a class for senior citizens that I had the opportunity to teach in 1981. What happened in that class was exhilarating. Academically, it dispelled the countless adages of old dogs and new tricks. And for me personally, it opened my eyes to what was happening psychosocially to the students in the class.

This study will attempt to follow the class from its inception to its finish in order to highlight the factors that brought the students past their fears and blocks to language learning and into experiencing success in the classroom. The impact of that success brought me to chronicle what happened during the class and to research the broader topic of "lifelong learning" (a catch-phrase in educational gerontology). The students in my English as a Second Language (ESL) class seemed to rediscover their vitality. They made the first steps towards reclaiming their concept of themselves as valuable human beings.

After summing up the report of the class that I taught, a case will be made for extending ESL training to elderly immigrants living in the United States.

BACKGROUND

In 1981, I was working as an ESL supervisor in the Philippine Refugee Processing Center in Bataan. In the camp, there were many elderly refugees who were over the age limit (60 years of age) for the ESL program. Some of these elderly had no family members with them, nor were any waiting to sponsor them in the States. They were entirely on their own.

One Cambodian woman, Khim Khon, was 68 years old. She had lost every person in her family to the war. When she was asked through an interpreter why she had not just stayed in Cambodia, why she was giving up everything that she had known to face the struggle of starting a new life, she had an immediate answer. She said clearly and vehemently in English, "Cambodia, no good!!" She, like so many of the elder refugees, had virtually no English, and little, if any, literacy skills in her native language. What she did have was sheer determination to survive.

I designed a class for twenty-five senior Cambodians that began on June 24, 1981, and ended six weeks later on August 5th. We met three times a week for an hour and a half each night for a total of 25 hours of English. Appendix A charts the language that was actually mastered by the students in that time.

THE IMPETUS

There were 17,000 refugees in the camp in 1981. And, amid the tidal wave of needs that were being met, the needs of this older group (which I will define as 60 and older) were passed over. The elders that did slip into classes with the younger students found themselves surrounded by classmates who were able to absorb patterns and sounds with a great deal more facility than they were. They could not keep up. With 25 or more other students in the class, the teachers were not able to individualize instruction to meet the needs of the one or two older students that might be in the class. And so it was that those people who were facing some of the most frightening and difficult futures - with all the problems of a refugee plus the dimension of advanced age in a youth-oriented society - were the people that the program was least able to help.

In a refugee resettlement publication, the following problem areas were identified as serious issues faced by elderly Indochinese refugees in the United States:

1. The changing attitude of the Indochinese youth (loss of traditional values).
2. Stress in American society on the development of the youth, and an apparent lack of respect for the aged.
3. Challenges or pressures being placed on the elders to give up their old values and adapt to the new American systems and values.
4. Changing roles:
 - a. No longer being responsible to preserve the culture.
 - b. A disappearance of the traditional role of advisor due to inappropriateness of their life experience to the new society.

- c. Lack of place (and money) in society (family break-up leaving them dependent on government services).
5. Personal concerns:
- a. Being placed in a nursing home.
 - b. Having no place to practice Buddhist worship.
 - c. Funeral arrangements.
6. Psychological factors:
- a. Loneliness.
 - b. Low self-worth and self-esteem.
 - c. Nostalgia and longing for home.
 - d. Unrealistic thinking and expectations about their daily lives and future.
 - e. Hopelessness and depression.

It was with these issues in mind that I decided to start a special class for the elderly. At that time, I had no great hopes for what would be accomplished linguistically in an ESL class for students of this age group. What I did hope to accomplish was to give the students, first and foremost, a positive experience with learning something new. Secondly, by learning something that was directly related to their future life, I hoped to inspire them to enter into that life with less timidity about exploring it further.

THE SUPPORT AND WORK CREDITS

There was a great deal of enthusiasm for the class right from the start from everyone in the camp. The administration helped to locate a free classroom, the refugee education leader helped to recruit the students, and various coordinators, teachers, and friends encouraged me with offers of support classes now and again for physical exercise, and, in keeping with the Cambodian spirit, interludes of dancing and singing.

Sokhum Sin, a Cambodian man on the Cultural Orientation staff at the camp, had lived in the United States for many years as a part of the Cambodian diplomatic corps. He agreed to conduct sessions for the class on expectations and on life in America.

For each hour that the students were to attend class it was arranged that they would receive a much-valued "work credit". These credits were necessary for the refugees to accumulate before they would be allowed to leave the camp for resettlement. Receiving work credits for their time in class gave the students a means for contributing to their own needs, or to the needs of their family in a very respectable and worthwhile manner. It gave them something to offer, proved their usefulness, and provided an initial spark of motivation for enrolling in the class.

THE CHOICE OF CLASSROOM

The first night of class was glorious chaos. I can barely say "hello" or "goodbye" in Khmer. And the tiny classroom, chosen for its closeness to the students' living quarters (billets), and its high visibility in the neighborhood (as well as for its lack of missing light bulbs) proved overwhelmingly attractive. EVERYBODY came. Had it not been for Channa Huot, a twenty-one year old daughter of one of the students, I would have been at a great loss to explain that indeed, the class, as it had been advertised, was just for the "grandparents" and that younger relatives were not going to be allowed to take "grandmother's" place in class because she was "too old to learn." Channa became my official translator and ally that night, and continued to be my excellent assistant.

The students were as varied in personality and background as they were in age. There were sisters, spouses, fathers and widows ranging in age from 55 to 72 years of age. But they had one common purpose and spirit which brought them together in that classroom that first night: it was a desire to be a part of what was happening around them, and to learn English and/or whatever they could about America before they departed from the camp. That motivational spirit was something I had assumed and that I was counting on. It was the necessity for that spirit that directly influenced my choice of location for the classroom.

The building was set in a cleared field in the middle of a neighborhood. It was, therefore, physically obvious when the elders were attending class. They could be seen walking to the class. They could be heard when they practiced during the class by their friends and relatives who hovered outside by the windows and doorway.

They could be heard calling their "good-nights" to their classmates as they made their way back through the billets after class. The neighborhood was keenly aware of the effort and the progress that the elders were making.

This awareness within the community was a delicate and yet cardinal element of the project's goals. In as much as the elders wanted to be taking part in the process that was changing their lives and their families, it was absolutely essential that their friends, family, and neighbors should at least be aware of what the elders were doing. Without the awareness, there would be no community support. Without that support, without that sharing in the pride, the class would be operating in a vacuum, which is hardly a medium for growth of any kind.

As it was, having the brightly lit classroom right in the middle of the neighborhood made it not only easily accessible to the students, but made it THE center of activity in the evening. Grandparents were escorted to and from the school. Younger neighbors who were studying during the day would stand outside the windows while we practiced, now and again calling in answers to their hesitant friends, joining in for both the choral drills and for the applause when someone in the class did something new or special on his/her own.

It was obvious that something of great interest was taking place at the school. And, it was not long before everyone knew why I came to the neighborhood in the evenings. New students enrolled every week. Elders from other neighborhoods found their way to the class. They wanted to join and to learn. They wanted to be a part of the group, part of whatever it was that was happening.

THE STUDENTS

The students were recruited from a neighborhood of Cambodians that had been scheduled into the Khmer Guided Placement Program. This program was an accelerated resettlement project that meant that the students would be placed in selected sites in the United States within a matter of weeks of entering the Processing Center in Bataan.

Of the twenty-four students who enrolled, eighteen of them were women. Most of them came from the country-side. Though a few of the students had attended school in Cambodia, only two of them were able to write Khmer. For the rest, holding a pencil or a piece of chalk was a completely new experience. During the first week of class, they were extremely shy about their clumsy attempts to draw the letters that composed their names, but they were also determined to complete writing them, no matter how long it took them.

Orally, their control of English was limited to "Hello," and "How are you?" Some could respond to "What is your name?" They were timid about speaking to me, and often the only answer I could elicit to any question was a bowed head and a giggle.

Though their eyesight was weak, and arthritis made sitting in the small desks uncomfortable, it was the deterioration of their teeth that affected the class the most. Lack of teeth made for very poor articulation. Their embarrassment over this was acute, and was something that I had to seriously take into account. Pronunciation was one of the first areas in which I made the choice to praise effort over mastery. By stressing intonation over pronunciation, I was able to give the students sincere positive reinforcement for whatever efforts they made to communicate in English. The success that they then experienced in expressing themselves to me built up their confidence in their abilities, and this had the long-run effect of improving their overall communication skills.

They were not pressed for precision or perfection when it was not in their purview. Their response to this was willingness to experiment with new sounds and words. It led to the strengthening of their trust in me; it was not long before they began to initiate conversation with me without the aid of the translator.

STUDENT HURDLES

"Student hurdles" for students over the age of sixty has a distinct definition. Their needs, though maybe not unique to the group, are certainly exaggerated. The hurdles that must be crossed, though similar to those of any other class, are compounded by disabilities as well as a fear of failing that is particular to students in their later years.¹ Declining eyesight and hearing, arthritis, and a slowing of the thinking process are all possible handicaps that elder students can bring to class with them. Additionally, the idea that learning is for the young is a psychological barrier that can keep elder students from reaching their full potential.

If health is maintained, I.Q. does not significantly change with age. This has been proven in longitudinal studies of students over a period of 20 years (Blum, Jarvik and Clark: 1970). Thus it is the misconception that age affects learning that can be a major factor in hindering students from achieving at age sixty as much as they could have at age twenty-five. If students maintain that they are "too old," their negative attitude can work as a self-fulfilling prophesy that will actually keep them from learning.

In an article titled "Aging: A Positive Growth Experience," Sister Rose Therese Bahr noted that "several needs should at least be partially satisfied if positive behaviors are to emerge from the aging individual".² She listed eight of their major psycho-social needs: positive self-concept, self-esteem, communication, belonging, independence, privacy, respect as a spiritual being, and loving and touching.³ Without meeting these needs, there is little chance for confidence to develop. With confidence and a positive self-image, elder students can overcome almost all of the physical disabilities that they may have to contend with and bring the full of their learning powers to the classroom.

In retrospect, I can see that most of those needs mentioned by Sister Therese, to one degree or another, were being met during the ESL class that I had in the Philippines. As the weeks went on, the students grew more confident in their abilities to complete tasks set before them. They became boisterous both physically and verbally. Students were cheered when they did something right. (They were also sometimes yanked to their seats by their neighbors if they did something in error!) They helped each other constantly. In many ways, they ran the class.

Each student was given individual attention and their accomplishments were measured only against their own previous work. Yam Lo Chan was able, after about three weeks of class, to copy her name on the board from an index card. For that, she was praised. And, though it had been embarrassingly difficult for her at first to make the connection between the symbols written on the card and her actual name, she soon was eager for me to "check" her work and would loudly proclaim across the classroom, "Teacher, come here!" so that I could see what she had done. She knew that she had progressed and she was proud of it.

The classroom was the private domain of the students. One of them was charged with keeping the key to its lock. Visitors were not allowed to enter during class time unless they were asked to "come in!" Students decorated the room; it was theirs in every sense. In as much as a four-walled classroom was an alien learning environment for them (many had never had any sort of formal schooling), the development of their sense of ownership of the classroom space helped them to feel at ease. I can see now that it was playing at least a partial role in meeting their needs of belonging, independence, and privacy.

There can be a variety of physical hurdles for students to overcome in any class. In terms of the elderly, Carol Kasworm has found that accommodations must be made in class for "potential losses of hearing, sight, kinesthetic sense, and motor coordination. Further, the time span of classroom activities should consider the diminishing energy levels of older adults."⁴

Strategies for overcoming such physical disadvantages were a high priority for me whenever I was making lesson plans and visual aids. I found that bigger sometimes can be better! The students eye problems were constantly brought to my attention. Eyeglasses were a scarce commodity. And, though distance from the blackboard in the small room was not much of a problem, glare from the florescent lights was. I partially solved that by drawing whatever figures I was using on both the extreme left and right of the board. (Though this may sound time consuming, it is important to realize that the pace of the class was deliberately unhurried.) Otherwise, visuals were always done on large white paper with heavy black ink.

Poor hearing acuity was one foreseen difficulty that I attempted to overcome through a teaching technique. It was easy enough, through exaggeration, to relieve a few of the visual problems of the students, but I could not imagine myself shouting out English in double digit decibles as a model of American communication. What I did find as a practical tool was to use a "trick" that I had picked up from the Silent Way: using silence as an active part of practice.

When I was modelling a new sound or phrase, I would pause after each of three models for a few seconds of silence, letting the sounds sink in. After the third model I would cue the group as a whole to repeat the utterance once. The students quickly saw the pattern to my procedure, and came to expect and even demand it. If I ever happened to forget the third model, it was invariably pointed out to me quite clearly that I had not followed the "rules." They were comfortable with known patterns; deviations from those patterns was cause for rebuke.

The response to this pattern of modelling was excellent. The sounds that the students produced were remarkably clear, and their recall of them was much better than I had anticipated. Three reasons come to mind that might explain this success.

First, it was a slow manner of modelling, paced by my perception of the students' ability to assimilate new material. It did not rush them. Secondly, it grabbed their attention. I would stand quietly in front of

the class giving the students time to collect themselves, and to gather the energy and mental concentration that they needed to override their physical disabilities. Occasionally, I would even have them take a long, deep breath before beginning to introduce a new item so that they would be fully calm and focused before they took their next "step". Thirdly, material introduced in this manner was non-threatening to them. They knew that they were going to hear the utterance three times and then would be asked to first respond in a large group. No one was ever put on the spot; no one was made to lose face. It was the effort alone that I was after, the effort that was "rewarded," and the effort that resulted in the students' success.

WORKING STRATEGIES

There were two prominent themes that played a part in every aspect of working with this class. The first was a presupposed respect for the adult minds of the students and their own knowledge of what was best for themselves. These students were over fifty-five years of age. They had learned a great many things in their lives, but little of that learning had taken place within the structure of a classroom. They were excited at the very idea of being in a class, and especially in one solely for students of their own age group. (And, it can not go without mention that the class was being taught by an American, which did, in that situation, have its measure of prestige.) This excitement manifested itself during the class in constant interaction among the students. In any other situation, this might be seen as less than adult classroom behavior. In this case, it was not only "allowed," it was relied upon.

The students discussed, in Khmer, the lesson's meaning, their teacher's actions, their physical discomforts, the daily news, and whatever else was on their minds. "Allowing" for this was part of what made the class work. It brought the students closer together. This closeness was very important for them because of the fact that learning directly from one another (versus learning from books) has traditionally been the Cambodian strategy for learning and sharing needed skills. By recognizing the students' ability and need to give the class its operating structure, however inefficient it may have seemed compared with customary classes, I gave them a means for exerting control, and showed them that I respected their needs, that I was willing to work with them according to their "rules."

Roger Hiemstra has found that learning is facilitated in older learners by actively involving them in the entire teaching/learning process. This includes, "assessing needs, planning content, securing resources, and involvement in implementation".⁵ In my own rough approximation of this in Bataan, it certainly played a significant role

in the students' efforts to assimilate the material and in their willingness to work when it was time to work. They felt respect; they gave respect. And it was upon that respect that trust was built. They knew that they were setting the pace, and as time went on, that their questions were welcomed, that review was available when they asked for it, and that vocabulary or phrases that they were interested in learning could be made part of the lesson.

In return, they tackled with enthusiasm any task that was given them to do whether it was as new and confusing as using a teletrainer (most of the students had never held a telephone before) or as complex as learning the American money system. They never balked. Before we would begin a new topic (such as health or giving directions) I would use Channa, the translator, to elicit from the students examples of what they might need to say in a particular situation. For example, they would tell me what they might say to the doctor, or what they might expect a caller to say on the telephone and how they might respond to that. This helped the students to focus on the task, and to realize the importance of learning the English that was associated with it. When they felt that what we were learning was something that they needed, they quickly assimilated that English into their vocabulary.

Judith Roumani confirms that "conclusions suggest that older people have no patience for apparently meaningless or irrelevant learning, while in significant learning, their results, given enough time, equal those of younger learners" (underlined in the original).⁶

The second of the themes was one that was realized only after being with the students for more than a week. It was that trying was succeeding. It developed quickly from a glimmer of a belief on my part into a strong affirmation. I had thought, initially, to focus the class on confidence building, and in my naivete, I had thought that that was a fairly straight forward task. It was not long before I realized just what it meant to meet that objective. Building self confidence meant that first, the students had to come to terms with their fear of failure.

Failure had an extremely special meaning to a group such as these elderly refugees who had lost most, if not all, of the things and the people who were most important to them. Most precious of all, they had lost their self-esteem. In class, that self-esteem was once more at stake. Fear of failure, of losing face, was playing an active role in their learning process. It significantly affected the way in which I worked with them in class.

Roumani agrees that "among the elderly, the desire for success is often outweighed by fear of failure"⁷ (emphasis in the original). The physical disabilities, though acute, became only a minor concern; once recognized, they could be dealt with on a physical plane. It was the dread of taking risks that was the terrifying hidden hurdle for these students. To ask them to make the effort and take the risk was asking them to face one of their greatest fears. Whenever they did that, in whatever size, shape or form that it took, that was something very, very special. For them to respond to "What is your ID number?", to take chalk in their own hands and face the black board, not to mention attempting to write their names, these were things worthy of the highest praise and warm, positive reinforcement. And that is what they got - from peers, from their teacher, and often with cheers from the ever-observant "Glee Club" in the darkness beyond the doorway.

FORMAT AND PRESENTATIONS

The overall format for the class was fairly traditional: warm-up, review, introduction, practice, and wrap-up. It was the allotment of available time that was somewhat deviant from standard procedure. Warm-up was extensive. Review spiraled throughout each lesson. Introductions were kept short and simple. Practice was done through a variety of very brief exercises and then one major hands-on task. Wrap-up began with some sort of physical body movements (Total Physical Response review, or simple stretching) and a condensed review of the night's material. The actual time that was spent on working with new items was probably about forty minutes out of a ninety-minute class. It was as if to take three steps in one night, we first had to move back two. To progress in any other fashion was to waste precious time and energy.

Items to be presented were chosen for their ability to be seen, touched, or acted out. When something was introduced, it was introduced using as many of the senses as was at all possible. Sounds were first silently shown with exaggerated mouth formations. For example, the sound of "ch" was first introduced by miming a sneeze. Actions were accompanied by body movements. "Come" was motioned with the hand. "Need" was with both hands over the heart. Feelings and sensations were dramatized first with facial expressions and tones of voice. My interpreter would help me by translating what the students were verbalizing in Khmer about my actions. For example, I would mime "crying" and Channa, the translator would tell me, "They say you are sad." From then on, that particular facial expression would be used to elicit the English word "sad" from the students. Negative statements were always accompanied by a shaking of the head.

Such actions and exaggerations during the introductions were used in hopes that the students could use them as mnemonics devices. The students were nearly all non-literate and had to rely completely on

their memory to retain new material. My idea was that if they could attach the new input to something that they were already very familiar with and/or some physical movement, then the chances of retaining that material were much better. For the limited material that we covered, this seemed to prove true.

In keeping with that assumption, much of the practice time was spent working with Total Physical Response (TPR) techniques. There was a triple value in using this. It seemed to help the students to remember, it gave me an observable measure of what they understood, and it helped to provide a light informal atmosphere that the students responded to with alacrity.

An example of this comes from the evening that we were working on "can" and "cannot". It was not clear to me if the students were merely mimicking my actions or if they really understood the meaningful difference between "I can see", and "I cannot see." Through Channa, I asked them to demonstrate to me the difference. Sok Sen, who had one rare pair of glasses held together with rubber bands and paper clips, took off the glasses, and said, "I cannot see!" At that point, Yin Chheng stood up and said, "I can see." Then he picked up the tattered glasses, put them on, and said, "I cannot see. Glasses no good," while he mimed bumping into the desks around the classroom. The class roared; there was no doubt that everyone understood.

The atmosphere was relaxed; the format was informal. We took a lot of time warming up and reviewed whenever there was the slightest uncertainty as to what we had covered already. And we never practiced to perfection. I depended heavily on the supposition that if the students felt that they were making some sort of headway, that they would be willing to try again, and in that trying, they would reach the limits of their capabilities. The better they felt about themselves, the better they would actually become.

Carol Kasworm supports this proposition. She writes, "Education for older adults should not be oriented to precision, task-demanding, production model learning. Although learning outcomes are of importance for older learners, there should be far greater emphasis on the environment, the process, and the association of the learning activities to self-esteem."⁸

PACE VERSUS PROGRESS

Initially, in teaching the class, the most obvious difference for me was the pace. It was different, and yet the same, for the goal of good pacing is to go as rapidly and smoothly as the students can effectively go. The students had a pace; I had to meet it, and for me that meant even physically slowing down my movements. If I moved too quickly from one visual cue to another, some of the students would give a response as if I had not moved from the first cue, others would not respond at all. I found that if I placed the cues far apart around the room and physically moved from one to another, giving the students time to make the mental change that they needed, then the responses were more accurate.

In researching this observation, I found that "one of the most clearly established phenomena of aging is the tendency toward slowness of perceptual, motor, and cognitive process."⁹ The students in my class in the refugee camp clearly demonstrated this to me. It was better to review something than to forge ahead at a fast pace if time were ever a factor. It seemed to confuse the students tremendously if I had to reintroduce something because the first introduction had been rushed or unclear. I found that time was not in any way wasted if I paused between activities and carefully checked not only my lesson plan, but the amount of remaining time and the pulse or energy level of the class.

Rapid drills were disastrous with these students. What worked well was to first establish clear meaning of the words that were to be practiced and then actively practice them in a variety of ways. In a study done by Robert Calhoun and Beverly Gounard on paired-word association with the elderly, it was shown that "optimal performance occurred when meaningfulness was increased, pacing was controlled by the learner, and repeated practice trials were given".¹⁰

Having the students take the role of the teacher in our class was very successful. I would, for example, give the pointer to one of them and have them come to the front of the room and lead the class in a drill. Having the students lead the class increased their personal self-esteem and self-confidence, and put control of the pace entirely in the hands of the students. It took the central focus off of me, freeing me to pay closer attention to the students' performance. And, it was entertaining (this by no means being the least of its merits).

Working in a variety of small groups (from pairs to groups of five) was also successful with the students. Their abilities with the language were quite varied, as were their rates of acquisition. By working in small groups, many of these disparities were allayed as students helped students work out difficulties on a one-to-one basis. We were able to move through some very complex material (such as the American money system) in a relatively short period of time by working in small groups.

Another manner of practice that proved popular with the students was role playing. The time involved in setting up the role play, in making both the language and the situation meaningful, was extensive -- sometimes, as with the telephone role play, as much as two nights. Plus, for these students to actually move into position to act out their parts took time. But the results were outstanding. The students were enthusiastic and creative with the language. It was clear that they could see the value in what they were learning and through their use of the language it was obvious that they had internalized what they had practiced.

I would rather say it was more the relative progress of the class that was slow than the pace. Steps forward were minute compared with classes of younger students and made only after tremendous investment in terms of time and student risk. Time was given, during exercises and in transitions, for the students to mentally process the material being worked on. Care was taken to insure clarity of meaning, and to

insure that students felt secure in what they were doing. A great deal of warm-up time was spent in readying the students for the language situation we would be dealing with later in the lesson.

Hiemstra has also found the "groundwork" stage to be critical. He writes, "In a two or three-hour session, as much as one hour might be invested in the preparatory stage....(T)he commitment toward, and the feeling of ownership for the subsequent learning builds meaningfulness into subsequent activities that more than makes up for any 'lost' time".¹¹ The students moved slowly, but steadily, and as their confidence grew, their joy in learning made the hours fly.

THE INTERLUDES

There was more to the class than ESL. There were regular weekly sessions with a co-worker, Elaine Himmelfarb, who led the class in simple exercises. She would have the students stretch and bend and breathe deeply. She had students come to the front of the group to be leaders. Her sessions grew more and more uproarious as the students grew to trust her, and they were delighted whenever she came to class.

Will Prior was also a regular guest. He brought with him his ukelele and taught the students the words and movements to "Ballin' the Jack" ("First you put your two knees close up tight..."). The neighborhood observers watching us went wild. During the final party at the end of the six weeks, the students brought in cassette tapes of Cambodian music and immediately began to dance to them. My translator was astounded. "They have never danced together like this," she said. "Only in this class!!" It was, apparently, a breakthrough.

The sessions with Sokhum Sin, the cultural orientation advisor, were taken very seriously. They were conducted entirely in Khmer, and I can only say that they were lively, emotional discussions concerning the family, living conditions in America, and such issues as funeral arrangements. The intensity of the sessions left me with no doubt as to the importance of such opportunities to voice the special concerns that the students as a group had.

THE CONCLUSION

What began in uncomfortable awkwardness ended in dancing. The students were awarded certificates of attendance for their participation after the final class, and a "graduation party" to end all graduation parties ensued. There was not a shadow of inhibition to be seen or heard as the students celebrated not only their class, but themselves. We laughed until tears were streaming down our faces. We exchanged addresses in the United States. Khim Khon was leaving for Chicago; Sok Sen for Little Rock. Yam Lo Chan handed me a piece of paper with her name printed across it. I asked Channa if Yam Lo Chan knew where she was going. "She doesn't know yet," Channa replied. "But she says if you give her your phone number, she will call you when she arrives!"

I could not help but think that evening what a change had come over the students in such a short period of time. They were fully in charge that evening. Six weeks before they had been painfully timid about even speaking their own name out louder than a whisper. They had sat stiffly in their desks with their heads bowed. Now, they were calling me to come to dance with them. "Teacher, come here!" I was the one being dragged to my feet. I could only hope that they could carry that spirit with them to their new homes.

IN SUMMARY

I have tried for many months to come to some conclusions about just what it was that made the class successful. The fears and blocks to language learning that these students had were enormous. They had every excuse not to learn, and yet they did. They learned a little about English, a little about America, and a great deal about their own still vibrant potential.

Three key elements can be isolated that led to the students' success. The first is that they valued the material that we were studying. They knew it was very important for their new life. Secondly, a supportive environment was established. Family, friends, peers, and I, as their teacher, provided psychological and social buffers from the anxieties the students had of losing face in their effort to improve themselves. Thirdly, they found that they were able to achieve their goals and that learning was not restricted by age. This realization allowed them to concentrate their efforts on the tasks at hand and achieve whatever measure of success that they were capable of. It brought them passed their fears and into the world of learning.

APPENDIX

.25 HOURS OF ESLSTRUCTURE:

Subject/verb/complement

Examples: I am cold.

I need help.

I can walk.

PRONOUNS:

she, he, I, you, my, your, his, her

VERBS:can, need, take, give, walk, write, speak, see,
hear, come, go, spell, be(am, is).NEGATION:

Examples: I am not Vietnamese.

I cannot see.

GREETINGS:

Good morning

afternoon

evening

bye

night

How are you?.....Fine, thanks.

Come in!

VOCABULARY:

colors

numbers (counting in time and money)

chalk/pen/pencil

book/notebook

days of the week (Monday - Sunday)

body parts

man/woman

month/year

25 HOURS OF ESL

home/school/store/work

floor/door/wall/window/chair

glasses

good

here/not here

quiet

Thank you.....You're welcome

family members (son, daughter, husband, etc.)

address/age/birth

SIGN RECOGNITION: MEN/LADIES, IN/OUT, ON/OFF, OPEN, PUSH/PULL

SURVIVAL SKILLS: Use of the telephone
Clarifications (Please repeat; I don't understand, etc.)
Directions (left, right, up, down, etc.)
Apologies (I'm sorry.....It's okay.)

A CASE FOR EXTENDING ESL TRAINING TO THE ELDERLY

"Unfortunately, many people believe that older immigrants have no need for English language skills because of their insulation within close-knit ethnic communities. Yet researchers and social workers from Hispanic and Asian American communities argue against (that)... (M)ost older foreign language speakers live alone, are financially independent of their children, and must interact with the English speaking culture every day."¹² Yet, "most institutions which provide educational programs for persons over 60 disregard the minority elderly and language skills."¹³

Priorities in the United States do favor the young. This makes life particularly miserable for senior citizens from Indochina. One Cambodian woman in Boston told her family that she would prefer to be starving at the hands of the communists than living life as she must in America. Pho Bau Long, the Senior Cross-Cultural Advisor at the Center for Applied Linguistics pointed out that "the refugees are euphoric in the camps. But once they settle into American society, that euphoria dies. The elderly realize that even though they left their country for the sole reason of being with their family, their children soon go away from them. They get jobs, and they become very involved with their new personal struggles in America. They don't have time for the old people."¹⁴

The isolation that this creates has led to some very unusual behavior. In Boston, five grandmothers have left their homes and moved in together. Said a caseworker I interviewed there, "They ran away from home. The first family had no idea where their grandmother had gone to for about four days." The desire for companionship in this case outweighed even the strong traditions of family ties and duties. Said the case worker, "One family was very upset. They lost their babysitter."

There are quantities of materials and programs for the elderly from the white middle class sector of society. They have banded together to form the Gray Panthers. Educational institutions have opened their doors to them in the form of Elder Hostels which offer free classes to students over the age of 65. Senior Volunteer Programs have been designed to put the skills and knowledge of retired people to use again.

But only recently has the Administration on Aging (A.O.A.) begun the work of extending such services and support to minorities. Sean Sweeney, the Director of A.O.A. stated that, "The Administration on Aging recognizes that the base of knowledge concerning minority aging has lagged measurably behind other fields of gerontology both quantitatively and qualitatively."¹⁵ He added that, "...neither the A.O.A. nor institutions of higher education and training have responded adequately to the needs of racial and ethnic minority communities (Asian American, Blacks, Hispanics, and Native Americans.)"¹⁶ As a result, beginning in 1977, "specific criteria measuring the institution's resources and commitment to minority aging concerns were made a substantial part of the evaluation of gerontology program applications under both Title IV A and Title IV E programs."¹⁷

It is possible for elder non-native students to learn the skills that they need to survive. These skills include learning to speak English. Thav Sort, one of my Cambodian students from the Phillipines, wrote (through an interpreter) that she needs very much to learn more English, and that she is "trying to learn with the help of a friend". She said that she wants to "talk with Americans.... I would shop at stores and supermarkets if I could speak English," she wrote. "And I would like to read more."

ESL classes can provide not only a means for the non-English speaking elderly to begin to manage their own affairs such as shopping, but can also serve to meet their psycho-social needs. Learning something that is directly related to their life situations, and

taking firm positive steps toward making those lives more meaningful and fulfilling can only work to improve their self-concept. And, as Bahr noted, "the attitude one holds toward oneself is a key in the manner one relates to others. Those who believe that they have self-worth treat themselves with dignity and respect, have a positive outlook on life, and thus become the fully functioning person they imagine themselves to be."¹⁸

English in and of itself is not the answer to every issue faced by elderly immigrants. But it can be used as a forum for discussion of topics that are of concern to them. It can provide an important opportunity for them to socialize and to belong to a group. It can give them the skills to function independently in the English-speaking environment in which they live. English is not a panacea, but it can be a vital instrument in the effort to reach the human goal of self-actualization.

The pages that follow chart the problems, and the suggested solutions to those problems, that need to be considered when planning a class for elder students. The charts represent ideas culled from a great variety of resources: articles from journals, newspapers, and magazines; Educational Resources Information Center studies; medical texts; interviews with teachers who work with the elderly; and my own personal experience.

HURDLES TO FORMAL CLASSROOM LANGUAGE LEARNING FOR OLDER ADULTS

<u>Physiological</u>	<u>Psychological</u>	<u>Organizational</u>	<u>Motivational</u>	<u>Other</u>
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> -visual -auditory -fatigue -susceptibility to glare -reduced color sensitivity -hypertension -decrease in noise level tolerance -slowness in movement -slowness in cognition -increased susceptibility to general illness (colds, flu, etc.) -decrease in amount of material able to store at one time in memory -low threshold of stimulus overload 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> -self-confidence is low -stress is high -fear of falling is high -anxiety in a mixed age-level class (dignity at stake) -uncomfortable with a young teacher -distrust of change -need for relevant material in order to associate meaning 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> -do not use efficient learning strategies -do not use: mnemonics mediators associations -have greater difficulty with complex tasks -unable to focus on one subject while screening others 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> -fear that the language is hard to learn (psychological distance) -distrust or dislike of the people or culture that speak the language (social distance) -interested in "other-than-academic" objectives 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> -money -lack of transportation -dislike of night classes -educational background -lack of knowledge of available class -literacy

SUGGESTED SOLUTIONS

<u>Psychological</u>	<u>Psychological</u>	<u>Organizational</u>	<u>Motivational</u>	<u>Other</u>
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> -Provide: comfortable chairs bright lights (watch glare) good acoustics comfortable temperature -stretch occasionally -use deep breathing to relax, regain focus -eliminate extraneous noises -limit material in one unit -allow for self-pacing -give EXTRA TIME -make provisions for disabled 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> -provide supportive atmosphere -give early success -do not focus on tests -use group work -respect past experience and adult dignity -use frequent praise -provide an older teacher -use clearly obtainable, short-term goals -give over control of teaching/learning process to students -increase relevancy to students' lives -allow for self-pacing, student-centered approach, and individual instruction -take consultant role: facilitate student interaction after establishing content meaning -increase warm-up time and investment time 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> -teach organizational skills -encourage associations -provide direction for approaching assigned tasks (how to begin) -use deductive reasoning to introduce new material -simplify units of a task; decrease complexity -allow for TIME for students to organize -repeat frequently and at spaced intervals -make use of verbal/visual associations -increase relevancy and meaningfulness 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> -use translators to discuss target culture, questions and problems/difficulties students are having -introduce special teachers and friends to expose students to different native speakers -provide non-linguistic, interpersonal objectives, tap personal interests, goals, skills, for curriculum 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> -provide materials free for students -locate near a bus stop -schedule hours in the day for class (no night classes) -check for literacy -use personal contacts to advertise the class

Summary of Recommendations

Roger Hiemstra:

1. Physical conditions (lighting, temperature, seating, acoustics) should be the best possible for older learners.
2. Define individual needs and abilities in terms of prior education, sex, how long since the student has had structured education, previous exposure to foreign languages.
3. Individualize teaching as far as possible. Some older learners may succeed with younger students; others may need a separate class.
4. Make material relevant to older learners, i.e. eliminate material dealing with life of young students, and substitute material drawn from their own lives.
5. Diminish emphasis on speed. Provide opportunity for self-pacing.
6. Define attainable short-term goals in terms of a "contract".
7. Break material down (and study periods) into short units for better concentration.
8. To facilitate memorization, present materials both verbally and visually. Allow time for absorption into long-term memory.

9. Integrate new material into previously existing structures of knowledge.
 10. Without lessening responsibility for material, reduce anxieties and insecurity through consciousness of role as counselor.
 11. Be sensitive and alert to potential difficulties.
-

Suggested techniques:

1. Small groups (10) facing each other.
2. Visual stimulus combined with sound stimulus.
3. Use a variety of review strategies often.
4. Involve learners in organizing content material.
5. Use concrete stimuli - but ones that reduce discriminability.
6. Avoid competition and complexity.¹⁹

Suggestions from Carol Kasworm

taken from:

"Old dogs, children, and watermelon wine"

1. Believe that old age does not stop learning.
2. Understand and accept the aging process as a natural adaptation in the life cycle.
3. Provide a warm supportive relationship.
4. View the classroom as a means to interact, learn, and grow in both content and in life transition.
5. Believe that older adults are competent and a rich resource for learning and teaching.
6. Construct an environment that maximizes their success in both introduction of learning content, and in diminished hearing, eyesight, kinesthetic sense and lower energy levels.
7. Remember that illiteracy can be a problem of the elderly and therefore do not use the blackboard unless it is appropriate.
8. Do not assume that elders learn in concert.
9. Promote self-paced learning.
10. Give positive feedback.
11. Continue to learn from them.²⁰

END NOTES

- 1 Elizabeth Joiner, The Foreign Language Learner (Washington D.C., Center for Applied Linguistics, 1981), p.17.
- 2 Rose Therese Bahr, "Aging: A Positive Growth Experience," Educational Horizons, 56 (Summer, 1978), p. 174.
- 3 Ibid., p.174.
- 4 Carol Kasworm, "Old dogs, children and watermelon wine," Educational Horizons 56 (Summer 1978), p. 201.
- 5 Roger Hiemstra, Preparing Human Service Practitioners to Teach Older Adults (Columbus, Ohio; ERIC Clearinghouse on Adult, Career and Vocational Education, ED193 529, 1980), p.6.
- 6 Judith Roumani, Foreign Language Learning for Older Learners: Problems and Approaches (Washington D.C., U.S. Peace Corps, ED 192 627, 1978), p. 2.
- 7 Ibid., p. 5.
- 8 Kasworm, p. 207.
- 9 James E. Birren and V. Jayne Renner, Handbook of the Psychology of Aging (New York, Van Nostrand Reinhold Company, 1977), p. 28.
- 10 Robert Calhoun and Beverly Gounard, "Meaningfulness, presentation rate, list length and age in elderly adults paired-association learning," Educational Gerontology 4 (Jan., 1979), p. 50.
- 11 Hiemstra, p. 12.
- 12 Melissa Spore, Extending Basic Education to the Elderly: A Guide to Program Development (Albany, N.Y., New York State Education Dept., ED 207 639, 1981), p. 1.
- 13 Ibid., p. 1.
- 14 Pho Bau Long, personal interview, May 5, 1982.
- 15 Sean Sweeney, "New Directions for the Administration on Aging Education and Training Programs," Educational Gerontology 5 (Jan., 1980), p. 95.
- 16 Ibid., p. 95.
- 17 Sweeney, p. 95.

- 18 Bahr, p. 174.
- 19 Hiemstra, p. 17.
- 20 Kasworm, p. 209.

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