

Re-envisioning English Foundational Education for Beginners: A Lifelong Education Perspective

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Abstract

Under the widespread dissemination of lifelong education, the definition of English “beginners” in China has undergone significant transformation. This study aims to reaffirm the concept of “all-age English learners,” asserting that individuals at any stage of life can be legitimate recipients of foundational English education. Through an in-depth analysis of current English courses, educational programs, and digital learning platforms (such as Douyin) utilized by elderly English beginners in China, this paper identifies three key findings: (1) Senior learners exhibit notable cognitive resilience when engaging with context-specific content; (2) Technological tools effectively reduce the psychological barriers faced by Senior learners; and (3) The current educational assessment system exhibits implicit age-related bias.

Keywords: all-age English learners, English beginners, elderly English beginners, English foundational education, lifelong education.

Introduction

With the global popularization of lifelong education and the continuous advancement of the “lifelong learning for all” policy in China [Li Jun, Li Jian 2019:196–220], the audience boundaries of language education in China have gradually been broken. In the traditional English education system, the definition of “beginner” has long been confined to children and teenagers. Adults,

especially the elderly, are often labeled as “those with declining learning abilities” or even “seeking attention”, thus remaining outside the coverage of basic English education resources. However, with the continuous economic growth and social progress, the problem of population aging has swept the world [Eggleston, Fuchs 2012: 137–156]. Currently, the demand for English learning among the elderly in China is showing a diversified growth: there are not only the daily communication needs of visiting relatives across countries and traveling overseas, but also the spiritual needs of obtaining international health information and participating in cross-border cultural activities through English [Weng, Liping 2016: 5171–73]. Meanwhile, the popularization of digital technology has made platforms such as Douyin and Wechat important channels for the elderly beginners to get in touch with English learning. The traditional “age-limited” definition of beginners can no longer meet the current needs. Reconstructing the connotation of English beginners and incorporating them into the all-age group has become an important proposition in the current field of English education.

Based on this, the core objective of this study is to propose the concept of “all-age English learners” based on the theories of population aging and lifelong education in China, breaking the traditional definition of English beginners by age boundaries. By systematically analyzing the educational practice cases of elderly English beginners, the learning characteristics and existing problems of the elderly group in different educational scenarios are revealed.

Methods

This study adopts the case analysis method and interview method in qualitative research methods. Firstly, three typical scenarios of elderly English education are selected as research

cases: the first is the offline community language education project (Jilin Province, China), the second is the English courses specially designed for the elderly (including offline training courses and online courses), and the third is the digital learning platform (with Douyin as the core, three elderly English teaching accounts with more than 10,000 followers were selected). Through classroom observation, in-depth interviews were conducted with learners (one for each learning scenario, totaling three), English teacher (2) to explore the teaching characteristics and existing problems in different scenarios.

Results

The cognitive resilience of elderly English beginners

Case analysis shows that in areas such as short-term memory, vocabulary acquisition, and rapid cognitive processing, when teaching is based on familiar scenarios for elderly learners, they exhibit significant cognitive resilience. In community-based and offline courses, Aunt Li, a participant interviewed, pointed out that when learning content related to real-life needs, such as “Travel English” and “health-related terms”, it is easier to remember. For example, expressions like “take medicine” and “blood pressure” will be easier to understand if learners relate them to personal experiences, such as taking prescription drugs or having a physical examination. Among the selected Chinese Douyin English teaching video accounts, the average participation rate of videos with the theme of “travel scene dialogue” was 18.5% (18.5/100 min), significantly higher than that of videos with the theme of abstract grammar explanation, which was 6.5% (6.5/100 min). In addition, phrases like “This sentence can be used abroad” and “Save it for the next trip” often appear in the comment section, demonstrating strong practical significance. Further analysis indicates that this cognitive resilience stems

from empirical association — the process of linking new language input with previous life experiences and current real-world demands. This mechanism compensates for the age-related decline in processing speed and supports an active learning cycle driven by needs, personal experience and continuous participation.

The effect of technology empowerment

The daily application of digital learning platforms and digital technologies in courses has effectively alleviated the “English anxiety” and “technology fear” of elderly learners. For instance, on Douyin, elderly English beginner uncle Wang indicated that designs such as “word games” and “animated demonstrations” “make English learning less boring”. Besides, the average viewing completion rate of videos such as “picture word guessing” (for example, showing a picture of an airplane and guessing “airplane”) reached 92.3%. Significantly higher than the traditional “read aloud” videos (68.5%); Some community courses have introduced “wechat check-in” tools and set up functions such as “10 words a day” and “Friend PK”. Uncle Wang said, “*The sign-in mechanism enables them to keep learning.*” In addition, the design of elderly-friendly technologies (such as “large subtitles” and “slow speaking speed” on Douyin accounts) has lowered the threshold for use. Uncle Wang also said, “*I don’t need children’s help and can operate it by myself.*” However, it was also found that 33.3% learners still have problems such as “not knowing how to search for specific courses” and “worrying about data consumption”, and are still unable to make full use of the existing digital resources at present.

The implicit discrimination in the current assessment system

The main research objects of current English teaching are still mostly concentrated on the young learner group, and there is also

an implicit “age discrimination in education” in the current English education assessment[]: On the one hand, the assessment indicators are solely focused on “language ability”. For instance, in community activities, the final assessment of courses mainly consists of “reciting 10 words+1 dialogue” and “written tests on vocabulary and grammar”. Key abilities of elderly learners such as “digital tool usage ability” (such as whether they can independently search for learning resources) and “psychological adaptability” (such as whether they are willing to speak up in actual scenarios) have not been included. On the other hand, the assessment criteria imply “age-related requirements”, such as the speed requirement of “completing 50 vocabulary questions within 30 minutes”, ignoring the characteristics of elderly learners that they “think more carefully and answer questions more slowly”, resulting in 66.7% of the learners stating that “the assessment results do not reflect their actual level”. 33.3% of the learners felt frustrated and even gave up learning due to “failing the assessment”. Furthermore, there is a lack of recognition mechanisms for the English learning achievements of the elderly beginners at the community and social levels. For instance, learning certificates are only issued by institutions or communities and are not linked to public services (such as cross-border travel facilitation), which further weakens their motivation to learn.

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