THIRD AGE ADULT ENGLISH LANGUAGE LEARNERS IN NONFORMAL LIBRARY SETTINGS

by

Mary Anne Cassell

A Dissertation Submitted to the Faculty of

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This dissertation was prepared under the direction of the candidate's dissertation advisor, Dr. Valerie C. Bryan, Department of Educational Leadership & Research Methodology, and has been approved by the members of her supervisory committee. It was submitted to the faculty of the College of Education and was accepted in partial fulfillment of the requirements for the degree of Doctor of Philosophy.

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ABSTRACT

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There is little research-based and theoretical literature about adult education or English literacy classes in nonformal settings such as library literacy programs in the community (Mathews-Aydinli, 2008; McCook & Barber, 2002b). The purpose of this phenomenological case study was to explore the motivation, learning supports, learning barriers, and program change recommendations of Third Age Learners in a nonformal library ESOL setting. This study provides insight into the demographic variable of linguistically-isolated Third Age English Language Learners (ELLs) participating in a library conversationally-based ESOL program. The results can guide libraries offering services, as well as those considering offering services to these customers (American Library Association [ALA], 2008a).

Data collected included in-depth, face-to-face interviews, classroom observations, documents, learner and teacher essays, researcher journals, and analytic memos. The researcher coded all data with NVivo 8 qualitative software then half of the data was

coded with Atlas-TI 5 software by a second coder. A thematic analysis was completed in order to triangulate the data. The purposeful sample consisted of 21 participants at a Florida library adult ESOL program which included 11 learners and 10 teachers. The 11 learners were selected based on their ethnic background, predominantly those of Hispanic background.

Eight learner findings and four teacher-perceived findings were identified in this study. The learner findings included: (a) to understand people at work; (b) to find or expand employment; (c) to practice conversation, pronunciation, listening, grammar and language rules; (d) to meet and get to know people; (e) assiduous teaching; (f) self-directed learning strategies support second language learning success; (g) more publicity, more classes, tutoring, language learning labs, study skills classes, and classroom management training; and (h) lack of family/community support and opportunities to practice English. Teacher-perceived findings mirrored learner findings (a) through (f) and (h), and included: (a) to increase teacher support, communications, and training; (b) to encourage the use of library resources: children's materials; language and music CDs; audiovisual materials, and Internet websites; (c) libraries are safe, supportive, and welcoming environments; and (d) how the "give and take" between learners and teachers is helpful to both. Discussion of the findings, conclusions, and recommendations are included.

THIRD AGE ADULT ENGLISH LANGUAGE LEARNERS

IN NONFORMAL LIBRARY SETTINGS

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Chapter 1

Introduction

According to the U.S. Census Bureau's 2005-2009 *American Community Survey* [ACS], Broward County's median age was 38.5 years, with over a third (35%) of those speaking a language other than English at home (U. S. Census Bureau, 2009). This was up from 29% in 2000 (Maines, Abbady, & Benedick, 2006, p. 1B). Approximately 30% of Broward citizens are foreign-born, with the highest increases coming from Latin American and Caribbean countries (U. S. Census Bureau, 2009). Blacks (25.3%), Hispanics (22.7%), Asians (3.4%), American Indian/Alaskan Natives (6%), and other minorities (5.3%) now make up more than half of Broward County's population (57.3%) (Maines et al., 2006, p. 1B).

Although previous education is perhaps the strongest motivating factor for pursuing more education as an older adult, according to the American Association of Retired Persons' [AARPs] *Portrait of Older Americans* statistical report, Black and Hispanic persons in the United States have increased risks of poor education, substandard housing, poverty, malnutrition, and generally poor health (AARP, 1995). In recent years, the older population has been growing faster among minorities than among Whites, a trend that is expected to continue.

According to the ALA Office for Research and Statistics, a grave concern is that the nation has started to see a growing number of linguistically-isolated households

where no one over 14 speaks English well. More than 5.5 million households were linguistically-isolated in 2007, affecting about 21 million people in the United States. This is 50% more than a decade ago (ALA, 2008b).

In Hialeah, Florida, just 7.5% of its residents spoke English at home in 2000. John Trasvina, President and General Counsel of the Mexican American Legal Defense Fund, believes that there is a tremendous hunger to learn English. The night schools that once taught English to immigrants are no longer as available. According to Trasvina, there are year-long waiting lists for English classes in some areas of the country, creating a serious barrier hampering not only job prospects, but also the ability to get emergency help from doctors, police, or firefighters (Sharpe, 2008).

Notwithstanding, English as a Second Language [ESL] programs were the fastest growing segment of the state-administered adult education programs (U.S. Department of Education, 2006, para. 1). Institutions with Adult Basic Education [ABE] classes in 2006-2007 invited 2.5 million learners through their doors, with English Language Learners [ELLs] comprising 44% of these 2.5 million learners (Burt, Peyton, & Schaetzel, 2008).

A major challenge for the field of ESL adult community education is to develop more learning opportunities that meet the demands and needs of linguistically diverse ELLs. The field might respond to these major demographic shifts by identifying what motivates ELLs to learn English in a library setting. This study, with its focus on older or Third Age ethnic minority learners, will contribute to the research in educational gerontology and older adult education.

Problem Statement

In 2007, in a major longitudinal study funded by the National Institute of Aging [NIA], a proclamation was set out that "the aging of the population and the retirement of the Baby-Boom generation are considered by many to be among the most transformative demographic changes ever experienced in this country" (Karp, 2007, p. 87). Research and exploration will continue to be needed to allow us to understand the processes of aging and the motivations for learning in older adulthood, as well as the impact of those factors on the person's ability to function in society and live a long and productive life.

Additionally, the voices of both the learners and their educators have been left out of previous studies, making this study unique since this layer was included in the data collection. That is, teachers of the targeted learners were asked what they perceive to be the learners' motivations, barriers, and supports.

According to Moody (n. d.), education for the Third Age remains marginalized, much like lifelong learning for many reasons. One reason is that Third Age adult education is underfunded and subject to less research and documentation than education earlier in the life course. Another reason may be due to a lack of a recognizable theoretical basis for this work with Third Age education as compared with compulsory education (Withnall, 2000). Moreover, persistence of the deficit or biomedical model of aging, which limits our expectations of what is possible in later life, may also be a reason (Cumming & Henry, 1961; Quadagno, 2008).

In sum, there is little research-based, theoretical literature about Third Age education or English language classes in nonformal settings (Mathews-Aydinli, 2008; McCook & Barber, 2002b). Thus, the study's focus was on the life phases of middle to

late adulthood (Levinson, 1986) with a small group of diverse adults (55-64 years of age) and their teachers. Each participant was engaged in a separate dialogue about their own motivation and purpose for seeking English communication skills improvement in the face of many sociocultural messages about aging (Fisher & Wolf, 2000).

Purpose Statement

The purpose of this phenomenological case study was to explore the motivation, learning supports, learning barriers, and program change recommendations of Third Age Learners in a nonformal library ESOL setting. This study was formulated on a pilot study conducted by the doctoral candidate researcher as well as two recent studies, both recommending an exploration of perceptions of learners involved in literacy classes on how to improve ESOL programs. The first recommendation came from a dissertation study (Duay, 2007), which recommended gathering the perceptions of older learners involved in literacy classes on how to improve ESOL programs for Third Age Learners. The second recommendation came from an ALA (2008b) national study of public libraries calling for future research analyzing linguistic isolation in relation to age, race, and ethnicity.

Research Questions

The guiding research question was: What are the perceptions and motivations that impact Third Agers' learning experiences in a nonformal library ESOL setting? The following are the research questions for this study:

- 1. What motivates Third Age Learners before and while they attend the library's ESOL classes?
 - (a) What knowledge and skills are Third Age ELLs motivated to seek?

- (b) What program improvements and new services are recommended?
- 2. What supporting factors do Third Age ELLs experience in the library's ESOL classes?
 - (a) What teaching approaches, materials, techniques, and learning strategies support Third Age ELLs?
 - (b) What sociocultural factors support Third Age ELLs?
- 3. What barriers to learning and attending do Third Age ELLs experience in the library's ESOL classes?

Significance

Numbers of the "young-old" (Neugarten, 1996, p. 73), ages 55 to 75, known also as the Third Age (Laslett, 1989, p. 3) or "new gerontology" (Rowe & Kahn, 1998, p. 13), are increasing and people are living longer, making age-related transitions less relevant for lifelong learning education programs. Thus, older adulthood is an important area of research (Lawrence-Lightfoot, 2009; Sadler, 2000).

This study addressed the paucity of qualitative research conducted with diverse Third Age Learners (Jarvis, 2001; Kim, Hagedorn, Williamson, & Chapman, 2004) in nonformal or nonacademic community-based educational settings (Chen, Kim, Moon, & Merriam, 2008; Findsen, 2005; Lawrence-Lightfoot, 2009; Mathews-Aydinli, 2008). Findings of this study can benefit adult ESOL administrative and program personnel as well as adult ELL students, who not only face the need to learn a new language, but may also face challenges in the areas of continuation of employment, health, cognitive growth, and other educational and social experiences (Kim & Merriam, 2004; Wolf, 1997).

Adult educators can also benefit from understanding how these learners perceive community-based "communication improvement" classes, namely those that address writing and language skills (Hunt, 2006). What makes learning activities and experiences more meaningful for these diverse students? How can administrators encourage more Third Age Learner participation? What are the expectations of Third Age Learners and are those expectations being met? Little qualitative research has been conducted on the motivation for language learning among Third Age adults; hence, the need for these kinds of data is great (Cusack, 2000; Kim & Merriam, 2004).

Third Age Learners are motivated to participate in educational programs for many reasons besides just instrumental (Parsons, 1951; Weinstein-Shr, 1993) and prior successful educational experiences (Merriam & Caffarella, 1999; Manheimer, Snodgrass, & Moskow-McKenzie, 1995; Valentine, 1997). These reasons include intellectual stimulation, enhancing self-esteem, expanding a nurturing and supportive environment (Lamb & Brady, 2005), enhanced communications with family and friends (Weinstein-Shr, 1993), improvement in prospects for finding and understanding health care information (Wolf, 1997), support for independent living, and more options for entertainment (Rosenthal, 2008).

Adult education service providers, whether they be in formal or nonformal settings, need to understand (a) what motivates adult learners to remain enrolled; (b) what kind of education they perceive they need and in what kinds of situations; (c) if these needs change as their learning experience progresses; and (d) what kinds of services they need to keep them in the program. When adult education and library literacy program planners, teachers, and tutors understand the reasons for participation and the particular

needs of their diverse Third Age students, they are better able to design and market programs and services to relate to them (Chen et al., 2008; Roman, 2004).

Conceptual and Theoretical Framework

Twenty-first century, postmodern adult learning comprises a complex mosaic (Wolf, 2005). The vast consensus is that there is no single theory capable of explaining the phenomenon of learning (Jarvis, 2006). Likewise, educators of adults of any demographic group must be aware of the limited assumptions of single-perspective theories (Merriam, Caffarella, & Baumgartner, 2007). This study will draw from multiple adult learning and sensory and cognitive aging theories, as well as look at the motivations, barriers, and supports of Third Age language learning from several theoretical perspectives.

Developmental theory (Erikson, 1997; Fisher, 1993; Havighurst, 1972, 1976; Levinson, 1978) will be addressed in terms of Third Age Learning. Adult learning theories and approaches will be sourced in the content areas of andragogy (Knowles, 1980, 1984a, 1984b); formal, nonformal, and informal learning (Findsen, 2006; Merriam et al., 2007); adult education (Cross, 1992); older adult education (Manheimer et al., 1995; Peterson, 1983; Wolf, 2009b), sociocultural learning (Vygotsky, 1978), situated learning (Lave & Wenger, 2005); and Third Age learning (Eggebeen & Sturgeon, 2006; Laslett, 1989; Moody, n. d.; Wolf, 1994). The life course perspective (Elder, 1998, 1999; Elder, Kirkpatrick Johnson, & Crosnoe, 2003) and cognitive aging theories (Schneider & Pichora-Fuller, 2000) will also be reviewed. (See Figure 1.)

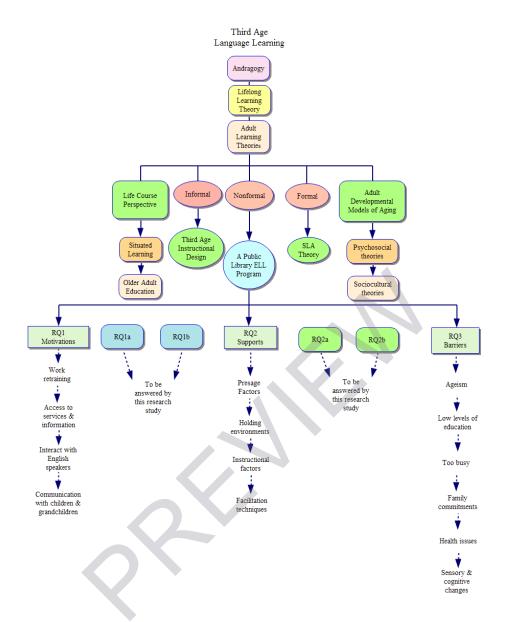


Figure 1. A conceptual model of Third Age English language learning in nonformal public library settings.

In addition, lifelong learning theory will provide a framework for this research. According to Jarvis, the term "lifelong education" first appeared in 1929, but it did not become popularized until post-WW II (2001). Dewey (1916) perhaps captured the spirit of lifelong learning best when he said: