

Full Length Research Article

Older Migrants: Negotiating Language and Communication

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Many people are now moving around the world, often migrating for political or economic reasons to countries where another language is spoken. There is a perception that migration is for young people but research has also shown that about 7% of all migrants are aged 45 or over when they move countries. With estimates of Polish migration to the UK since 2004 ranging from 500,000 to 1 million, this could mean between 35,000 and 70,000 older Polish migrants arriving in an English speaking country where they may have language issues and yet are expected to find work immediately in order to support themselves. Polish migrants over the age of 45 have been interviewed to find out how migration fits into their life history. Initial findings are that older migrants have less confidence in using English, that they may have tried several times to learn the language without success, and that they use strategies to overcome their communication problems. There may be implications for the future as these strategies do not address other social issues.

Key words: Older migrants, Learning English, Language needs

INTRODUCTION

It is estimated that around one million Polish migrants have entered the UK since 2004, and statistics show that about 7% of all these migrants are aged over 45 (Gidley et al, 2010; Accession Monitoring Report, 2009; Trevenna, 2009). This could account for up to 70,000 older individuals who have arrived in a country where they may have language issues and yet are expected to be able to integrate into their new community and support themselves by finding work immediately. The methodology used for this study has involved researching existing documentation, and carrying out oral history interviews with Polish migrants who came to the UK when aged 45 or over. Polish migrants were chosen for the study as they represent the largest immigrant group in the UK and they have specific issues: language barriers appear to be greater for the Poles than for the UK's other immigrant groups, according to a policy report on Human Rights (Sumption & Somerville, 2009).

A small sample of questionnaires was taken from learners in an English language evening class to compare and contrast with the interviews. There have been limitations to the amount of literature available on older people as this has unfortunately been seen as a less glamorous area of research. However, as the world's population grows older and consequently presents more issues for the economic and social policies of governments, then it is likely that more investigations will be required to inform practice. This paper investigates the communication issues encountered by older migrants and questions whether these are related to age, the strategies used to overcome any language problems, as well as strategies which may be appropriate for older learners, and the implications there may be in not addressing specific areas of concern.

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Communication

There have been few studies of older migrants moving countries although previous investigations have looked at migrants growing old in the host country. Katy Gardner's (2002: 159) study of Bengali elders in London describes the almost insurmountable bureaucratic hurdles the elders encounter when they need to claim benefits to which they are entitled, because they cannot speak much English. Lack of English also prevents them from using public transport and limits their world to one small familiar space: their reasons for this lack of English being that they felt they were too old to learn, they did not have enough time, or the classes were some distance from their homes (Gardner, 2002: 141). One of the interviewees for this study was Hanne, a 61 year old now retired, who has a fear of travelling, which she never did in Poland, and she relates this to the language barrier.

Taking up the theme of being too old to learn, Aneta Pawlenko (2005: 187) looks at the factors that can influence the way people use language and finds that languages learned later in life do not have the same sensual associations as those learned in childhood: they do not evoke the same personal memories and affective reactions. An effort is made when teachers apply the visual, auditory and kinaesthetic model of learning styles in the classroom and are encouraged to use personalised learning and individual learning plans to make the teaching more inclusive, but generally there is little information for teachers on how to approach and get the best from older learners. Bowden and Merritt (1995) find that older learners appreciate being able to see concepts in action through activities and examples and they want information that is useful to them. One successful method is being able to use the new information in small group interaction, which can then be applied in real life more readily and confidently. This is supported by Campbell (2006), who finds that older people want to learn information that is personally beneficial and the perceived barriers to intellectual capacity may be a myth.

There is no reason why older learners should not successfully learn a language but the context in which they learn is very important, according to Schleppegrell (1987), who contends that the greatest barrier to learning is doubt. It is this lack of confidence that comes through clearly in both learning and using English. Forty seven year old Fedek believes it would have been much easier for him to learn English if he had migrated to the UK twenty years ago, as his "brain is not the same now". Anna, a 49 year old engineer with a Master of Science degree, who is now working in a warehouse, says that she loves looking at all the small shops but she will not go into them because she is afraid of talking in English. She is worried that someone may say something to her and she will not be able to respond as she does not understand what they are saying. Hanne says her family try to encourage her to learn English but she is afraid of the challenge, she has no confidence in herself, although she was very good at languages when young and spoke German. In the survey of language learners, even although some of them felt their level of English was good, none had any confidence in using their English.

A report on universities and their engagement with older learners (Phillipson & Ogg, 2010) recommends that more research is carried out on teaching older learners as learning is especially important in boosting self-confidence, enjoyment and satisfaction with life. However, the motivation for learning is different with older learners as their motivating force is one of personal interest. One 47 year old with a PhD in management of telecommunications, and working as an international internet project manager, was visiting friends in the UK, and would have loved to move permanently to the UK, but she doubted she would find the same level of work as she could not speak English. She was very surprised that, even with her level of education, she could not learn English and found it such a huge challenge. This may be perception, rather than reality, and there have been no effective studies into the impact of mixed groups of language learners where the older learners may find their confidence drained by the vitality and energy of younger learners. As Schleppegrell (1987) points out, older language learners fear failure more than younger learners and this is especially relevant when applied to those who are already successful in other fields.

Those who do not master the English language, even when they migrate at a young age, will revert to their first language as they grow older, according to a study carried out in Australia by Trang Thomas (2003). This reversion can then create communication problems with younger members of the family and cause difficulties in getting close to grandchildren, according to Thomas and Hallebone (1995). There are also other causes for this reversion, with many people losing their ability to speak English after a stroke or when suffering from dementia: in the case of the Japanese women growing older in Britain, Izuhara and Shibata (2001) describe how they are unable to communicate with their own children who have been brought up in the UK. On the other hand, Wheeler (2011) finds that symptoms of Alzheimer's can be delayed by four or more years in elderly bilingual adults: the chief benefit is the ability to shut out irrelevant information and focus on what is important. There are therefore advantages, not just to the individual but to society, in encouraging the acquisition of proficient language skills. Language learning should be

regarded as an evolving process, rather than a programme of training. There does appear to be a gender divide in the way that older migrants adapt to their new surroundings. Older male migrants experience downward mobility because of their age and language whereas, although older women tend to adapt more positively in the short term, in the longer term they tend to suffer from isolation due to their lack of English language skills and the consequent paucity of independent friendships (Thomas, 2003). The difficulty in making new friends contributes to social isolation and a poor quality of life, but Thomas and Balnaves (1993) find it can also lead to mental health problems, which in turn are exacerbated by a lack of language hindering the process of getting help. This is mirrored to some extent in Martin's (2009) study of older Iranian migrants whose limited English language skills prevent them from communicating the real symptoms and whose cultural approach to health is holistic: this means that they do not distinguish between mental and physical symptoms and the mental health can be overlooked.

However, the men tend to be more prepared to adapt. Tomas, a 49 year old transport manager now working as a lorry driver, recognises that his level of English is too low to work at the level he is qualified for, but he has made the effort to find English friends and he has no problem using the language, while 46 year old Marcin feels comfortable and confident living in another country. The women interviewed made no mention of finding English friends and were more likely to keep within a small circle of Polish speaking friends outside the home. This particular age group missed out on learning English in school as the foreign language available to them was Russian. They also grew up without exposure to American and English culture via the medium of music and television and consequently they do not have the same familiarity with English language as younger Polish people have. None of the English language learners had had the opportunity of learning English in Poland.

Strategies

The opportunities for speaking English are limited, including for those who do have some basic language skills. Even when in situations where they need to use the language, they find other strategies to communicate. Anna takes her young son with her when she has to carry out any business such as paying bills, but when she goes to the doctor or dentist, she carefully translates everything beforehand and takes her dictionary with her. She mentally prepares herself beforehand and tries to anticipate responses. Her biggest fear is when English people approach her unexpectedly and catch her unawares as she cannot understand them at all. Ewa, who is in her forties and works as a hotel housekeeper, started an English course three times but never uses the language as she speaks only Polish in the workplace and at home. The English courses were provided as training for work through the Jobcentre in Poland. She says she can speak two or three sentences but does not have enough vocabulary. If there is a need to speak English, she takes her children with her. She tells them what they need to explain and has no problem with them discussing domestic issues. In her mind her child is an extension of her and can therefore speak on her behalf. However, she would love to be able to speak enough English to change her job. Almost all of the language learners used family or friends to interpret for them when they went to a

medical or dental surgery, despite more than half of them stating they met English people socially. Fedek, a 47 year old mechanic now working in a factory with Polish colleagues, tried learning English twice and was once fluent in Russian, but now he watches Polish television and speaks only Polish at work and at home. Friends and family help him when he needs to use English although he says if he were not with Polish people all the time, and had to learn English, then he would. Anna has a problem understanding people. Yet when she worked on a contract within the warehouse where she works, she was with English colleagues and she became used to their pronunciation and her English did improve. She then took some holiday and had Polish people staying with her, so spoke Polish all the time. When she returned to work, she was allocated another job and has been working solely with Polish people since, and now cannot understand English as she does not use it. Her plan is to work from home and sell cards to Polish people. Hanne has found Polish Facebook and communicates in her own language through the internet.

Although these older migrants are living in an English speaking environment, they are not interacting and using the language; this indicates that they are missing out on opportunities of enriching their lives by being involved in their local communities. All of those interviewed did their grocery shopping in the supermarket where they had no need to speak. Leisure activities are often limited to walking with the family or going to the Polish church. Fedek says he meets lots of people there and attends regularly, although he never went to church in Poland. Every one of the language learners attended Polish church at least once a month. Alazzi & Chiodo (2006) carried out a study on Middle Eastern university students and found that they experienced social isolation due to a lack of contact with nationals and they were often lonely. However, although those who had prior travel experience to other countries and those with language proficiency were more adept at making contact with others, they all saw themselves as guests in the host country and therefore made little effort to adapt. It may be that the Polish migrants do not perceive themselves as permanent residents, although those interviewed who had families stated that they intended staying in the UK as they saw more opportunities for their children. They focused more on the benefits to their children rather than benefits to themselves.

The factors related to age which impact most on learning a second language appear to be the learning opportunities, the motivation to learn, individual differences, learning styles and the quality and quantity of instruction, according to Bista (2009). This would imply that not enough importance is being placed on using strategies to engage with older learners. Phillipson & Ogg (2010) stress that learning improves the quality of life as it provides social networks and tackles inequality. Their report highlights the role of education in dealing with social exclusion and they give examples of intergenerational learning on an informal basis at the University of Valencia under a programme called NUGRAN, which links older learners with younger ones and promotes interaction and communication between the groups. They also point to the University of Pittsburgh which has a programme whereby retired engineers mentor students, where one of the main factors was the support foreign students gained in adapting to a new culture. The report concludes that

investment in education relating to older learners is likely to have major benefits for both individuals and society and that it will mean that older people remain economically and socially engaged. Withall (2000) does not agree with the education aspect and feels that more stress should be placed on learning within a life course perspective. This would serve to give meaning to the experiences of older people and make them feel that these experiences were valued. In terms of language learning this could be to ensure the relevance of the language classes to their lives, and to elicit these experiences through activities which have meaning for older people. Given that research shows it takes between two and five years to acquire basic oral English skills (Hakuta et al, 2000), this may seem daunting to Polish learners who have not been exposed to English culture in the way that younger people have. However, the one advantage that they do have is that they are in an English-speaking country. Too much emphasis seems to be placed on classroom-based learning, when other strategies could be put in place, which did not require the same formal approach.

An experiment in Nottingham in 2004 to engage Pakistani women was to run a weekly English language session on the local community radio and set tasks which were designed to get the women using the language immediately. This resulted in a number of women having the confidence to sign up for local classes and positive feedback from users. There are signs that Polish people would like to be able to integrate in that all of the language learners agreed that they spoke to their English neighbours and two thirds felt their spoken English language had improved since they had arrived in the country. Older learners may feel more anxious about learning languages and one of the ways Koba et al (2000) suggest of reducing this is by having conversation circles of fewer than ten learners as this provides security and gives a sense of involvement and equality. Smaller classes also provide the opportunity for learners to be more involved and to practise their language skills.

Implications

A study by Warnes et al (2004) finds that older migrants, whatever their social background, are all disadvantaged through social policies which are denying them full citizenship rights in both their native country and their new host country. There is no consistency of policies throughout Europe. Warnes also points out that there is an intolerant attitude towards older migrants, that they have brought upon themselves any problems they may encounter: for example, British pensioners moving to Australia or New Zealand have their pensions frozen at the level when they left the UK on the premise that they chose to migrate and are no longer the responsibility of the national government. The focus of public policy has been on young people migrating, but the numbers of older migrants will continue to increase and this has wide implications for health and social welfare policies and provision (Warnes et al, 2004). People are living longer and, according to NIH (nd), the percentage of the world's population over 65 is expected to increase to nearly triple by 2050. These older people are being asked to work more years before they retire and the older migrants' access to services may be limited because of their lack of language skills. This may lead to older migrants being socially more isolated and

consequently more inclined to depression and mental illness, notwithstanding the potential costs of healthcare to the host country. Ryan et al (2009) give an example of 48 year old Bernard who migrated to join his two sons in London following the break-up of his marriage: after more than two years he was still completely reliant on his sons for information and support, he had not met any new friends or even the neighbours and was completely alienated from UK society. Malgorzata, aged 57, has lived in London for several years but avoids all contact with anyone who is not Polish due to her lack of English language skills (Ryan et al, 2009). Communication and social engagement are closely linked and Nussbaum et al (2000) emphasise that there needs to be a consistency of communicative behaviours over one's lifespan and this can be disrupted when people migrate as that consistency cannot be maintained.

People may have had friendships and joined clubs to meet others in their own country, but when they migrate to a country where there are few opportunities to integrate due to a lack of language, then they are not replicating the social and communicative behaviours familiar to them. Adapting to a new country in later life is easier if an individual can find some common experiences to link him or her to new acquaintances (Nussbaum et al, 2000). In the case of the Polish this is made more of a challenge as many of them are working in occupations outside their training and background. Consequently, even in the workplace without language taken into account, there are limitations to them being able to form the friendships which could enable them to establish the relationships central to their future quality of life. Age must also be taken into consideration. As Twenge et al's (2010) study on the attitudes of different generations discovered, older people have always relied on jobs to provide them with the opportunity for making friends: younger people are possibly more used to technology for making friends and keeping in contact outside the workplace but the work environment has always contributed to friendships for the so-called baby boomers.

Without these social relationships loneliness is more likely and this is associated with health issues. Yang & Victor (2011) put forward the theory that increased loneliness in old age may be caused by political and economic changes in people's lives which reflect on the way they perceive others around them so that they find it hard to establish friendships. If this is so, then it may be more than language issues which need to be addressed when trying to integrate the Polish migrants into an English community.

Conclusion

Strategies for supporting these migrants in integrating into their new community may need to be thought through very carefully. Language learning in a classroom may not be the best approach for older learners, who need to have their self-doubts about their ability to learn questioned and repudiated through practical application of the language. The level of communication attained by learners tends to match their required needs and, if they can get by with the bare minimum of English language, then they will never see any further benefits in learning more. However, bearing in mind the implications and costs for both the individual and society,

there would seem to be an argument for considering creative ways of improving the language skills and ultimately the quality of life of older migrants. This may be in encouraging more mentoring to take place between retired volunteers as in Pittsburgh, or in educating English employers in the long-term benefits of ensuring that English is spoken in the workplace and that their workforce is not all from one ethnic background. In looking at whether communication issues may be age related, it seems that overall there is no conclusive evidence that this is the case. Various factors have combined to make it more difficult for older people to learn English. There are few opportunities for them to use English as many are working in low level manual occupations with other Polish workers and speak only Polish at work: they have not updated their skills or qualifications to make themselves more attractive to UK employers. Leisure activities revolve around the family and limit opportunities to meet English people: when needing help, they call upon family and Polish friends. The one factor which does seem to be age related is that older people do not have the same level of confidence as the younger age group. This would benefit from more research as to whether self-doubt is due to age, or whether it is inherent in the individual.

The strategies being used to overcome language issues are short-term and raise barriers preventing full integration in the new country. They do not allow social interaction and the building of a social network, and they are limiting the opportunities to enjoy the quality of life in the UK. Window shopping on one's own does not stimulate the senses in the way that touching, comparing, discussing, and smelling do. The affective reactions which Pawlenko (2005) attributes to learning languages at an early age may be replicated to a certain extent by making more use of the methods used for young learners, where older learners are encouraged to feel, taste, listen to music, speak without fear of making mistakes, experience the environment surrounding them. The long-term implications of neglecting the language needs of older learners are highlighted in the personal barriers and limitations experienced by the Bengali elders in London (Gardner, 2002) and social isolation which may result in a high economic cost to the state (Nussbaum et al, 2000; Warnes et al, 2004). Communication with migrant workers is seen as a key problem: migrants cannot maximise the value of their time in the UK because of their low level language skills (Green et al, 2007) and yet the language learners surveyed gave their primary motivation for coming to the UK as being a better quality of life. Friendships are vital to quality of life and there are more difficulties in accessing these friendships when there is no common language.

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