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Teaching Listening Skills to Older Second Language Learners: The Students' Perspective

Abstract: Most modern ELT course books and language courses are designed to address one of four language skills at the time to ensure that enough time and attention is devoted to each one of them. Despite the fact that listening is included as one of these skills, it usually receives the least attention from teachers, who do not utilize the full potential of the exercises. The problem arises from miscategorising listening as a "passive" skill, which can be learnt effortlessly by simple exposure to the target language. In reality, listening can be taught but it is a rather demanding process, requiring more preparation from teachers as well as their willingness to demonstrate and share their extensive knowledge about sounds, decoding strategies and different listening techniques, which in turn aids students in identifying targets for practice. The aforementioned issue, i.e. treating listening as a passive skill and not using all possible teaching strategies associated with listening exercises, applies to all groups of students; however, older adult learners seem to be the most affected by it. The reason why older adults consider listening as one of the most challenging tasks stems from their reduced cognitive abilities and common hearing problems, which results in decreased speech comprehension ability and thus makes learning new languages even more challenging to them. The primary objective of the following article is thus to analyse student feedback in relation to listening exercises and to suggest possible improvements to teaching listening skills. Acquired results and conclusions shall serve as a basis for a possible expansion of the survey by adding teachers' perspective and observations in the future.

Keywords: SLA, top-down and bottom-up listening, older second language learner, older adults

1. Older adult learners

Senescence is a universal phenomenon. The data presented by EUROSTAT (7.12.2015) shows an overall increase in the population of older adults (65 and more) in the world by 4.5pp and of older persons living in Poland by 5.1pp, both within 1995–2013. At the same time the population of older persons in the countries belonging to the European Union has grown by 0.4pp. in 2016, as compared

with the previous year, and on the whole by 2.3pp in the years 2005–2015 (as of June 2016). This means that currently persons aged 65 and over comprise 18.9% of the EU population. The latest statistics for the years 2015–2080 project that the peak of the subpopulation of older adults in EU will take place in 2080 and the number will increase up to 525.5 million people, which means that in 2080 the number of individuals at the age of 65 and more will increase to 28.7%, in comparison with 18.9% in 2015.

There is no consistent approach to describe the subpopulation of older adults, who, as a result, are defined in several different ways. The meaning of middle age and older age also differ due to social and historical factors. As a result, the group can be either divided into different categories based on their chronological age, such as for instance the WHO's definition, in which it is stated that "[m]ost developed world countries have accepted the chronological age of 65 years as a definition of 'elderly' or older person". Similarly, the United Nations consider the age of 60+ as the onset of the "third age," while according to EUROSTAT the age of 65 and more should be treated as the beginning of later life. Some researchers prefer using collective terms such as "the aging" (Peterson 1981); "elders" or "the elderly" (Ostwald & Williams 1985; Mautner 2007); "seniors" (Cusack&Thompson 1996); or more recently "prime-of-life adults" (Mackey & Sachs 2012) and "older adults" or "older persons" (Findsen & Formosa 2011), which are considered to be the most neutral and non-discriminatory terms of all. Other scholars tend to use specific age bands, such as, for instance, Jaroszewska (2013), who includes in this group learners over the age of 50; Brown (1985), who classifies older adults as those above the age of 55; or Weinstein-Shr, who chooses a category of "40 to 65 years old" and more (1993, 1).

Moreover, even though our societies are rapidly ageing, there is still not enough attention given to the subpopulation of older adults in terms of their learning needs and expectations. At the same time, despite learning a foreign language being the third most popular field of interest for this age group (see Singleton & Ryan 2004), the scarcity of research impedes the process of both teaching and learning. The resulting issues, such as difficulty with finding the right materials, inappropriate use of the already existing teaching materials, or trying to apply one's subjective theories regarding teaching older adults, have a negative influence on their learning experience. In order to facilitate the process of learning in this age group as well as to improve the existing state of knowledge related to the field of older adult second language education, Jaroszewska (2013) suggests the need for creating an interdisciplinary field of *glottogeragogika*, which continues to be studied as two separate disciplines, i.e., Second Language Acquisition and geragogy. This new approach would ensure more thorough research into the needs, abilities and expectations of older persons regarding learning a new language.

There are many reasons for continuing one's lifelong education in later life. Many older persons often find it necessary to learn the language in order to

communicate with their children and grandchildren, who left the country and live in an English-speaking environment with their English-speaking spouses or partners. Older people also need English to use the internet both for work and for pleasure, in order to, for instance, communicate with their friends online. Moreover, open boarders also mean that older adults get a chance to make new acquaintances, to socialize with their friends living abroad, or to make sure that they still exercise their brains and find some challenging but useful activities for themselves.[1] Peter Grundy (1994) notes that the older adult learner beginner "will always have some clear reason for wanting to learn the language" and "[i]t may be recreational or occupational" (7). It is, therefore, crucial to recognize students' learning preferences to facilitate the process of learning of older adults and to help teachers plan their lessons accordingly and to respond to each individual's needs.

2. Listening in the second language classroom

In his book, *Listening in the Language Classroom*, John Field (2008) notes that, "a faddish commitment to an 'integrated skills' approach may result in listening being relegated to a hasty topic-driven session wedged between reading and writing, which tend to be regarded as more manageable skills" (1). Indeed, because of its alleged "passivity" and "tak[ing] place in the hidden reaches of the learner's mind" (ibid., see also Vandergrift 2012) the potential of listening practice is often underrated in the language classrooms. The difficulty of teaching listening is also linked to the issue of measurability. It is much easier to show students' progress by teaching grammar rules and memorising lists of topic-related lexis than to ensure high performance during listening tasks, especially that each one is different and may pose new problems. Teachers also tend to fall into the trap of what Field calls a "quasi-psychological justification," namely making the claim that just as the process of first language acquisition starts with a silent period, which is effortless and is based on listening to one's mother tongue, so too should be the case with foreign language acquisition (ibid.).

However, as early as in 1987, Mary Schleppegrell stressed out the importance of teaching listening comprehension to older learners before other skills, especially before speaking. The author also pointed out that by delaying the need to produce the new language and helping learners in developing their listening strategies, the teacher creates a positive classroom environment, so important in learning. Shleppegrell thus notes that,

> [a]n approach which stresses the development of the receptive skills (particularly listening) before the productive skills may have much to offer the older learner … According to this research, effective adult language training programs are those that use materials that provide an

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[1] For a detailed analysis of Older Adult needs and reasons for learning languages, see Jaroszewska (2013).

interesting and comprehensible message, delay speaking practice and emphasize the development of listening comprehension, tolerate speech errors in the classroom, and include aspects of culture and non-verbal language use in the instructional program. This creates a classroom atmosphere which supports the learner and builds confidence. (4)

At the same time, so far, the research done into the methodology of teaching second language listening comprehension in general has also been rather scarce. There are many reasons for such a lack of both scholarly and teachers' attention devoted to this particular skill. Field (2008) notes that it was only in the late 1960s that listening began to be introduced and taught as a separate language skill, and yet it remained only one of the ways of reinforcing newly taught grammar (ibid.). More than half a century later, listening practice often remains regarded as less important than other skills, such as reading or speaking (the fluency in which, for years, has been seen as *the* most important goal), and at the same time just as demanding for the students as it used to be.

According to Field (2008), "variability of spoken language" (141) is, therefore, an area which needs to be studied in more detail to ensure students' better understanding of the message they hear and, as a result, to improve their listening comprehension. However, the problem emerges not only while trying to teach the skill itself, but also while taking into consideration the specific needs and cognitive abilities of the group of older adult learners. Jessica Cox (2013) notes that,

> [p]sychology has identified four main areas of cognition in which older adults differ from younger adults: sensory function, inhibitory control, working memory capacity (WMC), and processing speed (Park 2000). In addition, the stereotype that older adults are unable to remember new information can increase anxiety in an instructional context, thus further inhibiting performance McDaniel, Einstein, & Jacoby (2008). These five factors have implications for older adults' learning: sensory function is necessary for perceiving aural and visual input, inhibitory control is important for focusing on helpful information and ignoring distractions, WMC is essential for maintaining information from multiple stimuli, and processing speed determines learners' swiftness in taking in new information and applying it to new scenarios. Therefore, materials and classes with older adult students needs to keep these limitations into account. (93–4)

Listening comprehension in older adult learners is, therefore, challenged by numerous factors. Firstly, the exposure to a rapid authentic speech or to various new speakers can be more problematic for older persons than it is for the younger learners. Moreover, any additional distractions, such as the buzz of conversation in the classroom, "natural" background noises, which are included in the recordings to make them sound more authentic, or multiple speakers make the utterances increasingly difficult to understand. Finally, trying to link the complex process of listening and decoding the information with exercises, which often accompany the listening practice and involve a more conscious use of not only the two different skills–reading and listening–simultaneously, but also the need to write down, match, underline or mark the correct answers, make the tasks cognitively demanding. All of these actions when performed at the same time prove to be very challenging not only for

a novice second language learner in general, but even more so for an untrained ear of an older person. J.J. Wilson (2008) points out that, "[t]eachers of older learners may need to proceed more slowly with instructions" as they "may also find that their students' ability to cope with fast connected speech lags behind the students' cognitive abilities" (14). However, teachers should also introduce their older adult learners to different listening strategies, which will make the process of decoding information easier and should improve students' listening comprehension.

3. Top-down and bottom-up processing

In the glossary of listening-related terms, Field (2008) defines top-down process-ing as, "strictly speaking, describ[ing] a view of listening as a process that uses larger units in order to identify smaller ones (e.g. uses word-level information to recognise phonemes)" (351) and bottom-up as "describ[ing] a process that builds smaller units into larger ones (syllables into words and words into phrases)" (345), whereas Wilson (2008) is more detailed in his description and mentions the important aspect of "[t]he top-down model emphasis[ing] *the use of background knowledge to predict content* [which] may refer to world knowledge, knowledge of the speaker or context, or analogy (if the situation is familiar, listeners can guess what they're going to hear next)" and "[t]he bottom-up model emphasis[ing] *the decoding of the smallest units–phonemes* and syllables–to lead us towards mean-ing. The approach is based on discrete units of language in the text" (my emph., 15). Both of these approaches coexist and influence one another; however, the contextual knowledge is connected with the individual world-knowledge and is often explored by course books, while the bottom-up model is rather neglected in language teaching. Wilson (2008) also adds that "recent research suggests that it is often top-down approaches that cause mistakes in listening tasks" and that "until fairly recently it was assumed that most errors in listening comprehension were caused by students mishearing individual words — a failure of the bottom-up process" (15) as students activate their schemata and therefore often expect to hear different words based upon their knowledge of the topic.

Field (2008), however, argues the opposite and claims that "decoding skills should play a larger part than at present in L2 listening programmes, and certainly a larger part than the comprehension approach normally provides for" (140). He also suggests that teachers have a choice and "might conclude that L2 listeners need to give priority to developing their decoding skills so as to reduce their dependence upon outside information" (135), which can make the process of listening more auto-matic like in the case of native speakers. Moreover, short-term (working) memory is rather limited in its content, which is important especially for the novice L2 listeners as "decoding is uncertain and makes heavy demands upon attention, then it leaves no memory resources spare for interpreting what has been heard or carrying forward

a recall of what was said earlier" (136). Hence, teachers should help developing learners' decoding strategies so that they become more efficient and as a result rather effortless. As Filed stresses out, the inability to use decoding strategies is one of the major concerns of the learners themselves, and as pointed out before, it might be of particular importance for the lower-level L2 older adult listeners.

4. Problems in listening

Field (2008) distinguishes four main factors involved in the systematic variation of words and claims that it "might occur due to: phonological rules which *regularise* connected speech by attaching words to each other and by reshaping syllables; *alternative weak forms* for function words; the tendency of speakers to cut corners in the way they form sounds so as to *make articulation easier*; and the way in which words become *reduced* when they occur within a larger group" (143). Therefore, a crucial role in developing the decoding processes plays the awareness of problems caused by connected speech: redistribution, weak forms, transition between words and reduction.

Redistribution is a tendency of English to slip into regular rhythmic patterns in connected speech. As a result, native speakers and listeners of English tend to produce (and listen for) syllables which are grouped together (cliticisation), which causes problems with comprehension. Unstressed syllables which become attached to the stressed syllables do not fit the rules of syntax and cross word boundaries. Students who are not aware of this phenomenon are simply confused and cannot understand the utterances, whereas older adult learners, especially those with hearing difficulties, will find it both incomprehensible and frustrating.

Linking, resyllabification or catenation is yet another factor which leads to potential misunderstandings as it affects mainly the end of syllables and words. As a result, words beginning with a vowel are often pronounced with a consonant transferred from a previous word. This is a typical issue for novice L2 listeners who can often mishear words and, therefore, cannot understand the utterance itself. Following the decline of sensory function in perceiving aural input in older adults might, therefore, be one of the obstacles to the understanding of connected speech.

Weak forms are also problematic for the learners of English "[v]owel reduction affects the frequent monosyllabic grammar words of English" which change towards a more central form (Underhill 2005: 64). It is particularly important for learners to be able to recognise these forms as they may lead to failures to understand properly — students often cannot hear the weak forms at all. Moreover, many weak forms are homophonous, which causes confusion both for the learners and also for native speakers of English. Hence, it is crucial to raise students' awareness that the weak, not strong forms are the norm. However, as the former are unstressed and downgraded in prominence, they often become inaudible to an untrained ear

(even more so for the listeners with auditory impairments), which causes problems with listening and communication.

As utterances are often produced under the pressure of time, the speakers tend to "cut corners" of the words and phrases so that they are more comfortable and faster to produce, at the same time anticipating the sounds which are following. As a result, less experienced listeners find it difficult to make up for either the changed or lost sounds, especially if they are not used to decoding connected speech. A good listener knows where to expect such changes at the level of phoneme and, therefore, finds it easy to decode the meaning. However, "[t]he findings confirm that assimilation is a factor in failures of decoding" (Field, 149).

Elision, which is the loss of mainly consonant sounds taking place mainly at word boundaries, is another challenge for poor listeners. Indeed, as in the case of weak forms, elision of /t/ and /d/ is so common that it should be taught as a norm. Good listeners know where to expect such changes either because they are used to certain sequences where elision is likely or because they know when to expect it. Even though there are some regularities in the rules of assimilation and elision, they will vary in different languages, which challenges the learners who may try to apply the familiar to them rules in order to decode meaning. This causes even more problems for them as rules are most likely to be different (Underhill 2005: 61).

Words are also often reduced within the tone groups, especially if they are "of low importance within the group" or because "frequent and familiar group of words has become stored in the minds of speaker and listener as a single simplified chunk" (Field, 152). Moreover, many such words form "formulaic chunks," which "play an important part in assisting speakers to construct utterances rapidly, because they circumvent the need to assemble a common phrase afresh every time it is used" (Pawley and Syder qtd. in Field, 155). As a result, speakers pay less attention to prominence and stress than they would if they were to construct these utterances from the beginning.

Finally, native speakers' various accents (influenced by different physiological characteristics and style of delivery) are not the only issue causing problems with understanding — also the speaker variation of people from different learning back-grounds affects understanding of connected speech. The learners need far more time to get used to the voices speaking in a foreign language, especially if they use unfamiliar sounds or intonation.

5. Listening strategies

Whether listening strategies are a conscious or rather an unconscious process re-mains an open question. Some researches claim that in order to successfully apply strategies while listening, there needs to be at least some intentional effort on behalf of the learner (see Oxford & Cohen 1992). Indeed, different learners will

apply different strategies to a various degree; however, through repetition some of these can become part of a more conscious process, and as a result become more automatic than others. However, as pointed out by Ridgway (2000), language teachers' role is to concentrate on these elements that can be trained and improved, i.e. the conscious application of various strategies. Along the same lines, Oxford and Cohen (1992) note that, "[i]f strategies are unconsciously and automatically used, then explicit strategy training makes little or no sense" (12). Training, however, is crucial because, as pointed out by Ridgway (2000), it "places a far greater load on the memory" (181). In other words, it is impossible to go back and forth in order to check one's comprehension, or to stop and look up a word in a dictionary. Unlike in case of other reading strategies, such as breaking words into smaller parts, analysing syntax, etc., listening is a more immediate skill, and as such proves to be very demanding for the novice learners. An additional problem arises with older second language learners, whose cognitive abilities might be impaired due to age-related changes and not infrequently result in irritation, frustration and higher level of stress. Thus, such tasks as listening to fast "authentic" speech, without any help on how to deal with it, tend to dishearten older persons.

6. Research design and instrument

The following study concentrates specifically on older adult learners to highlight the problems this age group needs to face in relation to the listening procedures, strategies and materials used in the classroom. There are two methods of obtaining the data which are used in the article – an interview and a questionnaire with open-ended questions. Both of these methods prove to be the most reliable methods of procuring feedback in case of older adult learners as they allow for a longer discussion about their learning experiences. The interview and the questionnaire, thus, complement one another: the interview allows setting the background for research subjects (providing basic information concerning students' age, sex, occupation, reasons for studying the language and their learning background), whereas the questionnaire ensures more detailed analysis regarding older adult learners' exposure to the listening procedures, strategies and materials used in the language classroom (see Appendix 1). Both research instruments allow collecting the data which is used in the following analysis.

6.1. Research aims

This study aims to observe the problems which older adult learners might encounter during listening practice in the language classroom. The research also concentrates on students' attitudes towards listening activities, as well as, to some extent,

on their learning abilities and preferences. The following research questions are investigated to address the abovementioned issues:

1. Which language skills are the most challenging for the learners?
2. What is the learners' experience of listening in the language classroom?
3. Are the learners aware of the reasons for doing particular listening exercises?
4. What are the listening procedures used in the classroom?
5. Are they aware of the existence of any listening strategies?
6. Do the teachers introduce listening strategies to facilitate the process of listening?
7. Are the listening materials adapted to suit older adult learners' needs and cognitive abilities?

The students were asked to answer the research questions connected to their learning experiences and preferences. The results of the survey are presented below.

6.2. Participants

There were 20 subjects that altogether took part in the research. The groups consisted of 3 men and 17 women. The youngest person was 50 and the oldest 83. The data were collected in a language school, during regular classes, taught by 5 different teachers, from February to June 2015. Throughout the term, the students were observed during their classes, with a focus on listening activities. At the end of the term the groups were asked to fill in the questionnaire and participated in an interview. Students were informed about the character of the survey and some of the results were discussed with them. The same interviews was conducted with both groups of older adults — the beginners (CEFR A1) and pre-intermediate (CEFR A2+).

The group was rather diverse as their professions varied from accountants (3) and language teachers (2) to building contractors (1), journalists (1) and writers (1). There was also a nurse, a cashier, a lawyer, an architect, a manager, a secretary, as well as 4 pensioners and 3 people who decided not to reveal their professional backgrounds. The majority of older adult students (7) found it necessary to learn English in order to communicate with their children and grandchildren who left the country and often live in ESE with their English-speaking partners, as well as to get to know the culture of the countries in which they live (3). Therefore, learning the language in order to communicate with their families has become a crucial element of their motivation, which can be classified as integrative. Another reason for learning was the willingness to socialise (3), to keep in touch with their English speaking friends (1), to participate in activities similar to the ones enjoyed by the younger members of their families (3) and to make sure that they still exercise their

brains and are exposed to challenging and useful activities (1). Moreover, older adults found it difficult to use computers and browse the Internet (2) without the knowledge of English, which they also found useful to communicate at work (1).[2]

7. Presentation and interpretation of the results

The questions of the survey were divided into three groups: first, asking about listening procedures used in the classroom; second, concentrating on students' knowledge regarding listening strategies; and third, aimed at obtaining feedback on students' needs, preferences and experiences connected with the use of listening materials as well as their personal opinions regarding language skills introduced in the classroom environment.

According to older adult learners, listening is by far the most challenging language skill with 80% of the answers, whereas the following 20% of the subjects chose speaking as requiring the most effort. Reading, on the other hand, was chosen as the easiest by 50% of the students, while writing (35%) and speaking (15%) were viewed as the "not so difficult" option. The reasons behind choosing listening as the most demanding were: "the recordings are far too fast to comprehend" (Marek, 54 years old), "there is no time to read the instructions and the answers" (Maryla, 55), "the utterances are incomprehensible, they sound like one long word, I can't understand it because I don't know where the words begin and where they end" (Anna, 68), "the native speakers speak too fast, they should remember that we are older and need more time to understand, sometimes they should repeat what they say. I would like them to speak more slowly and clearly" (Teresa, 58), "English is a beautiful language, I like the way it sounds, so it's like listening to a song, you not always understand every word, right?" (Violletta, 64), "I can't understand the recordings, it's really frustrating, they are made for the young, not for us, sometimes I feel that I should give it all up, but my wife says I have to learn for my grandchildren, so here I am" (Edmund, 73), "I'm not sure what is the point of these exercises we can never understand what they [people in the recordings] are talking about, it's a waste of our time, (…) even when I see the tape script I can't follow the text, I can't read that fast in the foreign language so what's the point (…) it seems that teachers like it because they don't need to do anything when we're doing these long listenings" (Irena, 59), "I appreciate these listening exercises, I'm sure that I can learn something new even when I'm just listening to

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[2] The group that took part in the following experiment was also analysed in relation to their learning preferences, needs and abilities regarding the use of mother tongue in the language classroom. The results of the study were published in *Anglica Wratislaviensia* 2016 (54) ("Adult Learners and the Use of L1 in the Foreign Language Classroom"). Therefore, the following description has been quoted before in the aforementioned article. See Słowik, A., 2016, 116–7.

the sound of authentic speech" (*sic.*) (Bogumiła, 83)[3]. What can be seen in these answers is a rather negative picture of what the listening exercises seem to mean to the learners and how incomprehensible both their teachers and the recording are. In addition, the lack of support from the teachers in understanding the utterances as well as the tediousness and pointlessness of the given tasks are rather problematic. The prevailing belief that listening tasks are useful because listening to the foreign language is a good way to pick the language goes in line with Field's description of the pseudoscientific theories supporting listening practice in the form which is described above, namely doing the tasks for the sake of completing them.

50% and 35% of the subjects claimed that they do listening exercises in the classroom often and rarely, respectively and added that they are "never" (65%) or "rarely" (40%) an important part of the lesson. As a result 45% of the learners point out that they "never" enjoy the listening exercises and 40% rarely see them as a pleasant part of the lesson. The answers regarding the instructions, as well as pre- and post-teaching of unknown lexis and grammar are very varied. The instructions are given clearly in 65% ("always") and 20% ("usually"), while difficult words and phrases are pre-taught rather often (60%) and usually (20%), whereas in the case of grammar the result is opposite 65% ("never"), 25% ("often"). Moreover, the students claim that their teachers hardly ever focus on some difficult parts of the listening in order to improve their understanding of the given fragments or to help them avoid problems in the future (85% "never," 15% "rarely"). In the case of post-teaching vocabulary and grammar it is done rarely 70% and 75% of the time, respectively. Students are also not given any explanation following their problems with comprehension — 90% "never," 10% "rarely". In sum, the problems arising while listening do not seem to be due to teachers' inaccurate or complicated instructions but rather solely to students' inability and frustration resulting from the lack of understanding. The learners' almost unanimous claim that their teachers do not concentrate on any demanding parts of the listening exercises but rather check the correctness of the answers is something that should be taken into account in the future studies devoted to the subject.

The subjects were unable to name or to describe any listening strategies, which could help them to decode fast, connected speech in the future. The comments by the students rather expressed their subjective theories regarding the process of learning than actual existing methods which could improve their understanding of, for instance, a running commentary of their teachers or an authentic speech, which they are exposed to while watching the news or their favourite TV series. Hence, Teresa, 58 claimed that, "the more she listens to the radio the better she'll get at listening in the classroom" and Bożena, 50 noted that, "trying to talk to her friends in English [during the classes] will finally help her understand the native speakers."

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[3] The quotations coming from the students are my own translation, originally the interview was conducted mainly in Polish; therefore, the learners' comments were also made in Polish.

On the other hand, the learners were aware of some difficulties, even though they were not able to name or sometimes even describe them. For instance, the learners found fast speech, elision ("the disappearing ends of words" — Lidia, 53) and weak forms ("sometimes some words sound the same like others, and yet they are often pronounced in a different way when I look them up in the dictionary" — Beata, 63), as well as the difficulty of understanding people with different accents ("nowadays the people in the recordings have very strange accents, I think they [course book authors] do that on purpose to make it more difficult, I don't see the point — why can't we listen to "normal" English?" (Bogusław, 57).

On the whole, the listening materials attracted the most scathing and bitter criticism. All of the students claimed that they are never given any additional listening activities to practice outside the classroom and noted that the recordings, which they listened to neither answered their needs when it comes to the range of topics ("I'm not interested in listening about teenage pop singers" — Edmund, 73; "I'm unlikely to change my profession as I'm retired so what's the point of having the whole unit about it. It's also quite depressing. I'm sure my colleagues would say the same" — Bogumiła, 83), nor suited them when it comes to the quality of sound of the recordings and speed of delivery ("the recordings are too quiet, I can't hear properly, I have to sit closer to the CD player" — Irena, 59, "I hate that there is always some noise in the background, I know it's more authentic then but what's the point if I can't understand anything they say" — Elżbieta 73; "They think that everyone who learns English can talk that fast, I can't even listen that fast" (*sic.*) — Maria, 58). Teachers also fail to adapt the recordings to suit the needs of older adults, or to prepare any of their own. Moreover, the teachers were thought not to understand that their speech is often incomprehensible or to ignore the students' needs ("[the teacher] is extremely nice but he constantly forgets to slow down when he speaks, I think he is sometimes irritated that we don't understand what he says, but I know that he can find classes with us quite frustrating at times" — Violetta, 64). The last point expressed by Violetta regarding the impatience with the learners' problems highlights yet another issue which has a demotivating effect on older adults' learning, namely ageism and age discrimination, which can be observed in the classrooms and which influence students' willingness to rise to new challenges and overcome difficulties.

8. Conclusions

Even though listening is usually treated as one of the most challenging skills connected with learning the second language, students do not seem to get enough help with how to deal with complicated, rapid utterances. Moreover, students' knowledge of strategies and procedures related to listening comprehension is rather scarce and would benefit from additional practice and more input during the

lessons. This is especially important in the case of older adult learners as their cognitive abilities decline with age causing various problems with listening. Hearing loss, slower response time and language processing speed, less efficient encoding of information, slower retrieval of information from long-term memory, or less effective drawing on working memory (see Glisky 2007; Mast, Zimmerman & Rowe 2009) make it more difficult for the learners to process the information they hear, especially in a new, i.e. foreign, language. In order to facilitate the process of learning of this age group it would be recommendable to concentrate on their needs and cognitive abilities while discussing listening strategies and techniques used to improve comprehension. Therefore, devoting some time to analysing problems related to connected speech, or allowing the learners to notice certain regularities in the language would help the learners not only in enhancing their listening comprehension, but also in building their self-confidence. Finally, raising teachers' awareness of particular learning needs of this age group would benefit the students and improve their language competences at the same time making them feel more satisfied.

However, both the practice and the above research show that older adult students are often not given the same opportunities to take part in various courses as younger people. They are, for instance, often regarded as less socially important and as such do not need to be treated as a group with special educational needs. For instance, as of 2016, except for few self-study books, there is no course book in Poland designed specifically for older adults. Moreover, there are neither any university nor private language courses preparing teachers to deal with this particular age group, which causes countless problems both for the learners and for their teachers. Older adult learners are also exposed to the problem of ageism. According to R.N. Butler, who coined the term, it is a "process of systematic stereotyping and discrimination against people because they are old, just as racism and sexism accomplish this for skin color and gender" (2006, 41). Ageism can be easily observed in, e.g. the language classrooms, in which older adults are seen as a less receptive audience, simply due to the stereotypical treatment of their age by their usually much younger teachers and fellow students. This is closely connected to another common example of such unfavourable treatment, namely the group division in language schools, which is done according to one's level and not age. The resulting problems such as high level of stress for older learners and not infrequent irritation and lack of understanding of their special educational needs on the side of other students and sometimes even the teachers demotivates the learners.

The existence of such mixed age and ability groups only increases the scale of the problem. Findsen and Formosa (2012) point out that, [a]geism, which is deeply ingrained in social relations, arises from the younger generations' attempts to cease to identify with older persons as means to reduce their own sense of fear and dread of growing old. Ageism manifests itself in everyday life through a variety of myths and misconceptions such as that ageing results in a lack of productivity,

disengagement, inflexibility, senility", etc. (15). The lack of proper teaching materials which would be designed to answer the needs of this age group would also improve the quality of learning experience. Older adult students should not be discriminated against while choosing teaching materials, which are often unrelated to their interest and unsuitable to their cognitive abilities, or while dividing groups in which students learn at different speed. The problem is especially visible in the materials related to listening, as the recordings are too fast, too quiet and the background noises make them additionally difficult to understand.

Unfortunately, all of these problems, false prejudices and erroneous subjective opinions of the teachers influence the process of learning and decrease the enjoyment coming from continuing one's education despite the age. Fortunately, the growing group of older adults and their greater contribution to the society slowly changes the harmful stereotypes and subjective opinions associated with teaching listening, but also influences the growing interest in changes taking place in this period of human development and allows a more thorough analysis of this period of our lives. Such research will certainly improve the quality of lessons and give students the ability to study the language despite their reduced cognitive abilities. Learning how to listen effectively will, on the other hand, make the whole process of learning a new language less stressful, more enjoyable and easier for the older second language learner.

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Appendix 1

PART I — ABOUT YOU *(an interview)*

  1. Age group:

18–49   50+

  2. Sex:

Man   Woman

  3. Your English language level:

  4. beginner   pre-intermediate

  5. Type of school in which you study English:

private   public   other (please specify)

  6. What is your occupation?

  7. How long have you been studying English for?

  8. In which country do you study English?

  9. What is your mother tongue?

10. Why do you study English?

PART II — ABOUT YOUR LISTENING CLASSES

1. Can you order the following language skills on the scale from 4 — the most difficult, to 1 — the least difficult — *speaking, reading, listening, writing*

2. Can you explain why you decided to order the skills in such a way?

Listening procedure:

1. Do you often do listening exercises in the classroom?

always/usually/often/rarely/never

2. Are they an important part of your lesson?

always/usually/often/rarely/never

3. Do you enjoy them? Why/ why not?

always/usually/often/rarely/never

4. Are you given clear instructions before the listening?
always/usually/often/rarely/never

5. Are you given a clear reason/ goal for doing the listening?
always/usually/often/rarely/never

6. Does your teacher pre-teach difficult lexis?
always/usually/often/rarely/never

7. Does your teacher pre-teach unknown or difficult grammar?
always/usually/often/rarely/never

8. Does your teacher introduce context before the listening?
always/usually/often/rarely/never

9. Does your teacher focus on some difficult parts while you are listening?
always/usually/often/rarely/never

10. Does your teacher re-play important parts so that you notice some elements?
always/usually/often/rarely/never

11. Does your teacher post-teach difficult lexis?
always/usually/often/rarely/never

12. Does your teacher post-teach unknown or difficult grammar?
always/usually/often/rarely/never

13. Are you given any feedback on the mistakes you make while listening? If so, in what form?
always/usually/often/rarely/never

14. Are you given any explanation and further practice to help you avoid these mistakes in the future? If yes, can you give some examples?
always/usually/often/rarely/never

Listening strategies:
1. Are you aware of the existence of listening strategies? Please name or describe them.
2. Does you teacher introduce any listening strategies to help you understand the text? Can you name them?
3. Does your teacher provide some pronunciation practice? What kind of practice?
4. Are you aware of some difficulties you may encounter while listening? Please name or describe them.
5. Do you know how to overcome them? If so, how?
6. Do you think that listening practice could improve your listening comprehension?
7. Are you often tested on your listening comprehension? If so, how?
8. Have you ever been tested to check the improvement of your listening strategies?

Listening materials:
1. Does your teacher use other forms of listening than the course book recordings? If so, what are they?
2. Do you find the recordings useful in real life context? Why/why not?
3. Do you find the recordings interesting? Why/why not?
4. Do you find the recordings challenging? Why/why not?
5. Does your teacher adapt the listening materials so that the exercises are easier for you to do? (think about the pace, volume, etc.). If so, how?
6. Are you given any listening practice outside the classroom?
7. Do you try to listen to any materials of your own choice outside the classroom? Why/why not?