

Perceived benefits, motivations and preferences for foreign language learning by older adults. Insights from an initiative in Cuenca, Ecuador

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ABSTRACT

This study explores the perceptions and attitudes of older adults from Cuenca, Ecuador, towards English language learning. A total of 151 people (mean age 70.3 years) responded to a questionnaire consisting of 50 items. Factor, multiple regression and cluster analysis were conducted with the objective to define the dimensions underlying older adults' perceptions, motivations, and ambitions to learn later in life a foreign language and their relation to the socio-demographic characteristics of the participating group. Findings suggest that the interest to study a foreign language is based on the perceptions that it improves a person's social interaction, personal development, functioning and maintenance of mind and memory, and it activates and makes life more dynamic. Results revealed that the participants' main motivation to take an English language course is related to the increased potential of using this language in daily life and the ability of insightful reading of English texts. The duration of the course and the attainment of a certificate were determinant factors, and enabled the grouping of the participants according to their preferences with respect to the practical design of an English course. Furthermore, age and school level were found to be the motivating variables affecting most of the participants' responses.

Keywords: Older students, educational motives, learning benefits, EFL.

RESUMEN

El presente estudio analiza las percepciones y actitudes que tienen los adultos mayores de la ciudad de Cuenca, Ecuador hacia el aprendizaje del inglés. Un total de 151 adultos mayores (con edad promedio de 70.3 años) respondió a un cuestionario con 50 ítems. Se llevó a cabo análisis factoriales, de regresión múltiple y cluster con el propósito de definir las dimensiones subyacentes en las percepciones, motivaciones y ambiciones de los adultos mayores para aprender un idioma extranjero, y su relación con las características sociodemográficas de los participantes. Los resultados señalan que el interés por estudiar un idioma extranjero está basado en la percepción de que aquello mejora la interacción social de las personas, su desarrollo personal, el funcionamiento y mantenimiento de la mente y memoria, y que activa y vuelve su vida más dinámica. Los resultados además revelaron que la principal motivación de los participantes para tomar un curso de inglés está relacionada con el potencial de usar este idioma en la vida diaria y el de leer profusamente en esa lengua extranjera. La duración del curso y la obtención de un certificado fueron factores determinantes que permitieron agrupar a los participantes en función de sus preferencias en lo que respecta al diseño práctico de un curso de inglés. Adicionalmente, la edad y el nivel de instrucción fueron variables determinantes de motivación que influyeron en la mayor parte de las respuestas dadas por los participantes.

Palabras clave: Adultos mayores, motivaciones para aprender, beneficios del aprendizaje, EFL.

1. INTRODUCTION

In today's world, older adults are not only increasing in number but also becoming more active members in the society. According to the United Nations, which considers people aged 60 and above to be older adults, there were over 200 million seniors in 1950, which increased to over 800 million in 2012, and it is expected to increase to 2 billion in 2050 (United Nations Population Fund, 2012: 19-20). According to the census carried out by the National Institute of Statistics and Census (INEC) in 2010, Ecuador counted 14,483,499 inhabitants of whom 986,294 were senior citizens (65 and above). Of this population, 57.9% were between 65 and 74 year old and 42.1% between 75 and 100. In 2015, this population increased to 1,108,991, respectively 61% in the age class 65-74 and 39% in the age class 75-100. By 2020, INEC projects that the number of senior citizens in Ecuador will raise to 1,310,297 and that 62.1% of them will be between 65 and 74 year and 38% will be in the age class 75 to 100. With other words by 2020 shall the group of elderly people in Ecuador grow with 24.7%. Likewise, in the province of Azuay (in the south of Ecuador) where this study was carried out 58,641 senior citizens were registered in 2010, 64,110 in 2015, and by 2020 it is expected that there will be about 73,001 senior citizens in this province (INEC, 2015).

The expanding group of elderly people seems to be significant worldwide and at local level, and will have certainly an impact on social, economic, health, education and political matters of the society. Governments might need to adapt their policies in order to ensure a good quality life for this age group, since the future demographic tendency is a dwindling of the young population relative to the increasing older population (Nizamuddin, 1999; Requejo, 2008). Even more, as stated by the United Nations World Assembly on Aging (1983: 38), education must be considered as a basic human right and should be "*available without discrimination to the elderly*". In the context of instruction, even though the number of young people engaged in formal education is evidently larger than the number of older adults, there are studies which indicate that the percentage of senior citizens taking courses at university level has increased worldwide over the last years (Kim & Kim, 2014).

The initiative of targeting older adult education as part of lifelong learning is not new. In fact, in the United States discussions on these issues started already in the 1960s (Cummins *et al.*, 2015), and the first countries to open formal university courses for older adults were England and France by the early 1970's (Yuni & Urbano, 2005). In Spain, a number of universities have been working with older adults in different training programs since 1993 (Requejo, 2008). In Ecuador, the University for Older Adults, which is a program endorsed by the University of Cuenca, was opened in Cuenca in 2012. This university offers courses in gerontology, good living, electronic communication, and micro-entrepreneurship. This is a pioneer academic project in Ecuador which aims to promote an active, healthy, and productive aging for older adults. It has already benefited around 400 older adults ("Nuevo", 2014).

1.1. *Older adults' motives for learning and benefits from instruction*

Several studies explored the reasons why older adults participate in learning activities (Boulton-Lewis, 2010; Purdie & Boulton-Lewis, 2003) such as in social areas (as opposed to scientific-technical disciplines). The main triggering factors seems the overcoming of the situation of inactivity in life, a reason to leave home and meet people, personal achievement, among other reasons (Requejo, 2008; Villar *et al.*, 2010). Manheimer (2005) summarized the responsible factors into intellectual stimulation, sociability, and skills enhancement. Likewise, Scala (1996: 748-749) mentions two motivational categories for older adults to go back to school: a) cognitive interest and desire to learn, including reasons like academic interest, intellectual stimulation, and learning for the sake of learning; and b) personal growth and satisfaction, which involves "*enrichment, enjoyment, self-satisfaction, bettering oneself, and a sense of accomplishment*". In the same vein, Mehotra (2003) mentioned that the maintenance and improvement of cognitive functioning, the enhancement of a better sense of self-esteem and personal utility, and the expansion of social networks, as well as the gain of more social support are some of the positive benefits older adults obtain from formal education. On the other hand, in the field of second/foreign language learning by seniors, studies have shown that their motivations are *instrumental* and *integrative*. Instrumental motivation means that the older adult has an imperative

reason to learn a second language, while integrative motivation refers to the need of communicating and being part of a community (Larsen-Freeman & Long, 1994; Dörnyei, 2001). In this light, according to a study carried out in Argentina, the most important reason why older adults study English is enjoyment, and when they do it for practical motives, the top reasons are the need to read in English and to speak it with their family or other English speaking foreigners (Enriquez, 2007). Likewise, Kim & Kim (2014: 132) reported that the motivational construct of self-actualization was found to be the most influential, indicating that an immediate sense of enjoyment, satisfaction, and achievement is crucial for elderly learners' in EFL learning. In addition, a study on older Russian immigrants to the USA indicated that the main reasons why those immigrants wanted to learn English are integration in order to become part of the American society; meaningful communication, in order to have satisfying conversations and relationships with those who spoke English; and autonomy to participate more independently in daily life (Hubenthal, 2004).

In spite of the findings mentioned above, there is limited information about older adults' participation in learning activities (Kops, 2008) and few empirical studies have explored the actual benefits of participating in formal education at older age (Villar *et al.*, 2010). Analogous, Hubenthal (2004) and Alvarado (2008) stated that little is known about second language learning in late adulthood. Additionally, Kim & Kim (2014: 120) indicated that second language (L2) learning experiences among the elderly have not yet received particular attention from researchers and policy makers. Similarly, in Ecuador, studies on this area are limited; therefore, in an attempt to contribute to a better understanding of older adults' participation in educational programs, particularly in foreign language courses, this study aimed to ascertain their motivations, perceptions, attitudes, goals, and preferences for taking an English course. In particular, the study addressed the following three research questions:

- What are the benefit dimensions that underlie seniors' perceptions of attending a foreign-language course, and are the perceptions related to their socio-demographic background?
- What is the structure underlying the motivation/ambitions of seniors for taking an English course, and to what extent are motivation and ambitions influenced by the socio-demographic characteristics of the interested elderly people?
- Can the respondents be classified in distinct groups on the basis of their perception, motivation and ambitions?

2. METHODOLOGY

2.1 *Participants and context*

The participants registered voluntarily after advertisements were published in local newspapers and broadcasted on the radio. These ads were also put up on bulletin boards at a center for senior citizens who promote active ageing and are part of a government institute in charge of social security. This facility was selected with the purpose of targeting the retirees who currently attend other courses such as yoga, brain gym, gymnastics, guitar, and singing. The only registration requirement was to be 65 or older. Obviously, the population is a self-selective sample, which is not -and it is not intended- to be representative for the background population. The sample, however, allows exploring the structure of, and relationships among, senior citizens' perception of benefits, motives and organizational preferences concerning second language courses. While the findings may not be representative as such, we believe that they allow carrying out exploratory research that yields suggestive hypotheses for future (confirmatory) studies, especially concerning the underlying structure of the responses and the relationships between constructs.

In the end, a convenience sample of 151 participants, 59 males and 92 females, was obtained, with an average age of 70.3 years, of which 27 participants have only primary education, 59 high school education and 65 went to university. Table 1 summarizes the participants' socio-demographic profile.

Table 1. Participants' socio-demographic profile.

| Parameter | Group | n | % |
|--------------|-------------|----|-----|
| Age range | 65-70 years | 95 | 63% |
| | 71-80 years | 49 | 32% |
| | 81-85 years | 7 | 5% |
| Gender | Male | 59 | 39% |
| | Female | 92 | 60% |
| School level | Elementary | 27 | 18% |
| | High school | 59 | 39% |
| | University | 65 | 43% |

2.2. Data collection

A questionnaire was used to measure the benefits perceived by the participants in a second language course, their motivation and ambitions in terms of the acquisition of the English language, preferences for concrete organizational features of the course (e.g., weekday or weekend courses), their importance, and relation with selected socio-demographic features (age, gender, and school level).

The questionnaire contained five main sections. The sections A and B deal with the preferences for concrete course features such as schedule, duration, certificates, and the alike (see Appendix). Section C measures the self-assessed initial level of English and the intended achievement level. Section D probes towards the motives/reasons for taking the course and includes 10 specific reasons for learning the language. Finally, section E aims at measuring the potential benefits that the participants -senior citizens- perceive in attending a foreign language course. Based on the literature, 10 potential benefits were identified and we attempted to measure each of these by means of two items (i.e., for a total of 20 perceived-benefit items).

A pretest of the questionnaire with six seniors who were not included in the final population allowed us to fine-tune the questionnaire and its administration. Before letting the respondents fill out the questionnaire, the researchers explained the purpose of the study and addressed possible concerns of the participants. Next, the researchers read out loud in turn each item of the questionnaire and waited until the participants responded.

3. ANALYSIS AND RESULTS

The data were analyzed using the open-source package *R*. In the analyses below, after a short description of the data by summary statistics, the researchers focused on the structure underlying the responses to separate sections of the questionnaire by means of Principal Component Analysis and Factor Analysis, interrelated the answers between several sections by means of Multiple Correlation Analysis and Regression Analysis, and looked for respondent typologies by means of Cluster Analysis.

3.1. Perceived benefits of taking foreign language courses

Summary description of the responses

The average response on the 20 perceived benefit items is shown in Figure 1. The results are presented in descending order of mean response on the scale from 0 (*rather less*) to 2 (*rather more*), reflecting the nature of the conceptual underpinnings of the 20 perceived benefit questions.

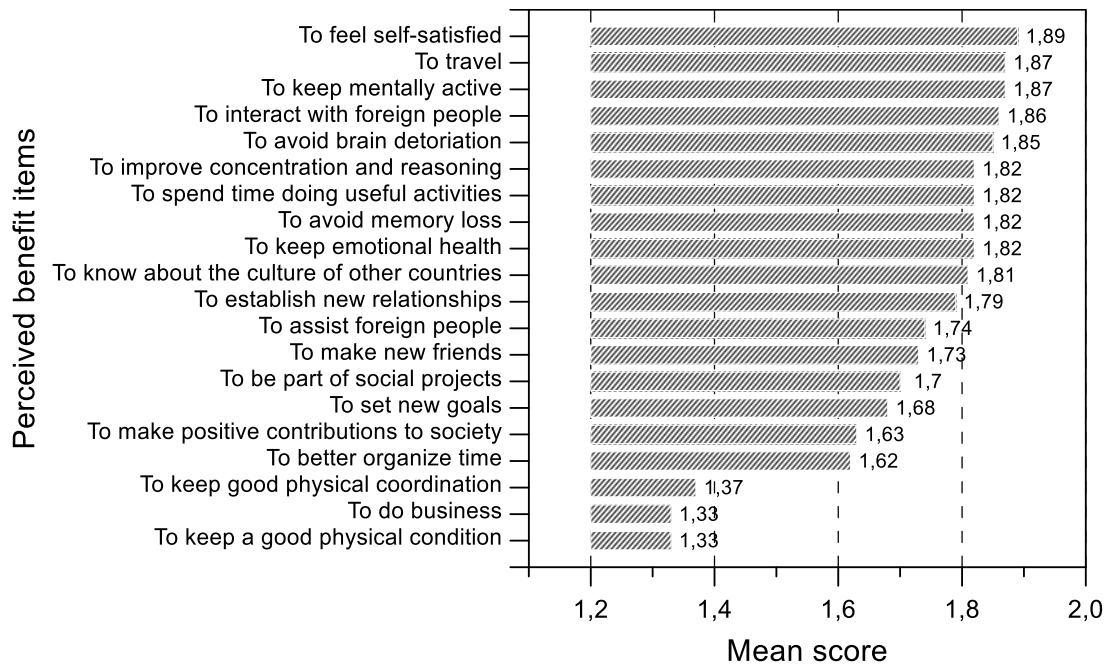


Figure 1. Mean score of the respondents on the perceived benefits following a foreign language course.

Structural analysis of perceived benefit items

To reveal the structure underlying the perceived benefit items, the responses were subjected to a principal component analysis. From the scree plot (see Figure 2), two or at most three principal components were identified. A three-component solution was adopted because the results of an exploratory (oblique) factor analysis seem to reveal a meaningful, yet simple structure. Based on an inspection of the salient factor loadings, the three factors were labeled as:

- Social interaction and personal development benefits (*social/personal*)
- Mental well-being benefits (*mental*)
- Social integration and activity benefits (*activity/integration*)

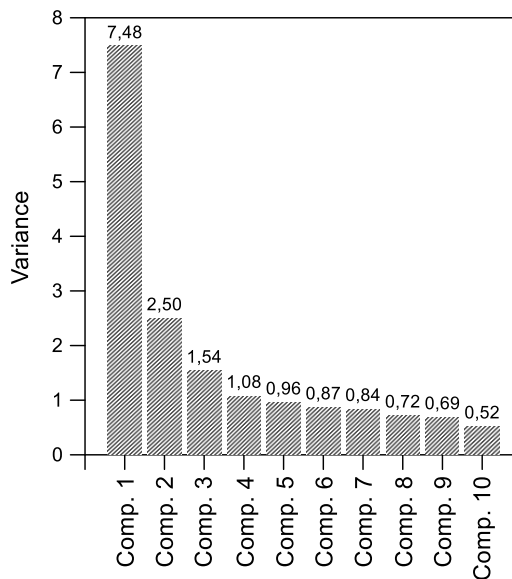


Figure 2. Principal component screen plot of perceived benefits.

Table 2 presents the salient loadings in descending order of magnitude.

Table 2. Results of the structural analysis of perceived benefits.

| Section E, question number | Factor loading | Item |
|---|----------------|--|
| <i>Social interaction and Personal development benefits</i> | | |
| 19 | 0.78 | To interact with foreign people |
| 7 | 0.72 | To assist foreign people |
| 17 | 0.68 | To set new goals |
| 12 | 0.65 | To spend time doing useful activities |
| 16 | 0.64 | To travel |
| 13 | 0.61 | To make new friends |
| 14 | 0.57 | To feel self-satisfied |
| 8 | 0.57 | To know about the culture of other countries |
| 6 | 0.55 | To establish new relationships |
| <i>Mental well-being benefits</i> | | |
| 11 | 0.88 | To keep mentally active |
| 18 | 0.76 | To avoid brain deterioration |
| 15 | 0.55 | To keep emotional health |
| 1 | 0.55 | To avoid memory loss |
| 9 | 0.49 | To improve concentration and reasoning |
| 4 | 0.47 | To better organize time |
| <i>Activity/integration benefits</i> | | |
| 2 | 0.95 | To keep a good physical condition |
| 10 | 0.87 | To keep good physical coordination |
| 3 | 0.61 | To make positive contributions to de society |
| 5 | 0.47 | To be part of social projects |

The *social/personal* factor was named such because it encompasses activities related to social relationships and interactions as well as the desire for personal growth; the *mental* factor relates to perceived benefits in terms of the functioning and maintenance of mind and memory; and the *activity/integration* factor involves activities related to keeping an active and dynamic life. The first and third constructs were also reported in the study by Villar *et al.* (2010: 1366), in which the older adults who participated in university programs acknowledged positive outcomes including both social gains, such as having more friends, and psychological gains, such as self-satisfaction, life joy and feeling more useful or active. The second construct (*mental*) was not addressed in this study.

The results from this study show that the respondents differentiate in three major dimensions of the perceived potential benefits of EFL courses. This might be useful to differentiate course participants on the basis of the benefits they perceive for their participation, and to design courses in function of the type of benefit that is sought by the participants. These issues are, in part, the objective of the ensuing analyses.

Perceived benefits of taking foreign language courses: socio-demographic determinants

In order to address the first research question (i.e., *can one identify groups of respondents seeking different types of benefits from a foreign-language course?*), each of the three factor scores of the respondents was correlated with each of the three socio-demographic indicators (age, gender, and school level). A multivariate regression analysis was carried out with each factor score as the dependent variable and the age, gender and school level of the respondent as independent variables. As this is an exploratory analysis, we do not have specific (directional) hypotheses to subject to significance testing. No significant relationship was found between the three socio-demographic variables and the extent to which the participants perceive social/personal (factor 1) or mental (factor 2) benefits. This suggests

that the extent to which the participants perceive social or mental benefits is not obviously determined by objective characteristics such as gender, age, or schooling level; possibly, the perception of these benefits belongs more to the psychological or sociological realm. These conjectures should be submitted to further confirmatory tests. By contrast, factor 3, which refers to *activity/integration*, is statistically significantly related to age and schooling level, as shown in Table 3: older participants and those with higher education tend to agree more that participating in a language course might help them keep a physically active and integrated life.

Table 3. Multivariate linear regression analysis between *age/school level* and *activity/integration* (Factor 3).

| Socio-demographic indicator | Estimate | SE | t-value | p |
|-----------------------------|----------|------|---------|-------|
| Age | 0.06 | 0.03 | 2.35 | 0.02* |
| School level | -0.34 | 0.17 | -2.03 | 0.04* |

*p<0.05

3.2. Motivations for taking an EFL course

Summary description of responses

Figure 3 shows the mean scores of the participants' motivations for taking the course in order of descending importance, ranging from 1 (*less important*) to 3 (*more important*).

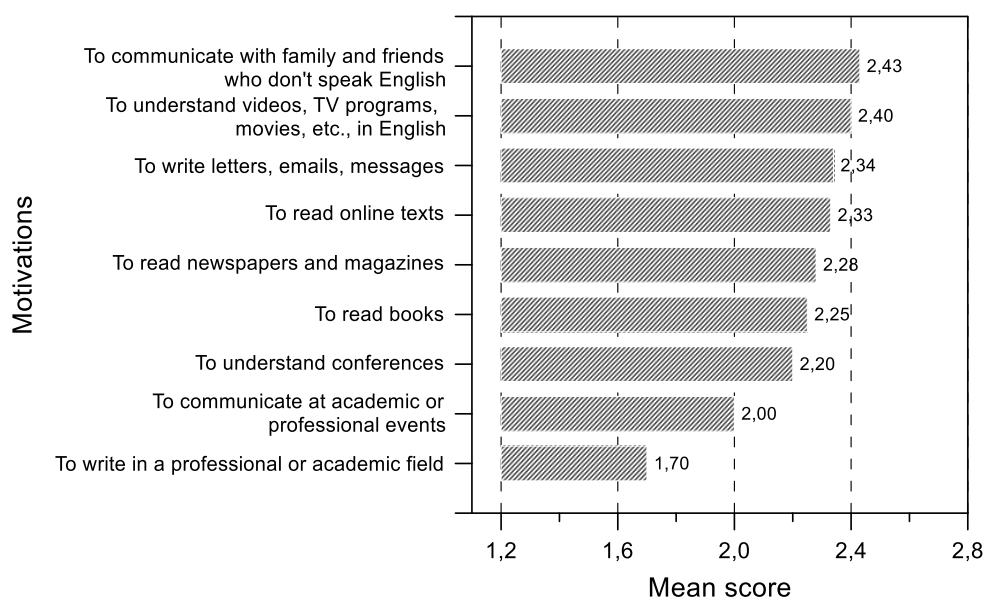


Figure 3. Mean score of the participants' motivations for taking a foreign language course.

Structural analysis of motivations

Again, a PCA and an oblique factor analysis were carried out to find out if these nine items shared an underlying structure. The principal component analysis points to at most two factors. Since these can be meaningfully interpreted by means of an oblique factor analysis, we opted for an oblique two-factor solution. Our interpretation distinguishes between a factor related to more immediately *useful/utilitarian motives* and a factor mainly related to *insightful reading*.

As can be seen from the loadings (see Table 4), the nine reasons for taking the course can be grouped into two major factors: the first, labeled *useful/utilitarian motivations*, includes an interest to develop and/or improve English skills in order to apply them practically in daily life; while the second, labeled *insightful reading motivation*, features the interest for taking an English course in order to be able to read, especially books, newspapers, and periodicals.

Table 4. Results of the structural analysis of perceived *useful/utilitarian* motivation.

| Section D, question number | Factor loading | Item |
|--------------------------------------|----------------|--|
| <i>Mental well-being benefits</i> | | |
| 4 | 0.83 | To understand conferences |
| 3 | 0.82 | To understand videos, TV programs, movies, etc. in English |
| 1 | 0.75 | To communicate with family and friends who don't speak Spanish |
| 5 | 0.72 | To read online texts |
| 2 | 0.69 | To communicate at academic or professional events |
| 8 | 0.65 | To write letters, emails, messages |
| 9 | 0.56 | To write in a professional or academic field |
| 6 | 0.27 | To read newspapers and magazines |
| <i>Activity/integration benefits</i> | | |
| 7 | 0.98 | To read books |
| 6 | 0.60 | To read newspapers and magazines |
| 5 | 0.19 | To read online texts |
| 8 | 0.12 | To write letters, emails, messages |
| 2 | -0.20 | To communicate at academic or professional events |

Motivations for taking an EFL course: determinants

As before, the researchers tried to explain the factor scores of the respondents for the two motivations identified in this factor analysis; this was approached by regressing the factor score coefficients on the socio-demographic characteristics as well as on the (three factor scores for) benefits sought from an EFL-course identified in section 1.2 (see Table 5: A, B & C).

Not surprisingly, the variable *school level* was found to be significantly related to the *insightful reading* motivation factor: the higher their schooling level, the more motivated the respondents are to take an English course in order to be able to read books and periodicals.

There is also evidence of a highly significant impact on the *insightful reading* motivation factor of the *social benefit* factor, implying that senior citizens who perceive more social benefits from foreign language courses are more inclined than others to take the course in order to be able to read books and periodicals in the acquired language.

As shown in the regression analysis, senior citizens who tend to perceive more social and activity/integration benefits from an EFL course tend also to be more motivated by *useful/utilitarian* reasons. The variable *school level* also explains the factor score for *useful/utilitarian* reasons: the higher their schooling level, the more are participants motivated by *useful/utilitarian* reasons.

3.3. Ambitions for taking an EFL course

Summary descriptions of responses

Regarding the current and expected level of English as self-assessed by the participants, Figures 4 and 5 show the mean scores in descending order of English ability (ranging from 0=*None*, 1=*Poor*, 2=*Fair*, 3=*Good*, to 4=*Excellent*). The results show that most of the participants rated themselves as having between *none* and *poor* knowledge of English; in addition, the majority of them expected to achieve between fair and good level of English in relation to the four skills, yet no explicit leaning towards any specific skill was observed.

Table 5. Multivariate linear regression analysis between different indicators and factors (A, D), and between factors (B, C).

| Item | Estimate | SE | t-value | p |
|---|----------|-------|---------|--------------|
| <i>A: Correlation between socio-demographic indicators and insightful reading motivation (Factor 5)</i> | | | | |
| Age | -0.01 | 0.03 | -0.25 | 0.81 |
| Gender | 0.05 | 0.26 | 0.19 | 0.85 |
| School level | 0.44 | 0.17 | 2.65 | 0.01** |
| <i>B: Correlation between social/personal, mental and activity/integration perceived benefits (Factors 1, 2 & 3) and insightful reading motivation (Factor 5)</i> | | | | |
| <i>Social/personal perceived benefit</i> | | | | |
| | 0.65 | 0.15 | 4.30 | 0.0005*** |
| <i>Mental perceived benefit</i> | | | | |
| | 0.10 | 0.15 | 0.64 | 0.52 |
| <i>Activity/integration perceived benefit</i> | | | | |
| | 0.29 | 0.15 | 1.95 | 0.06 |
| <i>C: Correlation between social/personal, mental and activity/integration perceived benefits (Factors 1, 2 & 3) and useful/utilitarian motivation (Factor 4)</i> | | | | |
| <i>Social/personal perceived benefit</i> | | | | |
| | 1.88 | 0.41 | 4.56 | 0.0000194*** |
| <i>Mental perceived benefit</i> | | | | |
| | -0.43 | 0.41 | -1.03 | 0.30 |
| <i>Activity/integration perceived benefit</i> | | | | |
| | 1.15 | 0.4 | 2.83 | 0.01** |
| <i>D: Correlation between ambitions and social/personal, mental and activity/integration perceived benefits (Factors 1, 2 & 3) and gender and school level</i> | | | | |
| <i>Social/personal perceived benefit</i> | | | | |
| | 0.33 | 0.38 | 0.88 | 0.38 |
| <i>Mental perceived benefit</i> | | | | |
| | 0.11 | 0.34 | 0.32 | 0.75 |
| <i>Activity/integration perceived benefit</i> | | | | |
| | 0.90 | 0.36 | 2.52 | 0.01* |
| Age | | -0.20 | 0.09 | -2.31 |
| Gender | | 0.82 | 0.73 | 1.13 |
| School level | | -0.20 | 0.25 | -0.78 |

*SE: Standard Error; p<0.05, **p<0.01, ***p<0.001

Structural analysis of ambitions

The difference between the expected and actual level of English for each of the four separate aspects was computed and these numbers were subjected to a PCA. Only one principal component was identified in these four scores, confirming the expectation that the respondents do not differentiate between the aspects of their intended performance in the English language. For this reason, and for further analysis, these four difference numbers (difference between current and intended level of mastery) were added into one overall *ambition* score. The respondents have either high or low ambitions, irrespective of the aspect of mastery of the foreign language; or at least that is what they state.

Ambitions for taking an EFL course: determinants

In order to study possible determinants of the EFL ambition of the participants, a multiple correlation analysis was carried out between *ambition* as a dependent variable and the previously derived factor score coefficients for perceived benefits and the socio-demographic variables as independent variables. As shown in Table 5: D, there seems to be a relationship between the *ambition* score on one hand and the variables *age* and the *activity/integration* factor on the other hand: the younger the seniors and the more they perceive the activity/integration benefit, the higher their stated EFL ambition.

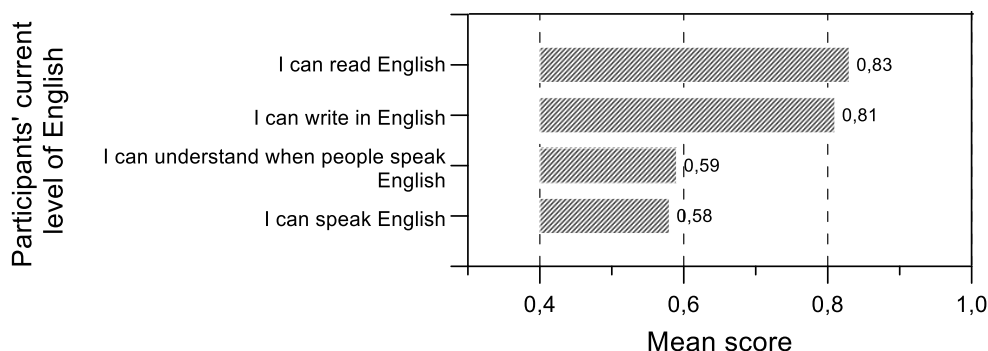


Figure 4. Mean score for the current level of English as assessed by the participants.

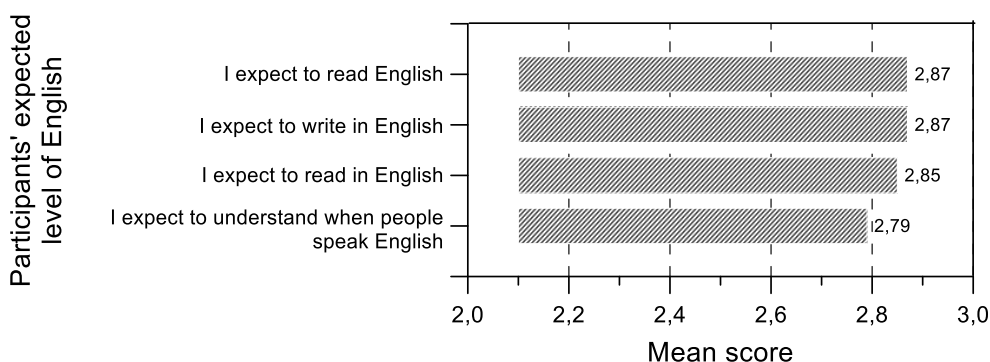


Figure 5. Mean score of the expected level of English as assessed by the participants.

3.4. Preferences for design features for an EFL course

The last part of the questionnaire analyzed is Section A, featuring the preferences of older adults regarding the design characteristics for an EFL course. Figure 6 shows the mean scores of these preferences coded on a scale from 0 to 2 for the following features: a) number of hours per session (coded as 1 = one hour, 1.5 = one and a half hours, and 2 = two hours); b) duration (1 = three months, 1.5 = six months, and 2 = nine months); c) number of sessions per week (1 = one session, 1.25 = two sessions, 1.5 = three sessions, 1.75 = four sessions, and 2 = five sessions); d) certificate (1 = approval certificate and 2 = attendance certificate); e) time of the day (1 = morning, 1.5 = afternoon, and 2 = evening); f) day of the week (1 = weekdays, 1.5 = any day, and 2 = weekends); g) class size (1 = ten students, 1.5 = 20 students, and 2 = 30 students); and h) learning mode (1 = on campus and 2 = blended learning). The results show that the participants would be more inclined to take a six-month English course on weekdays, in the morning or afternoon, two or three sessions a week for one and a half hours, and each session with no more than 20 students in the classroom; they also state that they would prefer to take such a course on campus and get an approval certificate upon course completion.

The importance of the preferences stated above was inquired in section B of the questionnaire; as the majority of the participants indicated that all of the designed features were important to them, no further analysis of these data seemed useful.

There is evidence, however, that the respondents differ, sometimes markedly, in their preference for specific features, which led us to investigate the possibility that there are segments in the group with different preference profiles. Therefore, a cluster analysis was conducted in order to identify the number and nature of such demand segments. If those segments can be found, it likely suggests that different groups of people have specific needs for the design of English courses. A cluster analysis is a logical procedure which aggregates objects into groups based on their similarities and differences (Palumbo *et al.*, 2010). The k-means method of clustering was applied to the data obtained from this section of the questionnaire, where the responses on each item were coded on a scale from 1 to 2 in order to standardize the range of the responses across the questions. We opted for a three-cluster solution.

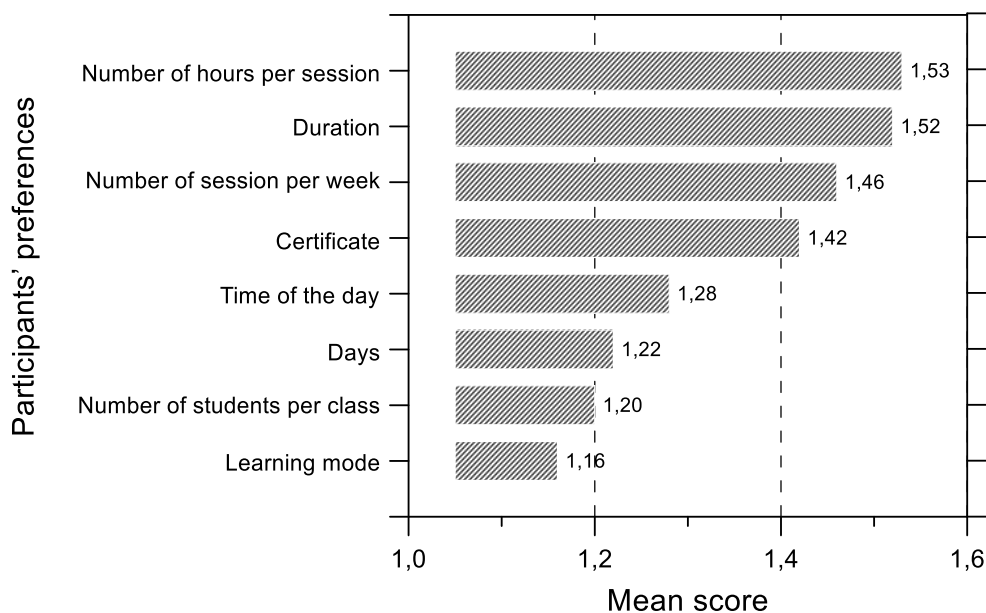


Figure 6. Mean score of the participants' preferences for the mode, intensity and organization of an EFL-course.

Three clusters of roughly comparable size, 47, 43 and 34 people respectively, were found by the procedure, as shown in Table 6. The participants belonging to the first group -47 individuals- (labeled *relaxed students*) are in between in terms of the number of hours a week and the duration of the course, in comparison with the other two groups, but they do not want an approval certificate. Group 2 participants -43 individuals- (labeled *hardworking students*) seem to prefer a larger number of class hours a week, an approval certificate, and a longer program. And the third group of 34 individuals (labeled *practical students*) seems to consist of participants who want fewer hours a week, a shorter course, but do want an approval certificate.

Table 6. Mean preference for features per cluster.

| Factor | Cluster 1 n=47 | Cluster 2 n=43 | Cluster 3 n=34 |
|---|-------------------|-------------------|-------------------|
| <i>Social/personal</i> perceived benefit | 0.33 | 0.38 | 0.88 |
| <i>Mental</i> perceived benefit | 0.11 | 0.34 | 0.32 |
| <i>Activity/integration</i> perceived benefit | 0.90 | 0.36 | 2.52 |
| Age | -0.20 | 0.09 | 0.01* |
| Gender | 0.82 | 0.73 | 0.02* |
| School level | -0.20 | 0.25 | 0.26 |
| <i>Social/personal</i> perceived benefit | 0.33 | 0.38 | 0.88 |
| <i>Mental</i> perceived benefit | 0.11 | 0.34 | 0.32 |

Next, a multivariate regression analysis was carried out again in order to find out which other variables (sociodemographics, ambitions, motivations, or perceived benefits) in the questionnaire may help determine which type of participant belongs to each group. As shown in Table 7, statistically significant results were found only with the variable *age* in cluster 2 (Table 7: A) and the variable *school level* in cluster 3 (Table 7: B), meaning that the younger the participants, the higher the probability of belonging to group 2 (*hardworking students*), and the higher the school level, the higher the probability of belonging to group 3 (*practical students*).

Table 7. Multivariate linear regression analysis between clusters and indicators (A, B).

| | | | | |
|---|-------|------|-------|-------|
| <i>A: Correlation between hardworking students (cluster 2) and age, gender and school level</i> | | | | |
| Age | -0.02 | 0.01 | -2.20 | 0.03* |
| Gender | -0.07 | 0.09 | -0.83 | 0.41 |
| School level | -0.02 | 0.06 | -0.25 | 0.80 |
| <i>B: Correlation between practical students (cluster 3) and age, gender and school level</i> | | | | |
| Age | 0.01 | 0.01 | 1.53 | 0.13 |
| Gender | -0.02 | 0.08 | -0.25 | 0.80 |
| School level | 0.12 | 0.06 | 2.12 | 0.04* |

*p<0.05

4. DISCUSSION

The purpose of this study was to find what the perceptions, attitudes, motivations, goals, and preferences of older adults from Cuenca are for taking an English course. Even though this research is exploratory, which could be considered not representative, it may offer new perspectives like interesting correlations among different aspects of the questionnaire, and thus, provide research questions for future studies.

The first research question was about the benefit dimensions that underlie seniors' perceptions of a foreign-language course and their relation to the participants' socio-demographic characteristics. The findings suggest three perceived benefit constructs: the first referring to fostering social interaction and personal development, the second regarding the functioning and maintenance of mind and memory, and the third involving keeping an active and dynamic life, which are in line with the main factors influencing older adults to engage in education such as intellectual stimulation, sociability, skills enhancement, joy of learning, keeping updated, personal growth, and the desire of belonging to a community (Findsen & Formosa, 2011; Hubenthal, 2004; Kim & Kim, 2014; Lakin *et al.*, 2007; Requejo, 2008; Romaniuk & Romaniuk, 1982; Scala, 1996). This is also corroborated by the findings of a study carried out in Barcelona and Valencia (Spain), which indicated that the participants derived positives benefits from attending university programs, including self-satisfaction, feeling more useful or active and making friends (Villar *et al.*, 2010). Out of the three constructs mentioned, only the variables age and school level of the participants were found to have a significant positive correlation with the construct *keeping an active and dynamic life*: older seniors with higher education are more aware that an English course might help them to remain active.

The second question concerns the structure underlying the motivation and ambitions of seniors for taking an English course and the relation of their motivation to the participants' socio-demographic characteristics and to the benefits that they perceive from taking such a course. With respect to their motivations, the findings show that their most important motivations are to communicate with family and friends, to understand videos, TV programs, and movies, to write letters, emails, and messages, and to read online texts, newspapers, magazines, and books. These results are in light with the findings by Enriquez (2007), who stated that when older adults study English for practical reasons, these are related to reading and talking to foreign people and relatives. Similarly, Kim and Kim (2014) found that one of the motivational constructs that function in older learners is *instrumentality*, meaning as defined by Gardner (1985: 52), "*the economic and practical advantages of learning English*". Furthermore, as depicted it appears that the variable *school level* is a determinant for both constructs *useful/utilitarian motives* and *insightful reading*, which prompts us to suggest that by designing English courses for older adults according to their school level, students might be more successful since each group would receive the type and amount of materials they can deal with. Additionally, this might provide them with more learning opportunities to succeed in their courses since they could make progress at their own pace. Regarding the relationship of the participants' motivation with their perceived benefits, the results show that the participants who perceive more *social interaction/personal development* and *activity/integration benefits* are more prone to take an English course for *useful/utilitarian reasons*. In fact, the agreement between the most important benefits perceived by older adults and their reasons for

taking the course seems to be coherent: older adults think that by learning English they would mainly be able to interact with foreign people as well as to keep an active and dynamic life, and this might be reached by attending conferences and communicating with people who do not speak English, as their main motivations are shown in the results. A related finding is that reported by Hubenthal (2004: 111) in a motivation analysis of older Russian immigrants learning English in the United States, in which it was found that their main motivations were “*to integrate into American society, engage in meaningful communication, and be autonomous*”. The results also revealed that the participants who perceive more social interaction and personal development benefits are more interested in learning English to get involved in insightful reading. This might suggest that elderly learners who want to feel self-satisfied, for instance, conceive reading in English as a tool to achieve this goal; and this, as aforementioned, would be determined by the school level of the participants: higher-level education participants are more motivated by reading. The pursuit of self-satisfaction by older adults has also been reported by Scala (1996: 768), in a study of the motives of elderly learners for going back to school, which reflects that “doing something useful” was among the most important reasons mentioned.

In terms of the participants’ ambitions for taking an English course, the findings of this study reveal that they do not differentiate among the four main skills to be developed (reading, writing, listening, and speaking), yet they just wish to achieve *fair* and *good* levels of English in general. Additionally, younger participants and those who perceive more *activity/integration* benefits were more likely to report higher ambitions. This finding might be of interest for those involved in curriculum design for this age group, especially when deciding on the material, activities, and methodology: younger students might demand more challenging tasks and a heavier workload than the older ones.

Finally, the third research question deals with the preferences of older adults regarding the features of an English course. The findings show that the variables *time* (number of class hours and course duration) and *certificate seeking* are what most concern the respondents. In fact, these variables determined the emergence of three groups of participants: one featuring 43 senior citizens interested in taking the longest duration course and spending the longest time in class, as well as getting an approval certificate (*hardworking students*); another one presenting 34 participants desiring the shortest duration course and the fewest number of class hours, and an approval certificate (*practical students*); and a third group of 47 people who do not want an approval certificate and are at the in-between course duration and number of hours (*relaxed students*). Out of the investigated socio-demographic factors shows age an indirect correlation with the *hardworking* group while school level seems to be a determinant of the *practical* group. The older learners seems to be less willing to participate in class probably due to normal age-related changes that might influence their behavior, like hearing impairment, weakening vision, hypertension, and a decline of information processing speed, among others (Cooley *et al.*, 1998), while the background of those with a higher level of education may lead them to seek a certificate with a short investment of time. Additionally, as seen from these findings, the attainment of an approval certificate seems a key motivation for the participants to take an English course, which could be understood as a way to fulfill their desire for *self-satisfaction*, *bettering oneself*, and *self-accomplishment*, as suggested in previous studies (Covey, 1980; Cox, 1991). Likewise, the course duration and the number of hours per session appear to be important factors influencing their decision to enroll in a foreign language course: the majority of the participants stated their interest in attending a neither too long (nine-month) nor too short (three-month) course with a workload of no more than two hours per session. These stated preferences are in agreement with the recommendations put forward by Antoniou *et al.* (2013: 2694) in a study on foreign language training as cognitive therapy for seniors, which suggests that “*learning-related changes in older adults should be expected within six months of commencing language training*”. This may be of relevance when designing an English course for this age group not only to attract them to learn a foreign language, but to fulfill the learning outcomes as well. As Findsen & Formosa (2011: 116) noted, “*facilitators of older adult learning must tailor their teaching and instructional techniques to learners’ past and present experiences, as well as future aspirations*”.

5. CONCLUSIONS

The results obtained from this study may be of special interest to people involved in elderly education and rights. First of all, the findings showing the benefits (social interaction and personal development, functioning and maintenance of mind and memory, and keeping an active and dynamic life) perceived by older adults towards a foreign language course can be deemed as a particular interest of this age group. Since the elderly population is increasing all over the world, this interest might increase and become a demand to be satisfied, especially by higher education institutions committed to community outreach. In this light, those institutions should consider these perceived benefits as a core element when developing the curriculum for courses targeting this age group; in other words, courses that besides teaching the language, focus on enhancing social interaction, personal development, and active life. In addition, the methodology of those courses should aim to provide older adults with the necessary skills to use the language immediately (talking to English-speaking relatives and friends, watching TV, reading, and the like), keeping in mind that age, school level, course duration, and certificate seeking could be key factors when designing the course.

Besides the limitations of this study in relation to the non-probability sampling procedure, the findings may contribute with more insights for researchers interested in this field. Future studies should attempt to corroborate whether the benefits, motivations, and preferences perceived by older adults after taking a foreign language course are in agreement with the ones indicated in this study. In addition, qualitative research in this area would allow deeper inquiry into the perceptions of older adults towards foreign language courses and their relation to active aging.

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