FACTORS INFLUENCING THE ROLE OF ANXIETY AND SELF IN
AN INSTRUCTIONAL FOREIGN LANGUAGE-LEARNING
SETTING FOR OLDER ADULTS

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A Thesis

by

Dagmar Waters

Fall 2013

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DEDICATION

For my husband Tony Waters

And my children
Christopher Waters and Kirsten Waters
ACKNOWLEDGMENTS

I would like to express my appreciation to all the people who have devoted their time and thoughts to helping me complete this thesis. First of all, I would like to thank my committee members. My committee chair, Dr. Hilda Hernández, who supported me through the process with her expertise, kindness, and great patience during the time it took to complete this thesis. I am also very thankful to Dr. Margret DuFon as my committee member. Her willingness to share her expertise in the field of applied linguistics was of great value to me. Her advice and constructive criticism improved the thesis greatly.

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Despite increased interest and demand for foreign language courses by older adults little is known about the maturational effects on learning and teaching foreign languages to older adults. This study examines factors that negatively and positively influence the foreign language-learning process in older adults in a formal instructional setting. It also investigates factors that cause anxiety and reduced anxiety in older adult learners. Study data suggest that language-learning anxiety in older adults exists within a complex network of inhibiting and enhancing factors, which influence each other in a multidirectional way.

The following inhibiting factors were identified: fear of failure, comparison with peers (true beginners verses false beginners), too fast instructional pace that leads to overload, physical limitations relating to age, and three instructional factors: a) too high
task level, b) lack of meaningful practices, and c) negative error correction. The following enhancing factors were found: correction of negative perceptions and unrealistic goals, positive classroom atmosphere, positive feedback (being able to do something successfully), small group and pair work, meaningful and relevant practices, appropriate scaffolding, and establishing a positive and secure status in class.

The analysis of these identified factors and their interrelationships, together with the specific characteristics of older adults, suggests that older adults need to establish a positive and secure self-image and status within their classroom environment before they participate in the language learning process. The study further suggests that anxiety in older adults is not caused by tasks, practices, or exercises, but by the level of difficulty.
CHAPTER I

INTRODUCTION

Today, the world’s more affluent populations are aging rapidly. Attention has been paid to the implications this has for societies and individuals, and the adjustments required to accommodate the needs of older adults. However, little attention has been paid to this age group’s increased interest in foreign language courses. This interest and demand is sparked by factors such as extended life expectancy and increased affluence. Many older adults have modified their way of life to include life-long learning, the desire for self-fulfillment, and the search for meaningful leisure activities. Additionally, interest in foreign cultures and travel has generated a demand for foreign language courses. Many early retirees are interested in spending extended time living in foreign countries for various reasons (e.g., interest in culture and/or in living where expenses are much less).

Interestingly, an extended literature search has revealed that there is no systematic research on older adults learning foreign languages (except in the context of ESL). Chandler (2006) complained about the lack of applied linguistic research on adults. He wrote, “Those beyond 25 years of age deserve further scrutiny, since no studies to date have singled out this group” (p. 61). Consequently, little is known about the maturational effects on learning and teaching foreign languages to older adults. Many believe that adults cannot learn foreign languages, the process is very painful, and the results are poor. Assumptions “are based on impressionism, folk wisdom, and personal
experience … [as were the] early writings on age and second language acquisition (SLA) from the 1920s until as recently as the 1960s … rather than [based on] empirical evidence” (Wood Bowden, Sanz, & Stafford, 2005, p. 106). These contradictory research findings and interpretations, especially within the field of linguistics, do not help sway the views of language educators or the public.

This researcher is not aware of any studies that explore the needs and challenges older adults face while learning a foreign language. Consequently, more research is needed when it comes to older adults and foreign language learning. There are many questions and few answers.

Background of the Study

As an experienced teacher and linguist (German, English, French, and Kiswahili), I have been reflecting on my experiences as a multicultural and multilingual adult. As a graduate student in the California State University, Chico, master’s program in Teaching International Languages, I had the opportunity in summer 2010 to learn beginning Thai in Thailand with a small class of adult learners. I immersed myself in the task of learning a new language and reflected on my language learning experience as an older adult language learner and a language teacher. As McKay (2006) observed, “[Teachers’] primary reason for doing research is to become more effective teachers” (p. 1). Nevertheless, in my view, as well as Johnson’s (1992), one should keep in mind that research provides mainly new insights into the teaching and learning process and does not necessarily produce definite answers to various pedagogical questions.

The importance of research is not so much that it supplies definitive answers to questions such as “What is the best way to learn a language?” or “Which is the most
effective method of L2 teaching?” It does not do this. Rather, research can help us gain a richer understanding of the many interrelated factors involved in learning. It can help us see how the ways we organize learning environments can promote or inhibit growth. (Johnson 1992, p. 5)

As a researcher, I turned the opportunity to learn a new language into a research study. I collected research data by keeping an extensive language-learning diary. This helped me to recall and examine the experience of learning Thai as an older adult and to gain a better understanding of the many interrelated factors involved in the language-learning process. Further, the language-learning diary helped me explore the questions: What is it like to learn a new language as an older adult (age 55 and up)? What are some of the crucial factors influencing the SLA process for older learners in classroom environment? What are some of the specific characteristics and needs that older adult learners bring to the task of learning a new foreign language?

To answer these questions, I interviewed some of the older students in the class, the instructor teaching the course, and the principal of the school in 2011. I also participated in a second beginning Thai course as an observer, documenting classroom interactions between the teacher and students that same year. The classroom observation was followed by interviews with the older adults and the teacher of the observed class.

Purpose of the Study

Having learned several languages under various conditions and with varying degrees of success during my life, I have observed that students of various ages are often unprepared to successfully tackle the challenge of learning a foreign language in a classroom environment. This research explored how older adults go about the task of acquiring a new foreign language and what specific learning difficulties they experience.
The primary objective of this study was to identify factors that had a negative impact on self and produced symptoms of anxiety in older adult language learners (participants of the study) that interfered with their language learning process. The second objective was to identify factors that impacted self in a positive way and reduced anxiety symptoms and, therefore, enhanced the older adults’ language learning process.

The findings from this study enhance the knowledge base in second language acquisition (SLA) about older/mature adults learning a foreign language in a formal instructional setting. By using empirical rigor such as “triangulation of research perspectives, cyclical data collection and analysis, and consideration of emic perspectives, the researcher tried to ensure the credibility, transferability, and dependability” (Wood Bowden et al., 2005, p. 88) of the research findings.

Research Questions

After the initial analysis of the language-learning diary, the following research questions were formulated:

1. What factors cause symptoms of anxiety to emerge in older adult language learners, inhibit the language learning process, and impact self?

2. What factors reduce symptoms of anxiety in older adult language learners, enhance the language learning process, and impact self?

Statement of Need

Further research is needed to investigate how older adults learn a new foreign language and identify their specific challenges and needs as learners. Only sparse and incidental data about older adult foreign language learners are available within extensive
linguistic studies, which do not focus on the older adult foreign language learners. Despite the fact that a growing number of older people pursuing foreign language learning are not immigrants in the traditional sense, little research has been done on the specific needs of older adult foreign language learners outside the realm of older adult immigrants.

There is a great need to make the process of learning a foreign language more efficient and enjoyable for older adults. It is also important to identify factors that inhibit or enhance their language learning process, understand what causes language learning anxiety, and examine what role self plays in this context.

To identify language learning phenomena and related variables from the learner’s point of view a diary study, as defined by Bailey (1991), was used. There is a need to investigate the internal language learning processes of older adult foreign language learners. Because these processes are inaccessible from the researcher’s perspective alone, only holistic accounts written by the learners’ themselves and complemented by careful retrospective analyses by researchers would reveal new insights (Adams, Fujii, & Mackey, 2005. p. 80). This exploratory diary study produced new insights into language learners’ internal processes, specifically those of older adult language learners.

The study made a contribution to the field of SLA by expanding the database of diary studies in SLA, language learning, language teaching and, more specifically, by adding data related to older adult foreign language learners. This study also answered some of the questions that arise when foreign languages are taught to and learned by older adults. It identified factors that produce symptoms of anxiety in the older adult
learner and factors that reduce these symptoms. The study also provided answers as to why specific age-related learner characteristics alleviate the level of language-learning anxiety in older adult learners and the role self plays in this context.

Finally, the study suggests pedagogical implications and offers recommendations for teaching older adults in a formal instructional setting. In addition, this research raises awareness of the fact that there is a need for systematic research on maturational effects on learning and teaching foreign languages in healthy older adults (age 55 and up).

The Study and Its Limitations

This explorative study provides some preliminary findings related to the research questions. The findings pertain only to older adult foreign language learners and not to second language learners who are immigrants. The main data collection happened during the first three weeks of both beginning level courses. Another limitation is that this study dealt with only a few external and internal factors, and how their interrelation influences foreign language learning. The study analyzed and interpreted only a few factors that came to the forefront during the analysis of the diary. Further no other raters were used for the analysis process of the study. The thematic units of analysis from the diary were further investigated through interviews with students and teachers, and classroom observation. The fact that the researcher had three roles in the study: diary writer, participant observer, and analyst. This does have an influence on the objectivity of the analysis and interpretation, which is referred to in the literature as the observer’s paradox.
Another factor that may have influenced the subjects’ views about their language learning experience is the time interval between interviews: interviews with participants from the first class were done 12 months after the class took place, while interviews with participants in the second course were conducted three weeks after the course began.

Finally, because research in the literature about older adult foreign language learners is very sparse or not available, research data from younger adults were substituted to make some comparisons with the findings from this study.

Definition of Terms

Anxiety

Psychologists defined anxiety as a “subjective feeling of tension, apprehension, nervousness, and worry associated with an arousal of the autonomic nervous system” (Spielberger, 1983, p. 1)

Foreign Language Anxiety

“Foreign language anxiety is a distinct complex of self-perception, beliefs, feelings and behaviors related to classroom language learning arising from the uniqueness of the language learning process” (Horwitz, Horwitz, & Cope, 1986, p.128).

Intelligence

“Intelligence, meant as ability to find solutions in new and problematic situations, is a function that is highly integrated with the other cognitive, emotional and motivational structures” (Mauri & Pentani, 1996, as cited in Pace & Topini, 2004, p. 93).
Older Adult

For the purpose of this study, an older adult is defined as age of 55 and above.

Self

The self is defined not only by the individual from within, but also by the society within which the individual resides. The self is formed through the perceptions of individuals, perceptions shaped by personal experience and interaction with others, society, and culture and is stored within the memory. The self takes on multiple forms within a single individual; it is dynamic and formative, changing with needs of the moment. Language plays a fundamental role in the development, manipulation, and expression of self. (Pellegrino, 2005, p.16)
CHAPTER II

REVIEW OF THE LITERATURE

Introduction

This study focuses on the older adult foreign language learner and his or her learning processes. Since the primary objective is to identify the causes of anxiety in older adult language learners that interfere with the language learning process and the role of self, the literature review starts with a description of the older language learner in relation to Second Language Acquisition (SLA). The literature review looks at age, the language learning process, and the findings of various studies pertaining to this age group. It also investigates the special characteristics of the older adult language learner.

The review then shifts to the issue of anxiety and language learning, anxiety related with classroom language learning, and how anxiety emerges and is aggravated in older adults. This illuminates some of the explanations for declining language proficiency in older adults and explores anxiety and the role of self in second language learning.

The Older Adult Learner

Age and Language Learning

The general assumption among some researchers is that older adult language learners are inefficient language learners, unable to acquire native-like competency in a new language. In essence, the effort to learn a second language:
will only succeed completely if a child, virtually from the cradle upwards, ‘acquires two languages as primary language’. . . (Lamendella, 1977, p. 157) . . . otherwise, if native-like proficiency in the two (or more) languages has not been achieved by puberty the expectation is that it never will be; that at one point progress will stagnate and fossilization will have set in. (Lennon, 1993, p. 39)

Most linguists and psycholinguists believe there is a critical period for learning a language naturally and that this period lies between birth and early adolescence, and many believe that foreign languages have to be learned completely by puberty. By the 1960s, Lenneberg (1967) hypothesized that the brain slowly becomes less flexible during the physical maturation process, “less capable of accommodating some learning tasks, particularly in the area of language learning” (Schulz & Elliott, 2000, p. 107).

One has to understand the fact that native-like proficiency for adult learners in an L2 is the exception rather than the norm, while the opposite holds true for young learners. Another fact is that an enormous variation in the rate of acquisition and ultimate attainment exists within adult populations, and that attainment declines with increasing age. Much of the “empirical research since 1970 has supported the claim that elements of L2 performance decline with increasing age” (Wood Bowden et al., 2005, p. 127).

Many explanations have been offered as to why there is a difference between the older and younger learner exists. For example, Chomsky (1994) and Pinker (1994) and others theorized that all human beings have an innate language acquisition capacity – a learning device that is responsible for helping them learn their first language (L1) (as cited in Schulz & Elliott, 2000). This device is believed to atrophy between the ages of five and fifteen (depending upon the research study). After that, language acquisition becomes more difficult. It is believed that language learning is governed by an innate universal grammar (UG), which may or may not be accessible to adults (White, 1990).
The idea of a biological age constraint on language acquisition remains very controversial.

Whether older adults were capable of learning languages was investigated from the 1930s until the 1970s. After that, interest in older populations learning languages dropped. The focus of researchers shifted to questions of optimal acquisition of a language, focusing on the critical period hypothesis (CPH) and ultimate attainment. Advanced age was considered a negative factor in the optimal acquisition of a second language. “Until the early 1990s, data driven research on the critical period hypothesis (CPH) gave results that supported maturational constraints” (Ioup, 2005, p. 42).

Many studies have questioned a biologically ordained CHP, arguing “that the distribution of the found data could be better explained by non-maturational factors” (Ioup, 2005, p. 426). In 1980, Andrews found that eight of her adult subjects acquired high functional proficiency in one or more foreign languages during adulthood using a combination of instruction and exposure. She concluded that it is not clear whether “age is the real barrier to continuing development of oral proficiency” (as cited in Lennon 1993, p. 40) for adult learners.

However, the debate goes on, because research findings confirm a correlation between onset age and test performance, and the implications for teaching older adults are far reaching. Bialystok and Miller (1999) explained it this way,

If the evidence fails to support the existence of such a biological constraint on language acquisition, then the options for language acquisition are more diverse but based on a much larger role for general cognitive mechanisms and environmental influences through all stages of language acquisition. (p. 128)
Many of the more recent studies provide arguments against maturational constraints in L2 learning. They indicate a steady decline in performance over a lifetime. This linear function extends from childhood through adulthood is seen as evidence against CPH. For example, Stevens’ (1999) research findings as well as Bialystok’s and Hakuta’s (1999) confirmed a continuous age-related declining curve. These researchers determined that factors other than an innate bio-program are responsible for the decline.

Stevens (1999) found that factors such as length of residence, higher levels of education, and marriage to a native-born spouse are responsible for greater language proficiency. Studies by Flege and Liu (2001) and Flege, Frieda, and Nozawa (1997) also discerned non-age factors that affect language outcome (e.g., amount of L1 use, amount of L2 use, and amount of input as responsible for variation in L2 outcome). In 1975, Schumann rejected a biological explanation for the difference in child/adult language acquisition based on Krashen’s argument that lateralization of the brain is completed by age five. Schumann asserted that adult L2 acquisition is strongly affected by social and psychological factors, which occur in social conditions, or because of the motivational and attitudinal disposition of language learners. He further asserted that language acquisition is hindered when learners experience social distance because of a dominant, subordinate, or assimilating culture. Studies like Schulz and Elliot (2000) lend little support to the hypothesis that meaningful competence in a foreign language is unattainable for older adults; they support the notion that considerable learning is possible for older adult learners. For example, Johnson and Newport (2010) asserted that language does not become unlearnable during adulthood: “For adult learners, age does
not continue to be a predictor of performance; thus any proposed mechanism accounting for adult performance . . . cannot be correlated with age” (p. 276).

**Special Characteristics of the Older Language Learner**

Who are the older/mature adults? There is a considerable variation at what chronological age an adult is called an older, mature, or healthy elderly adult. Every researcher assigns a different age range and name to this age group. Weinstein-Shr (1993, p.1) defined an older adult as someone who is at least 40 to 65 years old, whereas Brown (1985) classified the older learner as being 55 years of age or older. Few research studies have dealt with learners over the age of 50. Most of the SLA research on older learners “has focused on multilinguals, . . . on language maintenance and attrition issues . . . [and] no research was found on the learnability and maintenance of a new language for learners over 55” (Schulz & Elliot, 2000 p. 108). Stemmer (2010) provided an overview of cognitive neuroscience research in relation to L2 learning by the “healthy elderly” (defined as people roughly 50 years of age) and concluded that very little is known “about the processes of high level learning in the elderly from the neuroscience perspective” (p. 7) because research on this age-group is lacking. Therefore, for practical rather than scientific reasons, this researcher selected subjects who were healthy and at least 55 years old or older. They are referred to as “older adults.”

**Physiological Changes.** The aging process is different in every individual, depending on genetic makeup and lifestyle. Therefore, in the field of gerontology, one distinguishes between chronological age and biological or functional age. Berndt (2003) wrote,

For example, it is possible, that the objective chronological age of a 50 year-old woman can be congruent to the subjective age of a 30 year-old. Therefore, age is a construct of various correlational factors – the main dimensions are physical age, psychological age, mental age, and social age. (author’s translation)

Stemmer (2010) asserted that there are “substantial differences in the cognitive performance of the elderly” (p. 8). In studies cited by Stemmer, brain activation can differ in older and younger adults, while cognitive performance is similar. This can be taken as an indicator of “functional reorganization in an adaptive brain” (p. 15). This re organizational ability of the brain is also referred to as plasticity that lasts a lifetime (contrary to the beliefs of some researchers—e.g., Lenneberg, 1967). Therefore, it is important not to make sweeping judgments about the compromised capabilities of older adults, as it is not possible to connect them to a certain age.

This review looks at the healthy older adult population. However, “aging affects the brain in various ways and at different levels” (Stemmer, 2010, p. 8). The brain does atrophy, the density of white matter decreases, and biochemical levels change. Older people show some degree of physiological deficits (e.g., in hearing, seeing and memory). These age-related changes may influence information-intake and -processing as well as information storage (Ochel, 2003, as cited in Wegmann & Pomino, 2010). Therefore, age-related changes in many older learners may affect foreign language learning.

Difficulties in hearing, vision, and diseases producing stress need to be considered when teaching older adults. The pace of learning could be significantly
reduced if the teaching method considers these factors, and does not unduly challenge older learners. For example, a hearing-impaired adult learner may have difficulty with audio-lingual methods while a vision-impaired adult learner may find it challenging to read complicated writing systems like Chinese or Thai.

The most common physical changes in people over 55 are eyesight and hearing. Beck (1994) asserts that, even during the normal aging process (in healthy individuals), a gradual reduction of visual faculty occurs in 13% of people over 65, and increases to about 28% in people over 85 (as cited in Pace & Topini, 2004). The most common gradual reduction of visual faculties in older/mature adults are:

- High sensitivity to light.
- Alteration in the ability to distinguish distances and colors.
- Reduction of the accommodation ability for close objects.
- Reduced night vision.
- Reduced peripheral vision.
- Slower adaptation to sudden changes from light to darkness.
- Reduced static acuity and diminished dynamic visual acuity.
- Need for stronger contrast between objects and background - specifically under poor lighting conditions (Pace & Topini, 2004, p. 91).

Ochel (2003) has suggested how these age-related deficits in the sensory faculties of older people can be mitigated, even in computer supported language teaching, and does not see these as a hindrance when modern technologies are used with older adults (as cited in Wegman & Pomino, 2010, p. 62).

Approximately 30% of people between 65 and 74 experience a hearing loss, and about 50% of the 75-79 old age group experiences such a loss (Hogstel, 1993 as cited in Pace & Topini, 2004, p. 91). The term “hearing loss” refers to both “the absolute threshold of tones and the ability to discriminate the tones” (p. 92). The ability to
distinguish words in context decreases with age, and the ability to hear words clearly decreases in 25% of people after age 80. Noisy environments and blurred speech decrease hearing ability in older adults. When speaking a foreign language, ambient noise is much more noticeable and difficult to tune out than when speaking a native language. Nevertheless, it is important to remember that research has shown that learning to produce new sounds is possible for older adults.

**Changes in Intellectual Processing, Learning and Memory.** It is difficult to generalize about the human brain because there is still not enough knowledge about its processes, and variation across individuals. Nevertheless, a few generalizations can be made. This researcher uses the definition of intelligence developed by Mauri and Pentani (1996): “Intelligence, meant as ability to find solutions in new and problematic situations, is a function that is highly integrated with the other cognitive, emotional and motivational structures [as stated above]” (as cited in Pace & Topini, 2004, p. 93).

In aging people, the most noticeable cognitive changes are the decline of certain aspects of learning and memory, however Pace and Topini (2004) and others hold that standard tests used to evaluate brain functions in individuals are not suitable for older people. Moreover, Matarazzo (1972) asserts that the decline with age, as indicated by Wechsler’s *Adult Intelligence Scale*, “reflects and catalogs the differences in the socio-cultural milieu and experiences of the different generations” and not the intelligence of older people (as cited in Roumani, 1978, p. 3). Based on other research studies, he concluded that the level of education influences learning more than age. For the age group 25 – 64, an increase in verbal scores was found and little or no decline in Performance Scale scores was found (as cited in Roumani, 1978, p. 3). Stemmer (2010)
cited research highlighting factors associated with the cognitive ability of older adult learners. Some of the most influential factors are education, social, mental, and physical activity. Other studies relate sustained cognitive engagement across a lifespan and lifelong bilingualism with higher cognitive functioning and a lower risk of dementia (pp. 19-20).

Pace and Topini (2004) came to the conclusion that people demonstrate their best performances “in terms of memory, reaction time to visual and auditory stimuli, comprehension of technical problems, manual skill and work pace around the age of 30” (p. 92). Some time between the age of 30 to 40, physiological decline sets in, but the speed and onset vary greatly for each function and in every individual due to genetics, socio-cultural, and specific pathological factors (Mauri & Penati 1996, as cited in Pace & Topini, 2004, p. 4). These findings are supported in Stemmer’s (2010) literature review.

Nevertheless, during the aging process, a gradual decline of intellectual operational abilities and mental inactivity can be observed (Pace & Topini, 2004, p. 93). However, results from intelligence tests (keeping in mind that these tests have been criticized for various reasons) show that older people maintain their ability to retain information, learn new vocabulary, and store it in their existing semantic system (Lennon, 1993). “There are no ‘biological’ age constraints on learning vocabulary” (p. 39). While older adults keep their ability to comprehend, results decline with age on performance tests that require associating symbols and numbers and putting pictures in order.

After analyzing physiological data, researchers (e.g., Horn 1972; Beck, 1994 et al., as cited in Topini & Pace 2004, p. 93) have concluded that verbal function is
connected to “what the individual already knows.” This is defined as crystallized intelligence, and remaining stable during the entire life span. In contrast, fluid intelligence (also called unformed, undirected intelligence) deals with unfamiliar topics, makes logical connections, and emphasizes the role of speed. It is impacted by age-related modifications. Horn (1972) stated that the decline of fluid intelligence is compensated for by the increase in crystallized intelligence. Thus, the compensation for the loss of one’s ability is compensated with the surplus of another ability. The older person uses crystallized intelligence in place of fluid intelligence. He [/she] substitutes accumulated wisdom for brilliance, while the younger person does the opposite. (as cited in Roumani, 1978, p. 3)

Beck (1994, as cited in Topini & Pace 2004) asserted that when speed is deemphasized when responding, older people tend to evaluate answers more precisely and accurately than younger adults. Even when older adults had lower scores in traditional tests, they scored higher than younger adults when the tests were pertinent to older adults’ daily lives (as cited in Topini & Pace 2004, p. 93). Similar research results have been reported by Lehr (1991):

dass der ältere Mensch zwar mehr Zeit braucht, um sich einen Überblick über eine gegebene Situation zu verschaffen, das jedoch dann, wenn der Überblick da ist, die Reaktion in gleicher Schnelligkeit erfolgt wie bei jüngeren Altersgruppen. (as cited in Wegmann & Pomino, 2010, p. 62.)

the older person does need more time to assess a new situation at hand. Although when he/she has arrived at an assessed overview, the reaction to the new situation is as fast as that by a younger person. (author’s translation)

Memory. People are at their physiological best around the age of 30. After the age of 30 to 40, physiological decline sets in, but varies individually due to genetics, socio-cultural, and pathological factors. These findings are confirmed by neuroscience findings (see Stemmer, 2010).
The memory capacity of younger and older adults is typically measured by standardized tests. These kinds of measurements for older adults have been criticized for the same reasons as intelligence tests. They are also criticized because the test content does not pertain to the daily life of older people. As Beck (1994) asserts, it is necessary to access the degree of relevance because “pertinence allows older adults to obtain better scores in comparison with younger adults” (as cited in Pace & Topini, 2004, p. 93). Mauri and Penati (1996) pointed out that there is wide individual variability in the older population; therefore, the scores on these tests do not necessarily reflect older adults’ capability since an impairment on a simple task does not predict impairment in more complex performance (as cited in Pace & Topini, 2004). Researchers have explained this phenomenon in many different ways, citing compensatory mechanisms, shifts in processing strategies, functional plasticity, differences in cognitive reserve, and scaffolding mechanisms (see Stemmer 2010 for further explanations). These explanations are based on the assumption that the brain can reorganize itself.

Berndt (2003) offered two possible explanations as to why people with increasing age need more time to process new information, store it in the sensory memory, and act on new information.


On the one hand the lack of willingness [Bereitschaft] of the central nervous system to parallel processing of stimuli can be seen as being responsible for the deficit in information intake but on the other hand a second reason for the deficit in
information intake could lie in the pursuit for security by the older person in the sense of making sure that the reaction or the answer is correct. (author’s translation)

Pace and Topini (2004), Roumani (1978), Schulz and Elliot (2000), Stemmer (2010), and Ullman (2005) stated that older adults become more aware of “loss of memory capacity.” Researchers attribute this to a psychological aspect: older people notice that their memory is not the same as before, but their fear of memory loss is greater than the actual loss. A small suggestion will enable them to recall the lost information. It is important to acknowledge, however, that sensory storage does show age-related changes. According to Tammaro et al. (2000), “information transfer slows down and mistakes can be made” (as cited in Pace & Topini, 2004, p. 95).

In cognitive science, the most common taxonomy divides memory into long-term memory and short-term/working memory. Short-term/working memory “refers to the storage and manipulation of information for a brief period of time” (Stemmer, 2010, p. 10). Long-term memory is subdivided into declarative memory, which underlies all “learning, representation, use and knowledge about facts (semantic knowledge) and events (episodic knowledge)” (Ullman, 2005, p. 143), and procedural memory (memory of skills). Facts and events require mostly conscious recall. The procedural memory system, which is responsible for new learning and control of long-established cognitive skills and habits as well as motor skills and habits, does not (p. 146).

Since the prefrontal cortex is associated with retrieval processes and working memory and is most affected by aging, the following neurophysiologic and cognitive changes have been observed: processing speed, working memory functions, executive control processes, as well as aspects of long-term memory are most affected by aging.
Verbal and emotional processes are less affected. Planning, organizing, and decision-making are affected, and because of the decline in the neurotransmitter system, attention regulation and response modulation are compromised (Stemmer, 2010, p. 14).

Within short-term/working memory, a general executive and two subsystems exist: the phonological loop and a visual-spatial sketchpad. The phonological loop works in older adults as well as in younger individuals, while the visual-spatial memory shows decline over time (Tammaro et al., 2000, as cited in Pace & Topini, 2004, p. 95).

Tammaro et al. explains that procedural memory, which encodes and stores knowledge of rules of actions and procedures, becomes automatic with enough repetition and does not decline with age. The procedural memory system also includes the ability to learn motor-perceptive skills, verbal-perceptive skills, and cognitive strategies. These abilities also do not diminish with age (Tammaro et al., 2000, as cited in Pace & Topini, 2004, p. 95). To encode and store new information into memory, older people need more time for the same amount of information as younger adults (Beck, 1994, as cited in Topini & Pace 2004). This has direct implications for teaching older adults, so they are able to process new information successfully. Nevertheless, as Beck (1994) observes, “once the information has been well encoded, both by young and old adults, its fixing is similar in both groups (as cited in Pace & Topini, 2004, p.96).

**Psychological Changes.** Aging demands adaptability. Aging people have to deal with many difficult changes that require psychological adjustments, as: their status in family, society, and the economy changes. All these elements “influence a person’s psychological balance, causing more vulnerability” (Giglio & Alfrieri, 1993, as cited in Pace & Topini, 2004, p. 96). The aging process is based on many individual
characteristics. For example, the quality of affective, social, and psychological factors is reflected in an individual’s self-esteem, self-defense, motivation, and adaptability. Health conditions are also an important factor. How individuals react to new life experiences varies—reactions can range from complete withdrawal to seeking new activities and relationships.

The specific psychological characteristics of older adults are similar to those at any adult age. However, Gala et al. (1996, as cited in Pace & Topini, 2004, p. 97) note that these become more marked with age in either a positive or negative way.

The strongest and most influential psychological challenge for older adults learning a foreign language is that their “desire for success is often outweighed by the fear of failure” (Roumani, 1978, p. 6). This heightened fear of failure has been linked to heightened language learning anxiety in older adults. Learning a foreign language exposes learners to a high risk of failure. Fear of failure and feelings of anxiety are caused by older adults’ “wishing to see their lives as a process of integration” (Roumani 1978, p. 4) and not disintegration. It is assumed that this shift takes place slowly during middle age (p. 6).

Personal dignity, self-worth, confidence, and self-respect for older adults are potentially threatened by having to compete with much younger people in the classroom. Another potential threat can come from being taught by a much younger teacher, which can result in debilitating levels of anxiety.

The capability to take in and process several stimuli at the same time declines with age (Lehr, 1991). Lehr claims that older adults process information less effectively and to a lesser level when visual or verbal information are perceived as too complex.
(1991 as cited in Wegmann & Pomino, 2010, p. 62). Another reason why older adults are less likely to adopt new and difficult goals in their lives is that they have less time than younger adults. Therefore,

[...]

Learners tend to pursue goals in which they feel fairly sure of successful completion and which will be most beneficial for them...[and] they will reject ... goals in which they perceive costs are too great or that carry too strong a risk of failure. (Pellegrino, 2005, p. 26)

Statistically, the reasons for taking language courses shifts among the older population. Roumani (1978) asserts that after the age of 40, people tend to take courses to expand their knowledge rather than to acquire job skills. They wish to integrate new learning into their existing body of knowledge rather than learn new skills which they believe will be indirectly useful. If acquiring a foreign language cannot be fitted into an individual’s scope of desired knowledge rather than learn new skills which they believe will be indirectly useful. If acquiring a foreign language cannot be fitted into an individual’s scope of desired knowledge [or other important new goals in life], he or she will not learn it successfully. (p. 4)

Older learners set the language-learning goals they expect to reach in the classes they take, such as learning more about the culture, communicating with friends, and managing their traveling needs. “Older people have no patience for apparently meaningless or irrelevant learning, while in significant learning, their results, given though enough time, equals those of younger learners” (Roumani, 1978, p. 2). Brown (1985) found that 55-75 year old Spanish learners wanted changes made in what they were taught and how.

Most older adult learners reject haphazard learning because they have a need to integrate new learning into existing structures in their brains. Therefore, large amounts of foreign language material presented in a structure that “is difficult to perceive will not produce successful learning in older people” (Roumani, 1978, p. 4). Previously learned material, for example, the L1, can also become an obstacle for older people unless they
embrace the idea of working with an entirely new system (Roumani, 1978, p. 4). Berndt (2010) points out:

> Je fortgeschrittener das Alter des Sprachenlernenden, umso vielfältiger und auch wichtiger sind die Vorerfahrungen, die der Lerner im Laufe seines Lebens gesammelt bzw. nicht gesammelt hat. Sie bestimmen – neben Modifikationen in der Informationverarbeitung – den Lernprozess wesentlich mit. Insofern ist es wichtig, als Lehrender in den entsprechenden Kontexten nicht nur über die einerseits individuellen (Sprach-)Biografien, sondern auch über die generationen- bzw. kohortenspezifischen Bildungskonditionen von Lerngruppen informiert zu sein. (pp. 68-69)

The older the language learner gets, the more important and multifaceted their previous experiences and knowledge – that they have collected or have not collected during their lifetime – becomes. These experiences and knowledge determine and influence the learning process. Therefore it is important that the teacher not only be informed about the individuals’ biographies but also know the generational specific or cohort specific educational conditions of groups of learners. (author’s translation)

Roumani (1978) reports that teachers experienced in teaching older learners believe that older adults learn as much and as quickly as younger students when provision is made for their “physical comfort.” Adults can learn regardless of age. “Any deterioration in the faculties used by younger learners can be compensated by more skillful use of faculties developed with age, such as wisdom and social sensitivity” (p. 2). That previous education affects the ability to learn in maturity is affirmed by the fact that older people with high verbal ability do better on learning tests (Roumani, 1978, p. 3).

Language Learning Anxiety a Central Issue for Older Adults

What is Language-learning Anxiety?

“It is estimated that about a half of all students in an average class experience language anxiety” (Campbell & Opitz, 1991, as cited in Zybert, 2006, p. 127), especially
when they attempt to speak during foreign language classes. Anxiety is seen by many researchers as an extremely negative emotion that inhibits language learning in an especially profound way. Because anxiety seems to be omnipresent in foreign language learning, it has received a lot of attention from researchers (e.g., Horwitz et al., 1986; Mc Intryre & Gardner 1989). Since anxiety interferes with many types of learning, it “has been one of the most highly examined variable in all of psychology and education” (Horwitz, 2001, p. 113).

Psychologists defined anxiety as a “subjective feeling of tension, apprehension, nervousness, and worry associated with an arousal of the autonomic nervous system” (Spielberg, 1983, as cited in Horwitz, 2001, p. 113). Psychologists also differentiate categories of anxiety, e.g., anxiety as a personality characteristic called trait anxiety, while state-anxiety is seen as a situation-specific anxiety or “a response to a particular anxiety-provoking stimulus” (p. 113). MacIntyre and Gardner (1991) used the term situation-specific anxiety to highlight the multifaceted nature of anxiety. However, the findings of many earlier studies on language anxiety have been contradictory. For example, Scovel (1978) reviewed the literature and found a truly conflicting set of findings. A negative relationship between anxiety and second language achievement as well as positive relationships between anxiety and achievement were found. Consequently, Scovel coined two additional terms: facilitating anxiety and debilitating anxiety. Scovel also asserted that central to anxiety research is probably the issue of facilitating anxiety versus debilitating anxiety. He defined the terms as follows:

Facilitating anxiety motivates the learner to “fight” the new learning task; it gears the learner emotionally for approach behavior. Debilitating anxiety, in contrast,
motivates the learner to “flee” the new learning task; it stimulates the individual emotionally to adopt avoidance behavior. (p. 139)

These confusing results were due to problematic definitions of anxiety, the lack of reliable and valid measure specific to language learning . . . [and led] Horwitz et al. to define[d] foreign language anxiety as a separate and distinct phenomenon particular to language learning. (Yan & Horwitz, 2008, p. 152)

However, in 1986 Horwitz et al. (1986) proposed a new situation-specific anxiety construct called foreign language anxiety. They asserted that foreign language anxiety is responsible for negative emotional reactions to language learning because these anxieties are connected to immature second language communication abilities.

Adults typically perceive themselves as reasonably intelligent, socially-adept individuals, sensitive to different socio-cultural mores. These assumptions are rarely challenged when communicating in a native language as it is not usually difficult to understand others or to make oneself understood. However, the situation when learning a foreign language stands in marked contrast. As an individual’s communication attempts will be evaluated according to certain or even unknown linguistic and socio-cultural standards, second language communication entails risk-taking and is necessarily problematic. Because complex and nonspontaneous mental operations are required in order to communicate at all, any performance in L2 is likely to challenge an individual’s self-concept as a competent communicator and lead to reticence, self-consciousness, fear, and even panic. (Horwitz, 2001, p. 114)

Horwitz et al. (1986) concluded that “foreign language anxiety is a distinct complex of self-perception, beliefs, feelings and behaviors related to classroom language learning arising from the uniqueness of the language learning process” (p.128). In adult language learners self-perception is compromised because of limited linguistic ability. Therefore, “[t]he language learner’s self-esteem is vulnerable [because] . . . of the disparity between the “true” self as known to the language learner and the more “limited” self as can be
presented at any given moment in the foreign language” (p.128). This leads to feelings of loss in social or intellectual status due to L2 use.

Research has clearly established that a negative correlation exists between foreign language classroom anxiety and achievement. Research studies have also established that anxiety does not work in isolation. Experts felt that motivation, cultural factors, the students’ own coping skills, attention, self-concept, beliefs about language learning, and the specific teaching methodology the students experience, all play a role in learner anxiety. (Yan & Horwitz, 2008, p.152)

Six anxiety-provoking sources were suggested by Young (1991): a) personal and interpersonal anxiety, b) learner beliefs about language learning, c) instructor beliefs about language teaching, d) instructor-learner interactions, e) classroom procedures, and f) language testing (as cited in Yan & Horwitz, 2008, p. 152).

Anxiety Associated with Classroom Language-learning

Since no research on older adults in foreign language classroom settings and anxiety were identified, studies about language learning anxiety and classroom instruction for adults (mainly adolescents and young adults) were reviewed. Many possible sources of language learning anxiety in classroom settings have been identified, ranging from difficulty in authentic self-presentation to various language-teaching practices (see Horwitz & Yan, 2008, p. 152).

Anxiety can be debilitating enough to cause second language learners to refuse to participate in language classes. Student participation in negotiated interaction to resolve communication breakdowns and work towards mutual comprehension is vital in the language acquisition process; therefore, it is crucial for a conscientious language
teacher “to investigate ways and means of teaching language so that anxiety is minimized” (Gregersen, 2000, p. 120). Teaching methodologies that move away from more traditional teacher-fronted classrooms to more student-centered cooperative learning techniques have been suggested as a solution. However, it remains unclear which instructional condition reduces students’ anxiety, or what variables (outside of instructional methods) play a main role in anxiety reduction.

For example, in her study of 2nd year students learning EFL at a Chilean university, Gregersen (2000) concluded that student-centered cooperative learning techniques resulted in lower anxiety levels and greater participation than in a whole group, teacher-fronted classroom while she could not prove that small group interaction increased levels of language proficiency. One possible reason may have been insufficient contact hours in the classroom (p.131).

Researchers looking at various instructional conditions for answers to anxiety reduction have found no simple solutions. For example, Koch and Terrell (1991) found that even in classes that were specifically designed to reduce learner anxiety (e.g., within the Natural Approach), some learners were more comfortable participating in some activities than others. The researchers found great variability in the learners’ reaction to activities as tasks judged comfortable by some were stressful for others. Koch and Terrell found “that 60% of their subjects with previous classroom language study indicated that they felt more anxious or equally anxious under the Natural Approach than under other methods” (as cited in Aida, 1994, p. 164). Studies by Young (1990) and Gregersen (2000) revealed that secondary students preferred and felt more comfortable participating in aural activities performed in small groups rather than in front of the whole class.
Horwitz (2001) asserted that cultural differences need to be factored in, when looking at classroom practices and language anxiety. It is possible that practices perceived as comfortable by one group may be perceived as stressful for learners from a different cultural background used to different types of classroom organization (Horwitz, 2001, p. 119). This would also hold true for *Age/Generation Cohorts*. Different age groups experience different types of classroom organizations, and certain types of exercises and classroom interactions are unfamiliar to them (for further explanations see Fred Karl (2009) *Einführung in die Generationen- und Altenarbeit*).

Other studies point to the classroom environment as an anxiety reduction factor rather than specific instructional activities (Horwitz, 2001, p. 119). According to Frantzen (2005), the instructor is the most important factor in building a positive class environment (p.179). Palacios (1998) found that foreign language learning anxiety in classrooms are associated with several factors that influence classroom environments (as cited in Horwitz, 2001 p. 119). The level of perceived *teacher support* had the strongest influence on reducing anxiety. Positive teacher support was defined as the help and friendship a teacher showed towards the students: “how much the teacher talks openly with the students, trusts them, and is interested in their ideas” (as cited in Horwitz, 2001, p.119 and 120). Students in Donley’s (1997) study suggested that teachers not call on individual students and, “not teach language as a massive memorization task, and teachers be sensitive to students’ out-of-class obligations” (as cited in Horwitz, 2001, p.120). It seems that many research studies concluded that the teacher is one of the key factors influencing the level of anxiety in a formal instructional setting.
Another factor influencing anxiety levels within a formal instructional setting was the classroom environment set by students themselves. Palacios (1998) found that affiliations among learners, lack of competitiveness among learners, and clear task orientation are associated with lower language learning anxiety (as cited in Horwitz, 2001, p. 120.). There is not only the fear of being evaluated by the teacher, but also by classmates: “Stress results from the fear of being incompetent and being laughed at by the other students” (Price, 1991, as cited in Zypert, 2006, p. 128). Samimy and Rardin (1994) found that peer support was one of the main factors that helped the language learning process, while the lack of support hindered it: “initial anxiety in their adult participants was mitigated as they experienced a secure relationship with the teacher/counselor and the group support” (p. 386). They concluded that anxiety is reduced by a supportive and nurturing environment that is produced when the teacher and the peer group are able to create a sense of community (p. 387). Frantzen (2005) found in their study on true and false beginners in beginning French and Spanish classes that a sense of classroom community made students most comfortable: “The more you are familiar with your classmates, the less intimidated you feel speaking in front of them” (pp. 180, 181). Students also noted the value of small groups or pair work, and being able to speak with almost everyone. Therefore, “the instructor and the supportive classroom community are the most important factors in reducing anxiety and is consistent with results of previous research” (p.181). That true beginners are more prone to anxiety than false beginners is another finding of the Frantzen study (2005, p. 181).

Research also suggests that the focus of instruction influences the level of anxiety no matter what the classroom environment. For example, students reported lower
anxiety levels during reading classes than while participating in oral activities despite the classroom environment (see study by Kim 1998; Saito, Horwitz, & Graza 1999, as cited in Horwitz, 2001, p.120). However, Palacios (1998) found that it is “possible to keep anxiety levels to a minimum with a supportive and constructive classroom environment” (as cited in Horwitz, 2001, p.120).

Aydin (1999) pointed to learner perceptions as another factor that contributes to classroom anxiety. These encompass negative self-assessment of language learning abilities, high personal expectations, and certain classroom practices, like speaking in front of the class. Donley (1997, as cited in Horwitz, 2001 p. 120) identified written and oral tests, speaking the L2 in the classroom, and completing lengthy and difficult assignments as anxiety evoking practices. Aydin’s and Palacios’ studies pointed to teachers’ attitudes towards students as important sources of anxiety (as cited in Horwitz, 2001). Cheng, Horwitz, and Schallert (1999, as cited in Horwitz, 2001) came to the conclusion that high anxiety levels are found in students who tend to have low self-concepts as language learners. They asserted that these findings underline the importance of teacher support as noted previously. They also suggested that language anxiety is multifaceted, and therefore imply that instructional interventions need to be tailored to the specific concerns of each learner. (as cited in Horwitz, 2001, p. 121)

Foss and Reitzel (1988) described foreign language anxiety as sharing symptoms with communication anxiety such as “high feelings of self-consciousness, fear of making mistakes, and a desire to be perfect when speaking” (p. 438). Students tend to show behaviors of withdrawal in order to avoid humiliation or embarrassment. Young (1991) listed manifestations of L2 anxiety, such as avoiding L2 use, competitiveness with
others, “freezing up” during L2 performance, fidgeting, avoiding eye contact, and short answers responses (p. 430). McIntyre and Gardner asserted that learners who experience high levels of anxiety may have difficulties in comprehension due to short-term memory loss and in language production due to difficulties in long-term memory retrieval processes (as cited in Pellegrino, 2005, p. 22).

Pellegrino (2005) identified the most significant manifestations of language learning anxiety as severely reduced L2 use in terms of performance quality, avoidance of L2 use opportunities, and the tendency to reduce L2 use during interactions where learners felt their security was threatened (pp. 22-23). Ehrman (1996) stated that anxiety can surface when the learner’s sense of status as an intelligent, capable individual is threatened.

Anxiety relates to the response a student has to a perceived threat to his or her sense of security or self-esteem. . .. Anxiety is often linked to fear that one will fail in some way: on an assignment, speaking in class, on a test, in a final grade, in competition, maintaining one’s social position in the community, in interactions with native speakers, or on a job” (p. 137-138).

Anxiety and Representation of Self

Horwitz (2001) claimed that anxiety is cause for poor language learning (p. 112). If one agrees with that statement, pertinent questions remain: How does anxiety emerge? Where does anxiety originate? Why do older adults have a heightened language learning anxiety?

Since older adult language learners have a greater need to see their lives as a process of integration, they “feel that learning a new language implies the opposite of an integration process” (Roumani, 1978, p. 4). Older adults feel that their personal dignity and self-esteem are threatened by the language learning process. “Learning a new
language has been compared to acquiring a new personality . . . [and] Curran has described [this process as] the birth of the new self’ (Roumani, 1978, p. 4).

Pellegrino’s research findings (2005) suggested that anxiety may not be the factor that affects learners’ use of L2 directly. Instead, anxiety may be only the symptomatic panic that results from challenges and threats learners feel against their personal sense of status, which in turn is the true agent inhibiting learners’ abilities and desires to use the L2 in social interaction. (p. 24)

Pellegrino (2005) states that there is a correlation between anxiety and threats to self-perception, but she insists that anxiety does not cause the threat to self, as many researchers maintain. The reverse is true; the threat to self-perception produces feelings of anxiety (p. 25). She also asserted that the role anxiety plays in SLA, specifically in second language achievement, can only be explained without ambiguities and contradicting findings when anxiety in a learner is seen “as a symptom of a deeper conflict” (p. 25). She further asserts that studies, which only consider symptoms of anxiety as the problem without fully understanding what causes them, will not produce consistent findings.

Anxiety is traditionally seen as a learner-internal causal factor in the inhibition of L2 use. However, Pellegrino (2005) suggested that

anxiety is in fact a physiological and psychological response to the disparity between the “real” self and the “ideal” self . . . learners often reduce their L2 use to resolve the disparity and thus relieve anxiety. . . . Therefore anxiety is not the cause of L2 reduction, but rather the emotional byproduct of self-presentation. (p. 55)

So what role does the Self and the representation of Self play in the context of foreign language anxiety and the older adult? Pellegrino states that describing or even defining self is a difficult task. Using lists, she describes what self is:
a mental representation of an individual’s own personal qualities and characteristics . . . it consists of perceptions . . . it is not monolithic or static . . . it adapts with experience . . . it is the memory that preserves the self. The knowledge and perceptions an individual holds about itself, is known as the self-concept. This self-concept allows the individual a sense of security in his or her personal strengths and weaknesses, as well as a feeling of predictabilities about the self’s future capability. (p. 11)

Self has also been linked to the society and culture by which it has been formed (Goffman, 1959; cf. Mead, 1934; Tedechi, 1990, as cited in Pellegrino 2005, p.12). Goffman (1959) pointed out that every individual needs to create an image of her/himself that she or he wishes others to perceive as an ideal one. Pellegrino (2004) observes that an individual’s perceptions form the self-shaping through “personal experiences and interaction with others, society, and culture” (p. 16). The L1 plays a fundamental role in the development, manipulation, and expression of self. The older and more mature adult’s self is defined and established over a lifetime. It may be a successful or compromised self. That further entails, the older adult’s developed self has been validated, a satisfactory status established, and mechanisms of control put in place to keep the “ideal self” safe.

How a person’s self develops over an individual’s lifetime and how it influences language learning can be explained by the stimuli-appraisal system. According to Leventhal and Scherer (1987 as cited in Schumann, 1997),

environmental stimulus situations are assessed according to criteria such as whether they are novel, pleasant, enhancing of one’s goals or needs, compatible with one’s coping mechanisms, and supportive of one’s self and social image ... [Schumann asserts that] appraisal systems assign value to current stimuli based on passed experiences. . .. The value mechanisms influence the cognition (perception, attention, memory, and action) that is devoted to learning. (p. 2)
This appraisal mechanism is constantly at work during SLA. Language learners appraise teachers, methods, activities, materials, peers in the language classroom, the target language and its speakers, culture, and environments, and the learners’ own performance. Therefore, the stimuli-appraisal system produces the learners’ value system, which assesses “the personal relevance of stimuli associated with language learning and thus leads to action patterns that enhance or inhibit language acquisition” (Schumann 1997, p. 21). Older adult learners and their instructors have to deal with the accumulation of all life experiences and knowledge that have been integrated into older adult learners’ self-perceptions to produce well-established habits. As Schumann (1997) asserted, only a positive appraisal of a learning experience will lead to sustained deep learning.

The role language plays in society is not limited to primary communication: “language is also a symbol of cultural and social unity and division, a fundamental mechanism of self-presentation and social identity, and it is simultaneously an instrument of power and a source of weakness for its users” (Pellegrino, 2005, p. 8). For optimum results “language use and interaction must be conducted in such a way that the self will be enhanced or at least protected” (Pellegrino, 2005, p. 16). While learning a new language, learners have only limited command of the language. This can jeopardize the learners’ ability to reveal their true thoughts: their “identity becomes severely impaired. A paradoxical conflict results in that the language learner wishes to create an ideal sense of self in the second language, yet the very act of language use threatens that image” (Pellegrino, 2005, p. 4). As many researchers have pointed out, second language learners, especially at the novice level, often feel that people “perceive them as unintelligent,
lacking personality and humor, or as having the intellectual development of a small child” (Pellegrino, 2005, p. 9). Using the L2 puts learners at risk of presenting themselves as inferior to conversational partners. The very process of language learning affects the learners’ self-presentation in society very deeply. Learning “another language is to redefine yourself publicly, socially, and personally” (Pellegrino, 2005, p. 7).

Pellegrino (2005) postulates that language learners “must maintain a sense of security in order to construct the self in the L2, that is through validation, safety, status and control” (p. 10). Language-learning anxiety is caused by the loss of security and the derogation of the “real” self, the inability to represent the “ideal-self” to interlocutors. “The learner’s self becomes trapped behind the communication barriers” (p. 14). Stress and the need to preserve ones’ self may cause reduced success in learning a second language (Schumann, 1975; Jensen, 1995, as cited in Pellegrino, p. 14). “People are largely motivated by obtaining positive consequences and avoiding negative outcomes” (Tedeschi, 1990, as cited in Pelegrino, 2005, p. 16). Control of one’s social environment is necessary for communication and self-presentation. It is linked to self-esteem (e.g., creating positive attitudes in others towards one’s self). Speaking in an L2 always involves the risk of being misunderstood and misinterpreted. Speakers who lack sociolinguistic competence and do not use language in a culturally and situationally appropriate way are perceived as rude and ignorant.

Pellegrino (2005) categorized threats to self into four types: “two that reflect social distance learners feel from those around them [horizontal distance between individuals], and two that are indicative of their place in the social hierarchy [vertical distance, authority and power] (p. 18). Language learners must experience intimacy and
acceptance in a relationship with other participants in order to maintain a sense of safety and validation. They need to feel welcome, sought after, and physically and emotionally secure. Language learners also need to feel secure in the social hierarchy “by maintaining an appropriate status among the interacting participants, as well as a feeling of control over the interaction and their own destiny” (p. 19). Anxiety surfaces when a loss of security in these four areas occurs because the representation of the ideal self is severely compromised.

The very process of classroom education and the nature of classroom interaction may produce poor language learners and risk takers because the L2 learner is constantly evaluated and observed. The willingness to use language is a great risk for learners because, “the self-image they project rides firmly on the language they produce” (Pellegrino, 2005, p. 21). The older the learner is when learning a new language, the greater the disparity between self-presentation and ideal self.

This researcher believes that Pellegrino’s theories about self-presentation and maintenance of security in the context of L2 learning provide an effective approach for analyzing and explaining L2 processes in all language learning environments including classrooms. Pellegrino’s theory also explains why older adult learners are affected by severe language learning anxiety. Only when anxiety is seen as a symptom of a deeper conflict and the sources of anxiety symptoms are understood can they be eliminated.

Chapter Summary

The main findings from the literature review are summarized under the following three headings: 1) Learning capacity of older adults, 2) Special characteristics
of older adults, and 3) Language learning anxiety and the role of self-presentation a central issue for older adults

Findings from the Literature

1. Learning capability of older adults
   - Learning ability does not change until the age of eighty or even ninety in healthy elderly.
   - The aging process in every individual is different, depending on an individual’s genetic makeup and lifestyle.
   - No general judgments about compromised capability of older adults should be made because it is impossible to connect them to a certain age.
   - New research (also neuroscience) confirms that the reorganizational ability of the brain (also referred to as plasticity of the brain) lasts a lifetime (contradicting earlier researchers).
   - Certain brain functions are negatively affected by aging, while others are not:
     - Processing speed, parts of working memory functions, executive control processes, planning, organizing, decision making attention regulation and visual–spatial memory are negatively affected.
     - The phonological loop within the short-term memory, storage and encoding of knowledge of rules and procedures (with enough repetition), motor-perceptive skills, verbal-perceptive skills and learned cognitive strategies are not affected.
• More time is needed for encoding new information, but fixing it into memory is the same for younger and older adults.

• Nevertheless, researchers affirm that adults can learn regardless of age. Learners can compensate for any deterioration in their faculties by more skillful use of faculties developed with age.

• Experienced teachers of older adults believe that older people learn as much and as quickly as younger students when provisions are made for their physical needs and comfort (e.g., visual and aural diminished capacity, comfortable seating) and their psychological needs are met.

2. Special characteristics of older adults

• Adult language learning affected by factors other than age are:

  social/psychological factors arising from the social conditions in the environment, motivational/attitudinal dispositions, prior education, and attitudes towards the learning situation or content.

  • The aging process is based on many individual characteristics (e.g., the quality of affective, social, and psychological factors that are reflected in self-esteem, self-defense, and motivation and adaptability of the individual).

  • The specific psychological characteristics of older adults are similar to those of all adults, but become more marked with age.

  • The strongest psychological challenge for older adults learning foreign languages is that their desire to succeed is often outweighed by their fear of failure.
• Tasks perceived as being too complex are rejected due to fear of unsuccessful completion. The choice of new goals shifts as older adults reject goals they perceive as too costly and risky.

• Older adults want to integrate new learning into their existing body of knowledge scope of desired knowledge.

• Older adults have specific learning goals when choosing to learn a new language.

• Older adults have no patience for meaningless or irrelevant learning.

• Older adults avoid haphazard learning because they need to integrate new learning into existing structures in their brain. (e.g. unfamiliar learning exercises)

3. Language learning anxiety and the role of self-presentation a central issue for older adults

• Language learning anxiety is a distinct complex of self-perception, beliefs, feelings, and behaviors related to classroom language learning.

• Research findings about anxiety reducing instructional methods are contradictory. Variability in learners’ reactions to classroom activities and the interplay of factors seem to play a greater role in anxiety reduction.

• Anxiety has to be understood in context, motivation, cultural factors, students’ coping skills, attention, self-concept, and beliefs about language learning, and the specific teaching methodology the students’ experience. They all play a role in learner anxiety.
- Researchers have found that the classroom environment is the most important factor in anxiety reduction.

- Research studies agree that the teacher is a factor in influencing the levels of anxiety in formal instructional settings.

- Peer support is also an important factor in facilitating a positive language learning process.

- A strong sense of language learning anxiety emerges when the learner’s status as an intelligent individual is threatened.

- Adult language learners’ self-perception, sense of security, and control may be compromised because of limited linguistic ability in presenting themselves to others.

- Language learning anxiety is caused by loss of security and derogation of the real self, the inability to represent the real self to interlocutors.

- Language learners maintain their sense of safety and validation when they experience intimacy and acceptance in classroom relationships with the teacher and peers.

- Language learners need to maintain an appropriate status in the social hierarchy of the classroom to feel secure and in control of their interactions and destiny.

- The special characteristics of older adults point to a heightened need for security and ideal self-representation. They have an increased fear of failure, and they want to integrate new learning into their existing body of knowledge. Failure
causes great stress, and learners will frequently avoid similar situations or give up language learning altogether.
CHAPTER III

METHODOLOGY

Research Design and Considerations in Qualitative Research

Grounded Theory Methodology (GTM) was used to understand how language-learning anxiety emerges in the classroom and becomes aggravated in the older language learner. It also addresses what role self plays in this process. This method was designed by Glaser and Strauss (1967) “to help researchers to elicit and analyze qualitative data to identify important categories in the material with the aim of generating ideas grounded in the data” (Burck, 2005, p. 244). Strauss and Corbin (1998) describe it as “a general methodology for developing theory that is grounded in data systematically gathered and analyzed” (p.158). This approach was selected because “classroom learning must be studied holistically, taking into account various factors in a specific classroom” (McKay, 2006, p. 6) and GMT meets this criterion. Another reason for this choice is that “according to Strauss and Corbin (1990) a grounded theory model has been ‘inductively derived from the study of the phenomenon it represents’ (p. 23) and is grounded in the participants’ own perceptions as well as their own specific learning context” (Yan & Horwitz, 2008, p. 154).

Many objections are voiced by quantitative researchers with respect to qualitative approaches to research. This researcher agrees with Adams et al. (2005)
who assert that as long as rigorous empirical standards are observed including
“triangulation of research perspectives, cyclical data collection and analysis, and
consideration of emic perspectives to ensure credibility, transferability, and
dependability” (p. 88), important insights into L2 processes can be gained.

Few research studies on anxiety in an instructional environment have used
qualitative approaches to identify the sources of anxiety that interfere with the language
learning process. Even fewer studies have asked for learners’ perspectives on the causes
for anxiety. No studies have been conducted on older language learners. Researchers like
have used interviews, diaries, observations, and questionnaires to identify factors related
to language learning anxiety in a classroom setting. Yan and Horwitz, (2008) found that
studies which rely only on questionnaires and surveys to identify potential sources and
consequences of language anxiety cannot be used to draw conclusions as to how these
interact with learner and situational factors. Studies are needed

that encourage learner reflection through interviews or diary entries [that] would
seem to have the potential to yield a richer understanding of learners’ perceptions of
how anxiety functions in their language learning, which in turn, might lead to a
clearer understanding of the general role of anxiety in language learning. (Yan &
Horwitz, 2008, p. 153)

This study identifies factors that produce anxiety and interfere with the
language learning process of older adults. It also identifies strategies that older learners
use to cope with anxiety-producing factors. To get an emic perspective, a diary study is
used to collect data. For purposes of triangulation, data are collected from interviews and
classroom observations. This also adds to transferability. Nevertheless, as Allwright and
Bailey (1991) assert, transferability in qualitative research needs to be looked at
differently than generalizability. “Instead of claiming that whatever has been discovered must be true of people in general, a naturalistic enquirer will claim that whatever understanding has been gained by an in-depth study of a real-life classroom may illuminate issues for other people” (p. 51).

In the following section, I describe the settings in which the data collection took place and then proceed to introduce the participants of the study.

Settings

Setting I—Class A: Learning Thai As a Participant/Observer

This researcher’s language-learning diary was written in the context of learning Thai at a language school in Thailand in the summer of 2010. Her intensive journal described her experiences and reflections as a true beginning learner of Thai. At age 60, she had never been to the country before nor had she been exposed to the language or culture. The researcher traveled to the country with her husband, who had learned the language many years earlier as a Peace Corps volunteer. They stayed at a university hostel while she participated in a language course at a private language institute.

The researcher’s intent was to become a participant observer and experience learning a new language as an older adult, while keeping an extensive journal documenting the process. The intention was to gain a better understanding of the many interrelated factors involved in the language learning process. The language-learning diary helped the researcher to explore and record what it was like to learn a new language as an older adult.
The institute teaches English and Thai to small groups of students of all ages and for different purposes. It is also possible to obtain private lessons if one is willing to pay tuition. The school is well established and has a good reputation. The teachers are either native English speakers or native Thai speakers. According to the principal, they all have different approaches to teaching languages. The policy of the school is to match teachers to the needs of their clientele. The researcher was placed in a beginners’ class consisting of eight adults. The teacher was a middle-aged, native speaker of Thai. She had been a Peace Corps language instructor for many years. The class met in a small air-conditioned room. The chairs were arranged in a half-circle. There were no tables in the room. The teacher had the use of a white-board and a small desk. Except for a map of Thailand, the walls were bare. The researcher spent 2 1/2 hours every morning, five days a week in the classroom, and another two hours a day in the school’s small library studying language concepts and new vocabulary. This time was also used to write journal entries based on brief notes made during the lessons.

Upon entering the language school, the researcher kept her identity as a language teacher and her writing about the learning experience to herself. This was done to avoid any misinterpretation and discomfort for her teacher and fellow students. In other words, the researcher wanted to avoid the observers’ paradox.

Evenings and weekends during the three-week stay were devoted to sightseeing excursions with university students, visiting agricultural projects and villages with various ethnic populations, socializing with native Thai people, and getting to know some of the participants of the language course. The researcher spent most of her time outside the classes around English-speakers, and her Thai-language use was limited to a
few words and phrases when shopping or eating out. Most of this time was spent increasing her knowledge of Thailand and its culture.

**Setting II—Class B: Classroom Observation**

**As a Participant Observer**

In summer 2011, the researcher continued her investigation by reenrolling as a beginning Thai learner at the same institution. This time the researcher sought help from the principal and explained her intention to become a participant observer in a beginners’ course with older adults. The principal was fully informed about the extent and intent of the research, and agreed for the researcher to enroll as a participant observer. The principal suggested a class of older students taught by a Thai woman in her late 60s who had taught over 20 years at the institute and had never traveled outside Asia. The teacher and the students were not informed about the researcher’s dual role in the classroom. For three weeks, she was able to blend in as just another foreigner who wanted to learn Thai. After the three weeks, the researcher revealed her work as a participant observer to her peers and teacher.

**Participants/Subjects**

**Setting I—Class A: Participants**

The class consisted of eight adult students, including the participant observer, from the United States, Netherlands, Germany, Indonesia, Japan, and Taiwan. Six students were retirement age (over 55) including the researcher, and two were in their thirties. There were four male and four female students including the researcher. The students and teacher were multilinguals to varying degrees. The older students were well-educated professionals who had traveled extensively. Their goals for learning Thai were
to navigate daily life and travel. They were interested in basic communication skills to befriend Thai people and learn about the culture of the country. The ninth class member, another older student, expressed his frustration and left class in the middle of the second day’s instruction. He never came back. Except for the participant observer, he was the only true beginner in the group. The other six class members were false beginners with varying levels of proficiency in Thai.

**Setting II—Class B: Participants**

Eight students were enrolled in the class including the researcher, two women, and five men. Only three students were over 55 years of age including the researcher; the other five were between 40 and 55. The students came from the United States, Germany, Italy, Australia, England and New Zealand. All students, except a 69-year-old male student from England, were multilinguals to varying degrees and highly educated professionals. Their goals for learning Thai were to navigate daily life, travel, and develop communication skills with Thai people and culture. None of the students had prior knowledge of the Thai language. They were all “true beginners.” The exception was the researcher, who was participating in a beginners’ class for a second time and the 69-year-old male who had married a native Thai woman. He had tried to learn the language the natural way in various situations, as well as through instruction, but with little success.

**Setting I—Class A: Teacher P**

Teacher P, a native speaker of Thai, taught the class in 2010. She was in her mid-forties and had been teaching Thai to adults for 16 years. She had been trained by the Peace Corps to teach Thai to their volunteers, and received further training at a reputable
university in the United States. The language teacher training courses she attended covered topics from classroom management, foreign language teaching methods for adults, and individual learner differences and learning styles.

Setting II—Class B: Teacher M

Teacher M, the instructor for the 2011 class, was a native Thai woman who had taught Thai for over 20 years at the same institution. She had never lived outside of Thailand nor traveled outside Asia. She followed the school’s old teaching practices established during the 1960s and rooted in the audio-lingual approach.

Principal

The principal was in her fifties and a native Thai speaker. Educated and trained in Thailand as a language teacher, she had furthered her training at United States universities. Besides her job as a principal at the language institute, she organized and taught teacher-training courses for TESOL certification.

Student W

Student W was a 58-year-old female who had lived in Thailand with her husband for three years. She and her husband were both retired professionals. She grew up as a bilingual, speaking Dutch and her mother tongue Tagalog. In school, she learned fluent English and French. She and her husband love travelling in Asia. They made Thailand their home base because it is comfortable, safe, has excellent healthcare, and is cheap to live in. A native Indonesian, she moved with her parents to the Netherlands when she was still a baby. She wanted to learn Thai because she wanted to have contact with the people. She thought speaking the language of the country was necessary to integrate in society. She did not want to be the obstinate foreigner. Speaking Thai also
made every day life quite a bit easier: she could be more in control and not dependent on others for help.

Student J

Student J was 63 years old and the husband of Student W. A retired banker from the Netherlands, he learned English and German during his school years. He had many opportunities to use and practice his foreign language skills in his own country socially as well as professionally. Student J agreed with his wife that learning Thai was important for both of them, because they want to live in Thailand. “As a foreigner you should try to integrate into the country’s culture. That is the moral thing to do. You don’t want to stick out as a sore thumb. Learning to speak the language shows that you respect the people.”

Student D

Student D was 67 years old. A retired psychologist from the United States, his native language is English. He took two years of French in college to fulfill the foreign language requirement, and he never lived in a foreign country before coming to Thailand. After retirement, he decided to live in Thailand for various reasons. He started to learn Thai to communicate with Thai people. He explained that it is not possible to live together with someone and not talk together. By the time he enrolled in the class, he had already studied the language on his own and with tutors for over six months.

Student K

Student K was a retired 67 year old, whose native language was Japanese. He held a degree in mathematics from a Japanese university. He studied English in school and for two more years at the university. English was a required school subject, and
Student K studied only to pass the tests. He never had to speak or write English, so he lost most of his English skills. Since a second foreign language was a school requirement, he chose German, because he thought it would be useful for math.

Student K went to Germany three times to study and for job related reasons, but he never had to use German during his stays. He used his English skills a little bit. He also traveled to many Asian countries, but never lived in any of them for an extended time.

Since 2010, he had lived in Thailand with his wife. He saw Thailand as his permanent residence. He found life in Thailand very comfortable, because his retirement money bought him much more in Thailand than in Japan. He stated: “Everything is cheap here but good quality, e.g., food and schooling.” He wanted to learn the Thai language and culture because it would increase his life quality. He said, “When I can speak Thai and understand Thai culture I will have many more options for interacting with Thai people. I want to be able to work/volunteer with children’s organizations. I also want to befriend people from all over the world.” He also took English lessons at the same school, so he could follow Thai instruction since the classes were held in English. Student K had been exposed to the Thai language for six months, trying to pick up essential vocabulary and phrases with the help of a handheld translation device/computer. He had also taken about 20 hours of Thai lessons before entering the class.

Student S

Student S was a 55-year-old surgeon, who decided to change his lifestyle. Five years earlier, he quit his stressful job working 60-80 hours a week, sold his big house, and started travelling with his spouse. At the time of the study, he traveled
extensively and returned to his home country, the United States, for a maximum of six months a year to work as a surgeon. English was his native language. He had taught himself Spanish for travelling purposes and because of a special interest in the culture of Texas. He believed strongly that it is morally and ethically wrong to insist on being a monolingual. He also felt people should not be confined by national boundaries. “Maybe,” he contemplated, “my upbringing has something to do with my views. My father was an international consultant.”

Student S enlisted in the army when he was 17 and was stationed in Turkey for a time. At the time of the interview, he was taking a Thai class and living part-time in Thailand. Student S was convinced that if you live in a foreign country, you should learn the language and culture, because the more you learn, the more the language makes sense and people open up to you. He said that he did not want to be “an ugly American,” culturally insensitive and self-absorbed. He said, “bitching and complaining means not understanding the people, not knowing what and why they are doing what they do.”

Student OJ

Student OJ was a 69-year-old retired military logistics warehouse manager. His native language was English. A citizen of England, he lived for many years in New Zealand. OJ was not exposed to higher education during his formative years. He picked up some French and German during his military career, when he had contact with native speakers from Germany and France. While in the military, he lived in Singapore and Thailand for two years. He retired to Thailand and married a native Thai speaker. He wanted to learn to speak Thai because it was embarrassing not to understand what people
were saying. He believed that you should learn the country’s language when you live abroad. OJ was wearing hearing aids during class instruction.

Data Collection Instruments and Procedures

In their study of individual language learning experiences, F. M. Schumann and Schumann (1977) concluded that “there are numerous PERSONAL variables that affect the acquisition of a second language” (p. 247). These variables interact with psychological, social, cognitive, and personality variables in “patterns that are idiosyncratic for each individual” (p. 247). As a result, “no two learners will acquire a second language in precisely the same way” (p. 248).

This assertion left the researcher with two questions: 1) What methodological approach to the research questions would be appropriate to generate the needed answers? 2) How would an analysis of idiosyncratic factors from her language-learning experience lead to transferrable conclusions for teaching older adults in a formal instructional setting?

Diary Study

After reviewing research on data collection instruments, this researcher chose to use a diary study as her main data collection instrument because it provides unique insights into the reality of learning and teaching languages. Diary studies are first-person case studies. Researchers like Campbell (1999) recommend diary studies:

self-report data from personal journals allows us to tap into affective factors, language learning strategies, and the learner’s own perceptions – facets of language learning and teaching experiences which are normally hidden or largely inaccessible to external observers. (p. 197)
Diaries are a holistic qualitative approach to the inquiry and analysis of complex and intricate language learning processes in many social situations (Stakhnevich, 2005, p. 218). Williams (1991) suggests that diary studies are an appropriate tool for looking at long-term learning and anxiety. For example, diaries are able to show how anxiety can be reduced by environments teachers create in the classroom (as cited in Frantzen, 2005, p. 183). Studies that encourage learner reflection through interviews or diary entries [because they] . . . seem to have the potential to yield a richer understanding of learners’ perceptions of how anxiety functions in their language learning, which in turn, might lead to a clearer understanding of the general role of anxiety in language learning. (Yan & Horwitz, 2008, p. 153)

The researcher decided to follow the diary study methodology used by Bailey (1991). She followed Bailey’s steps for diary studies (see Bailey, 1983, 1991; Bailey & Ochsner, 1983). First, the researcher became a participant observer in a beginners’ course for Thai language in a language school in Thailand. For three weeks, she recorded her Thai language-learning experience in an intensive journal. During class-time, she took abbreviated notes about her personal language learning experiences, her feelings, and observations, even though doing so caused her to miss language instruction. Immediately after class, she filled in the details, wrote extensive commentaries about the other learners, and her interactions with them.

During the three weeks of initial data collection, the researcher did not restrict herself to writing only about experiences and events related to her preliminary research questions. This allowed her to collect data in a naturally occurring and non-manipulated context. As the researcher was the study’s main participant, her diary served as the main data collection instrument.
Procedures of the Data Analysis

After raw data collection was complete, the researcher transformed the personal diary into a public version, deleting or changing names to protect the privacy and anonymity of the school, teachers, and course participants. The researcher edited the text only where meaning needed to be clarified and when references would be unclear to outside readers.

During the next stage, the researcher conducted a preliminary analysis of the data (language-learning diary) to look for reoccurring patterns, significant events, trends, and topics. Since many diary entries were long and described several language learning situations, she “used stretches of coherent discourse as units of analysis.” Each unit was contextually separated from those that followed. These units were arranged into thematic categories (Stakhnevich, 2005, p. 219). The diary’s first analysis produced the following recurring topics: anxiety, fear of failure, losing dignity, fear of losing status, pace of instruction, information overload, and comparison with peers.

All qualitative research including “diary studies produce an enormous amount of data [and] myriad factors that have influenced the learner’s experience [and] emerge from these journal data” (Campbell 1996, p. 202). The researcher focused only on a few emerging patterns, topics, and events. The diarist had written about these extensively, and this would help her to answer the study’s research questions.

Results were generated using a combination of introspection and retrospection. Introspection is “the process of observing and reflecting on one’s thoughts, feelings, motives, reasoning processes, and mental states with a view to determining the ways in which these processes and states [at the time they are occurring] determine our
behavior” (Nunan, 1992, p. 115). Retrospection addresses the process of collecting corresponding data “after the event under investigation has taken place” (Bailey & Nunan, 1996, p. 121).

This process made it necessary to conduct another literature search to refine the research questions and categories of unit analysis in order to establish that the “findings are credible to the research population” (Adams et al., 2005, p. 86) and to determine which findings may be transferable. The researcher looked for evidence of similar factors in the journals and diaries of other learners and researchers to compare and contrast the participant’s experiences with those found in the professional literature. For instance, Bailey (1983) found that in a classroom environment, competitiveness and anxiety were the two factors that most influenced her language-learning process. Bailey also found similar data in other researchers’ journals and studies. She further compared findings from the literature to her own data. This researcher followed the same format. She analyzed and interpreted her own data, then compared and contrasted these findings with similar findings in the relevant literature. This was done to shed light on the processes involved in learning Thai as an older adult.

The main purpose of this study was twofold:

1. To identify factors that produce symptoms of anxiety and negatively influence the language-learning process in older adults; and

2. To identify factors that reduce symptoms of anxiety in older adults and positively influence their language-learning process.

The units of analysis were grouped into inhibiting and enhancing factors that mirrored the research questions:
1. What factors produce symptoms of anxiety to emerge in older adult language learners, inhibit the language learning process, and impact self?

2. What factors reduce symptoms of anxiety in older adult language learners, enhance the language learning process, and impact self?

The topics for the units of analysis were grouped as inhibiting or enhancing factors:

- **Inhibiting factors**: 1) fear of failure, 2) comparison with peers (true and false beginners), 3) too fast pacing, 4) physical limitations, and 5) instructional factors.

- **Enhancing factors**: 1) correction of negative perceptions, 2) positive classroom atmosphere, 3) positive feedback (being able to do something successfully), 4) meaningful and relevant practices/exercises, 5) appropriate scaffolding, and 6) establishing a positive status in class.

The researcher developed specific wording for the units of analysis rather than adopting constructs from the anxiety research, because researchers like Young (1990) and others point out that anxiety is defined differently according to the purposes of the research. For example, Young states that, “comparisons across research are often hindered by inconsistency in anxiety research” (p. 540). Scovel (1978) wrote that anxiety is not a “simple unitary construct, but a cluster of affective states influenced by factors which are intrinsic and extrinsic to the foreign language learner” (p. 34). Since this study wants to understand anxiety as a symptomatic manifestation of a deeper cause, the units of analysis were framed as factors. This is appropriate because the main purpose is to identify factors that cause or reduce anxiety symptoms in older adults or interfere with or
facilitate the language learning process. The analysis of factors examines how and why they interfere with or facilitate the process of language learning.

**Classroom Observation**

To triangulate the data collection, the researcher re-enrolled in a beginners’ class for Thai in summer 2011. She participated in the first three weeks of the course at the same school. The participating students and teacher were different from the first class. Most importantly, this teacher had a different approach to teaching language. The researcher’s goal was to observe and record interactions between the teacher and students, and student-to-student interactions. The personal language learning process was not the main focus. The purpose was to identify specific factors that inhibit or enhance the language learning process of the older adults. Were they the same inhibiting and enhancing factors as found in the language learning diary data? How did the identified factors compare and contrast?

In addition, the participant observer noted the emotional reactions, gestures, and body language that accompanied the students’ and teacher’s words. During class, the participant observer took notes; after class, she expanded the notes into coherent text by filling in the gaps. The categories for the units of analysis established for the diary were also used to analyze data from the observations.

**Interviews**

To further the triangulation process, the researcher formulated interview questions (see Appendix A) for qualifying students (age 55 and over) from both classes. The interviews were used to explore whether these students had experienced the same or similar anxiety producing or reducing factors as the diarist. The open-ended questions
were designed to investigate how, why, and which factors enhanced or inhibited the
students’ language learning process. The researcher was looking for an emic perspective
from the participants. Other interview questions were designed to identify the students’
personal learning needs, goals, and expectations with respect to the teacher’s approach to
teaching Thai.

To get a more holistic picture of the research subjects and put their answers
and personal perspectives in a more comprehensive context, the researcher collected
personal and biographical data summarizing the students’ former exposure to language
learning.

To supplement data from the students’ perspectives on their personal Thai
text language learning experiences, the researcher developed an interview guide for the two
teachers and principal of the school (see Appendix). All interviews followed the
interview guide approach and were conducted in English. For three subjects, English was
their native language. For everyone else, English was a second or third language. The
answers to the interview questions were written down by the researcher in the form of
field notes. Immediately following the interviews, the notes were transcribed into a
coherent and detailed text, which was further enhanced by recorded notes on the body
language exhibited during the interview. The units of analysis categories from the diary
were used for the analysis of the interviews.

In Chapter IV, the collected data is presented, analyzed, and discussed. In the
discussion section similarities and differences between the findings from the diary,
interviews, classroom observations, and the literature are discussed.
CHAPTER IV

FINDINGS AND DISCUSSION

Introduction

The first section of this chapter presents the findings of the diary. Factors that caused the journal writer to experience symptoms of anxiety, feelings of discomfort, stress, and almost panic are presented under Inhibiting Factors. An interpretive analysis of the symptomatic findings of feelings of anxiety, and what triggered them, is given. In the context of “out of control anxiety,” one classroom event is described and analyzed as an example to show the consequences anxiety can have when it reaches debilitating levels. Factors that reduced anxiety and enhanced the language learning process are presented under Enhancing Factors.

The second section presents data from interviews and classroom observations. These are used to verify the findings from the diary and to present contradicting and additional findings. The findings follow the same outline as the findings from the diary. All findings from the study are presented by using descriptions from the collected data.

In the discussion section of this chapter, similarities and differences between the findings of the study and the findings in the literature are discussed and summarized by answering the two research questions.
Findings from the Diary—Inhibiting Factors

What factors cause symptoms of anxiety and thereby interfere with the language learning process?

Reading the diarist’s journal to discover the factors that influenced the diarist’s language learning experience, it became apparent that there were several underlying concerns: What if she fails again in learning a language? Would it be the same painful process all over again? And maybe she is not a “good language learner” after all. Or maybe now she is too old to learn a language. Almost every day the researcher found a reference to these fears and anxieties. Looking at each incident, it became clear that symptoms of anxiety surfaced for different reasons.

Fear of Failure

The very first paragraph of the diary reveals the underlying fear of not being a good language learner and possibly even a pre-programmed failure. The diarist reasoned that after studying SLA and best practices for teaching second languages, and after writing papers about language learning strategies, she should be prepared to tackle a new language in spite of being an older adult. She wrote:

Today will be my first day of class after arriving in Thailand three days ago. So far I have been all eyes and ears, but nothing makes sense, specifically when it comes to sounds and writing. The script is incomprehensible to a German/American. Writing symbols don’t seem to correspond to particular sounds, nor can I isolate words out of a jumble of sounds. Even pictures don’t seem to reveal their message to me. There is zero “picking up” of key words or phrases so far. The very uncomfortable question is: Shouldn’t I be doing better, with all my knowledge of language learning strategies? Or, Is it true that older people cannot learn new languages?

The diarist felt helpless and lost in an unfamiliar culture and language where no contextual cues were available and background knowledge was of little help in
navigating these surroundings. Unable to figure out how to find her way she felt threatened, because she could not speak the language or read any of the signs. She felt indignant at becoming dependent on her Thai-speaking husband. She felt she had lost her independence and autonomy, although she was able to rationalize this as an expected and normal consequence of being a neophyte in the country. But the realization that she had zero capability of picking up any words or phrases caused instant anxiety. Old fears returned that she was, and would continue to be, a failure at learning languages. This fear was pronounced because all her knowledge of language-learning strategies (LLS) and her manifold language-learning experiences did not give her an edge in learning Thai. Therefore, she reasoned, she was not only a failure as a language learner, but probably should not be a language teacher if she could not apply her knowledge of LLS.

The next two paragraphs of the diary show that the anxiety was fed by the diarist’s negative anticipation about how the language classes would be conducted. She imagined the worst learning conditions and found her worries confirmed when she read the school rules. In her eyes, it was necessary to prepare herself to face major difficulties in her adventure learning the Thai language.

I am anxiously anticipating what my language teacher’s approach to teaching the Thai language will be. I have heard so much about tonal languages and how difficult they are for English speakers to learn. Will the teacher rely only on Thai? Will there be no English in class? How will the teacher introduce the foreign script? Will the teacher use the phonetic alphabet? I know this would help me to remember the foreign sound system and it would help me to study, practice, and memorize after class, on my own.

I have read the school’s rules for English learners on the bulletin board of the school. They sound extremely harsh, patronizing, and authoritarian (a totally teacher-centered approach).
The diarist’s biggest worry was the teacher’s approach to language teaching: would the teacher accommodate the students’ needs? In reality, she was only worried whether the teacher would meet her own needs as a language learner. She wanted the best conditions possible to succeed in learning Thai. She wrote, “I know this would help me.” In her mind, she was plotting out the best possible scenario where she would be successful. Reading the school’s rules on the bulletin board, which came across as being harsh, patronizing, authoritarian, and a totally teacher-centered approach, fed directly into her anticipated fears that the experience might become a failure.

At another time when anxiety was mounting, the diarist wrote:

Dealing with language learning stress even at my old age reminded me of the intense stress and pure fear I constantly felt when I had to learn my first foreign language in school at age 10, which became so great that it inhibited my learning and made me believe that – as the language teacher put it – “I was too dumb to learn English.

The quote reveals not only the diarist’s intense fear of failure but also the origin this fear. This explains why the diarist showed such a strong need for evaluating her performance. The most obvious way to gauge her comparative success or failure was her classmates.

Comparison with Peers (True Beginners Versus False Beginners)

The first day of language lessons became an emotional roller coaster for the diarist. She stated that as soon as the teacher launched into the first language lesson, the anxiety level started rising. Her focus shifted quickly from language learning to her classmates. She described her peers as responding to the teacher’s input like pros, as though they had reproduced these phrases in the short dialogue many times before. She
felt that she was the only one not sure about the meaning of what she was actually reproducing. The diarist instantly found this frustrating. She did not want to be the “slowest” student in the classroom. She wanted to be perceived as an “expert” language learner. In her eyes, she needed to be an expert language learner since she had studied SLA. Being aware of her fellow students’ performance and comparing their performance to hers caused the diarist’s anxiety level to rise steadily throughout the rest of the morning. She wrote:

It is frustrating when it seems that I’m the only one who is sooo slow! Some of the students seem to be very familiar and comfortable with the phrases we are practicing!!! I try to tell myself that these students can’t be true beginners as I am. They must have learned and practiced all of these words and phrases many times before.

Throughout the three-week course, the diarist compared her performance with her peers constantly. For example, on different occasions she wrote:

It became apparent that most of the students already know the numbers up to a thousand. The teacher took a short survey and found that all of the other students are very comfortable with numbers up to a 100. I don’t know any. It is frustrating when it seems that I’m the only one who is sooo slow!

It just doesn’t feel good to be by far the slowest in class, no matter how rational I am about the situation!

It is very frustrating that the rest of the class seems to have no difficulty keeping up with the vocabulary, the content, or the structures used.

The diarist found herself at the bottom of the class, which was very frustrating for her. Throughout the language course, the diarist battled the frustration that her classmates were ahead of her because they were false beginners, and she was the “only” true beginner. They already knew the words and phrases, it was review for them, but everything was new to her.
It seems that I am the only one who has never learned any Thai before, because everyone uses words that have not yet been introduced by the teacher. Further, the students seem to have much more confidence in answering the questions and a better recall of words then I have. In my mind I constantly attribute this to the fact that the students are more advanced and this is only day three of learning Thai for me.

The following incident, which happened during the second day of class, shows how devastating it can be for true beginners to participate in a class full of false beginners. The anxiety level becomes debilitating, especially for students who do not have effective coping strategies for anxiety reduction. The diarist recorded the following disturbing event:

The second day started with review of the numbers up to 10,000. We practiced with partners and individually. Then we were called one by one to the front of the class. The class members called out numbers in Thai and the one at the board had to write the corresponding digits. I had to remind myself to stay calm when I realized that most of the students were able to hear and comprehend the number when spoken once by the teacher at a normal speed and transfer them into digits, and that for numbers up to 10,000! I was only able to catch the numbers when they contained two or three words, and that only with the help of the transliteration and my notes. What was I supposed to do? I could only make a fool out of myself, and that in front of everybody. I have to remind myself that it is unrealistic to have memorized all the numbers up to 10,000, and be able to hear them, comprehend them, and write them down just 24 hours after being exposed to them for the first time. In spite of understanding and being able to analyze what is going on in the classroom, my anxiety level is skyrocketing! It just doesn’t feel good to be the “stupid” one in the classroom. My anxiety level really starts to spin out of control when every student has a turn to show his/her capability in front of the class. Some of the students call out a number in Thai and one of us writes the digits on the board. I know this will end in a disaster for me. While I am still trying to come up with a speech, an explanation to give when it will be my turn, to keep my face, my dignity before my peers and teacher – instead of paying attention to learning my numbers – suddenly one of the male students jumps up, and states angrily “I can’t do this!” and rushes out the classroom. I want to follow him and tell him that we could be buddies, because I cannot perform this exercise either and we could help each other . . . but nobody in the classroom does anything. Everybody freezes. Nobody knows what to do, including the teacher. It is only the second day of class. Finally, the class continues as though nothing had happened.
When the diarist saw that she would have to practice her comprehension of Thai numbers in front of the whole class and the teacher, she evaluated her chances of success as zero. Nobody in the class knew she only had 24 hours to learn the numbers and that she was not lazy or too dumb to learn them. Her anxiety level had become debilitating, and she was no longer paying attention to the learning task. By using several coping strategies, however, the diarist was able to keep her skyrocketing anxiety from spinning out of control. These strategies helped her stay in class, while the male student, whose stress level must have become unbearable, quit instantly. He jumped up before it was his turn, announced that he was not able to do the exercise, left the classroom, left school, and was never seen again.

Too Fast Pacing

Throughout the course, the diarist voiced her frustration about not being able to keep up with the fast pace. She wrote:

I was not able to take notes during class because the pace was very fast and I had to be constantly alert in order to follow the class. This is scary.

Again I had a very hard time to keep up with the class exercises. The teacher introduced many new vocabulary words and phrases, which are totally new to me, but most of them are review for my classmates.

I realized again that it is almost impossible for me to keep up this pace and not get confused.

Anxiety was building because the diarist was barely able to keep up with the rest of the class. After analyzing the situation, the diarist concluded that the teacher introduced too many new words and phrases during a single class session. She realized that, while it was too much for her, it was not for her peers since it was review for them. The diarist started to record the amount of new information presented in class. She wrote:
We also learned another 25 new words in connection with food and meals.

There are just too many new words and phrases I am confronted with. I missed over 30 new words and phrases. And today we learned and worked with at least another ten new ones, not counting the many new phrases we learned as well. I was not able to write everything down, too much in too short a time.

I am writing my notes again in the evening because I have not one spare minute during class time.

The diarist wrote: “Impossible to keep up, another 25 new words, missed over 30 new words plus many phrases, too much in too short of time!” In the next diary quote:

In class I thought I understood, but after going over my incomplete notes, with the questions and answers that were introduced during class, I am not so sure any more. Noun markers are a new language concept for me. First I thought it had to do with noun-classes as in Swahili but that does not hold true. I think one of the problems is that I experience information overload. I understand the concept when it is introduced, but then new layer upon new layer of information buries the first information, I find myself understanding everything one minute, but a few minutes later when new vocabulary or new structures are introduced I push the “old” information aside to be able to take the new information in. And I have no proper notes and no textbooks to study on my own.

The diarist diagnosed “information overload.” Another day she wrote: “I am on definite overload especially orally with the added skewed pronunciation of my classmates.”

The diarist concluded that the fast pace of instruction led to information overload for her and caused anxiety to surface. She was unable to write down the information she would need to study later (e.g., new vocabulary and new sentence structures). She felt she had no choice in this matter: if she kept up with class instruction, she could not take notes, and if she took notes, she could not keep up with class instruction. Either way, she was at risk of falling further behind her peers. Another quote from her diary lets the researcher conclude that information overload put the diarist “in
danger of shutdown.” Interestingly, the diarist wrote also: “We all feel that we are on overload and in danger of shutdown when too much information in too short a time needs to be processed.”

The diarist indicated that not only did she seem to be on constant overload, but all her peers did as well. Information overload did not allow the learners to keep the information in the working memory long enough to process the information.

**Physical Limitations Relating to Age**

The diarist’s journal shows evidence that she worried about possible physical limitations due to age. She questioned why she could not remember information. She wrote:

> At the time of explanation it [the information] seemed very logical and easy. But re-reading the examples now again, after two days, the concept has become very murky. It just shows me that it is very crucial to review as soon as possible after each lesson. The concept is no longer in my working memory. I will have to relearn it. (My fear is that this is related to age, or is it individual learner difference, both, or just too much time has passed).

The diarist recorded another physical limitation that she attributed to age: “We came back late Tuesday night totally exhausted. I am surely not in my twenties any more. I just don’t have the physical stamina any more. I am too tired to study.”

The diarist worried that her physical limitation, and therefore her age, was interfering with her language learning.

**Instructional Factors**

The diarist realized halfway through the course that, although she was in a non-threatening classroom environment, her anxiety levels were still “sky-high.” She wondered why the anxiety and frustration were interfering with her language acquisition.
Even in this non-threatening environment I was frustrated and my anxiety level sky-high. I tried to reason with myself that this was not reasonable. I was in a total nonthreatening environment. I was not getting graded, I was in a small class, I had all the reasoning tools to ease my pain of barely hanging on by using my knowledge about affective, social, and metacognitive language learning strategies, and today I had used all of these strategies to be more effective in learning this tonal language and still my frustration levels were far too high. This is what I think, I personally need to lower my frustrations and anxiety levels so they don’t interfere with my language acquisition:

The diarist described the learning environment as non-threatening. She was not being graded, the class size was small, and she had nice, helpful, and non-competitive classmates, and a helpful and kind teacher. The diarist reasoned that she knew enough LLS to help her with the language-learning process, but still found her levels of anxiety and frustration too high and interfering with her language acquisition. She wrote in her journal, reflecting as a teacher, “It is pure stress to sit through instruction every day, unable to understand, and day-by-day falling further behind.” This quote caused the researcher to look at instructional components that may have caused her frustration and anxiety.

The researcher found that every time the teacher used an extended monologue as an instructional tool, it caused the diarist extreme anxiety. This is demonstrated in the next two excerpts of the diary.

The teacher started out the class by giving an extended monologue without any context cues, any written cues, or stating what she was going to talk about, and she didn’t show any pictures to help with word and context recognition. When she was done she started immediately to ask questions about what she had told us. My overload and panic buttons started flashing right away. I am not able to process the incoming information at the needed rate.

Listening to the teacher giving a long monologue, using all the newly introduced words and phrases, felt again like listening to a new incomprehensible language. I was not able to figure out what they were talking about.
The diarist used strong language to express her anxiety. She writes, “My overload and panic buttons started flashing right away.” She gave insight into what she thought would have helped her process the incoming information. She wanted context cues, written cues, or pictures that might have helped her make some educated guesses and would have triggered a faster recall of words and phrases. Instead, she panicked and drew a blank. Not being able to figure out what the teacher was talking about and lacking the resources to find meaning caused the diarist to panic and kept her from paying attention to the task.

It appears to the researcher, however, that it was not the monologues that caused the anxiety to rise, but rather the incomprehensible input. The task level was too high for the diarist. With appropriate scaffolding, she would have been able to participate in the exercise. Many quotes from the journal verify this:

The exercise was a very fun and efficient TPR practice for ordering coffee and tea. I wanted to participate but was only partially capable of doing so. Every student had a card with an ingredient of the drink. One student would order a specific drink and the rest of the students had to stand on the ordered cup or glass when their item was ordered. This part I was able to do because I could concentrate on only two components of the sentence, my ingredient and the word for cup or glass. But when it came to ordering a drink I was overwhelmed with the many different parts of the sentence, the many options of the new vocabulary and the very complex and lengthy sentence. This was also true when I was asked to summarize what the other student had ordered. I was not able to participate.

The diarist wrote that she was overwhelmed at different points in the elaborate practice exercise. She liked the type of exercise but did not have enough resources at certain times to participate. Also, the quote indirectly refers to the cause of the diarist’s anxiety. It was not the exercises, but an inability to understand that prevented her from participating in class. The next quote underlines this finding: “Today I had fun in class. It
always feels good when I do understand and I am comfortable with the content and enjoy the content.”

The diarist wrote that by understanding the content, she was able to participate in class. She was included and not marginalized; therefore, she had fun in the class. The diarist’s anxiety was not caused by certain types of tasks, exercises, and practices, but by the wrong task level and/or lack of scaffolding.

Findings from the Diary—Enhancing Factors

What factors reduce symptoms of anxiety and thereby enhance the language-learning process?

Correction of Negative Perceptions

During the first day of Thai lessons, the diarist’s anxiety level dropped to what she considered a normal level when some of the “anxiously anticipated” complications of learning Thai did not materialize. Hearing the teacher’s introduction to the course led to an instant drop in the diarist’s anxiety level. The diarist wrote:

The teacher is a middle-aged native Thai woman. She introduced herself and the course, speaking in English with a slight Thai accent. The rules for the course are: no food, no drinks, and no gum in the classroom. There will be assigned homework. She will use as little English as possible during the class hours. She will introduce the Thai language, speaking at a normal speed right from the beginning. She will use a phonic approach to write the Thai words. She explained that the sounds of the Thai language are very different from the sounds of our mother tongues, and that the five tones of some sounds would add another layer of difficulty for most of us. She further explained that she will model the sounds and that we (the students) will have to try to mimic them, and as our teacher she will correct the sounds until they are recognizable to native speakers. The teacher encouraged us not to worry, because it takes a lot of practice to even approximate the sounds. She encouraged us, saying that we will be able to hear and learn the sounds over time. She further stated that it is important not to translate word by word, because in Thai word-by-word translation does not necessarily reveal the meaning of a sentence.
The teacher was not the authoritarian teacher the diarist had expected after reading the school rules. Instead, the teacher encouraged the students by acknowledging that Thai was a very difficult language for non-Asian language speakers to learn. They should not worry, because she would help them and, over time, they would be able to distinguish the many unfamiliar sounds of Thai and approximate them.

The diarist was relieved that there would be some written and understandable representation of the language that would help her recall and memorize the words and structures taught in class. She would not have to rely solely on aural memory. Without this provision, she felt that she would have been at the mercy of the teacher. The teacher would have been her only resource. The transliteration system was going to set her up to be able to study on her own. The diarist wrote:

The other reason why my anxiety level dropped drastically was that the teacher used phonetic symbols to represent the sound-system of the Thai language. (She used a transliteration system based on American English). This gives me a visual help for recognizing and memorizing all these extremely strange/foreign sounds. I now can build a mental representation of these sounds in my mind. This does not mean that I have already put to memory all the new sounds that were presented during the first hour, but I will be able to recall the sounds by looking at these symbols. It is important for me to intellectually understand how these sounds are formed. Now what I need is a lot of practice to be able to hear the sounds and then to reproduce them.

Reading the diarist’s journal and analyzing what might have reduced her anxiety, the researcher found that the diarist was encouraged by the thought that she would be able to have control over her personal learning process. The diarist was relieved that she would not have to turn over control of her learning to the teacher and that she would not have to become dependent on the kindness and patience of the teacher. The diarist’s fear about her possibly diminished aural memory capacity was also addressed;
the transliteration system promised her some control and independence in the learning process.

Another drop in the diarist’s anxiety level happened when the teacher explained to the class what linguists meant when they talked about a tonal language. The diarist’s fears were based on a total misconception about tonal languages.

It was a great relief for me to understand cognitively what the tones are about. Thai has five tones. For example to pronounce a rising tone your voice starts at a low pitch and goes up, a falling tone starts at a high pitch and then goes down. The other three tones present a high pitch, a mid, and a low pitch. I had a totally wrong picture in my mind what tones are all about. I thought I had to say a word at five different pitches (like notes in music) and I imagined that I had to be able to recognize, e.g., words spoken at the pitch of C, D, E, and F on a music scale. By having the tones in the Thai language explained to me, my anxiety about learning Thai was greatly reduced.

Throughout the first part of the morning, the diarist’s anxiety level dropped when she realized that many of her anticipated fears were based on misconceptions. One was based on the Thai language itself. The others were based on the teacher and her teaching methods. The diarist expected the teacher to use teaching methods that the diarist had experienced in the past, which had made it harder for her to learn other languages. The Thai teacher was not an unapproachable, judging, all-knowing, and authoritarian teacher. She genuinely wanted to help her students learn the language.

Positive Classroom Atmosphere

The diarist recorded many incidents that demonstrated how the teacher was instrumental in creating a positive classroom atmosphere and how much this fact reduced the diarist’s anxiety. First, the teacher acknowledged that the Thai language was difficult to learn, especially for those who did not speak a tonal language: “The teacher encouraged us not to worry, because it takes a lot of practice to even approximate the
sounds. She encouraged us, saying that we will be able to hear and learn the sounds over time. She also emphasized, ‘I am here to help you!’

The teacher conveyed to her students that with her help, they would learn and be able to speak Thai. Many times the diarist recorded that the teacher encouraged the students not to give up. She always acknowledged that learning Thai was hard and would take time, but all of them could learn it. She said, for example, “You will be able to hear and produce the Thai sounds over time!” Another time the diarist recorded: “[After the incident, when the student had left the class] the teacher tried to encourage the students with remarks like “don’t worry! We will practice the numbers in many different contexts! It takes time to learn a new language! Don’t be so hard on yourself.”

The teacher’s acknowledgment that Thai was a difficult language removed the diarist’s fear that she was a bad language learner. Another way the teacher reduced anxiety is shown in the following quote:

A student calls for a time out. “I am lost! What are you talking about?” “I am lost, too,” another student adds. The teacher changes the pace instantly to adjust to our needs. She introduces a few new words and reviews the new structures from the day before and writes them on the board. She also shortens the segments that we are supposed to practice. This makes the practice much more manageable for me. I catch on and I am able to participate in the class exercises and so are the other students.

Every time students requested help, the teacher responded by providing the necessary scaffolding for them to finish the task successfully. The following quote shows how tuned in the teacher was to the students’ needs. The diarist described a time when she did not understand a question she was asked and had a blank look on her face: “The teacher knows me by now and immediately writes down the questions and I am able to
process the answers because all the sounds I hear immediately start making sense. The written presentation of the words helps me to decode the meaning.”

The diarist summarized her appreciation for the teacher in the following two quotes:

The students including myself appreciate our teacher, especially the students who already have had teachers who followed strictly scripted and meaningless drill patterns that are totally disconnected from the natural context of language learning.

Today was the last day in school for me. It is sad to leave the people behind I just had started to get to know, including my teacher, whom I had come to appreciate more and more, seeing and understanding that she was one of the few teachers who had adapted her teaching to the needs of the “old foreigners.” We just started to get to know her also on a more personal level, too. We all had lunch together after school. It was a lot of fun. Three weeks was just too short a time.

The diarist described the teacher’s strength as having adapted her instruction to the needs of the “old foreigners.” The teacher was very personable and talked to every student in the class because she was interested in them as people as well as students. She made an effort to get to know her students’ strengths and weaknesses in order to provide all the help they needed in learning the language and culture, so they would be able to live independently and have an enjoyable time in Thailand.

The diary also provided evidence of how the students themselves contributed to a positive classroom atmosphere. The diarist wrote the following after having had a difficult and frustrating class session:

I do though enjoy the class in many ways. I like my classmates. We are getting to know each other. I like them very much because we have a lot in common. They let me know that they also have their problems with the language, which reduces my anxiety about being a total failure at learning Thai. They always accommodate me when I need extra help, without making me feel worse.
The diarist recognized that her peers’ behavior was not responsible for her anxiety attacks. On the contrary, they were always accommodating when she needed help. They let her know they got frustrated too and had difficulties learning Thai. The diarist liked her peers, because she found they had a lot in common. She realized they had started to get to know each other quite well. The researcher found that the diarist had started to record positive peer interactions beginning the second day of class. After the incident that had shocked all the students and teacher, she wrote the following:

The interaction among the students during break was dominated by the incident. We all gravitated to each other. We had to talk and find out what had happened. Every student expressed their utter shock and not knowing what to do at that moment, because it happened so fast and unexpectedly. Everybody felt that we were a very easygoing and noncompetitive and accommodating group of learners. They expressed, “We all are in the same boat. We all have difficulties in learning Thai.” We started to ask around for the student who had left, but we couldn’t find him.

It seems to the researcher that this “shocking incident” was the catalyst for the group to find its way and support each other. This became apparent in the diarist’s recordings over the three weeks of class. Since she got to know each student in the class, she was able to collect evidence that showed this was a very easygoing, noncompetitive group who tried to accommodate each other. When she went on a mission to find out if she was the only true beginner in class, all the students admitted they had felt utterly lost and humiliated at not knowing what to do or say.

How this process of getting to know each other was enhanced is evidenced in the following quote. Talking about Thai culture in class gave the group many topics to talk about during their breaks, which brought the students even closer together. Every student had many experiences with cultural differences. The diarist wrote:
During break this led to an intensive exchange among the students about cultural differences, since every student was from a different cultural background. It surely brought out beliefs and the students’ values. This process brought the students as a group closer together. We all got great respect for each other and their accomplishments in life and their great experiences around the world.

The researcher finds proof of positive group atmosphere based on mutual respect and admiration for each others’ accomplishments in life. In another part of the journal, the diarist wrote that she started having lunch with other students. The researcher concludes that the diarist’s anxiety levels decreased as she felt more comfortable with her peers and teacher. The positive classroom atmosphere did enhance the diarist’s language learning process.

Positive Feedback (Being Able to Do Something Successfully)

For the diarist, high levels of anxiety were caused by not understanding what to do or how to do it. This caused her to become discouraged, and a fear of failing set in. The opposite happened when the diarist was able to understand and do things. The following quotations, taken from different parts of the diary, show how important it was for her to be able to do something right and participate during instruction. Realizing that she was making real progress in her language learning caused her anxiety levels to decrease and disappear, and hope to set in. All of this greatly enhanced the language-learning process. The diarist wrote:

I was proud of myself when I connected the words with the right numbers. I could discern the words aurally and attach the right meaning to them when at the same time I could see the transliteration the teacher had written on the board.

For the first time I start to be able to discern chunks/words, so I can ask “What does this… mean? Before, everything was just a jumble of strange sounds, without beginning or end. This is encouraging.
Am able to pick up the sounds of a word and transcribe them correctly when the teacher says them.

Today class-time seemed much less frustrating than yesterday. It seemed to me that I was able to keep up with the other students during the many and varied exercises. I was able to participate in the exercises with relative ease.

I was pleased with myself when my classmate recalled all the new vocabulary for me and I was able to transcribe it.

This whole encounter encouraged me because I realized that I was able to discern Thai sounds and that means I have the capacity for word and sentence recognition.

I had the opportunity to listen to some highly contextualized conversations between advanced Thai language learners and native speakers. I was able to recognize question-and-answer patterns as well as many of the words we have learned. I was able to contribute to simple conversations when I was addressed personally. I made another observation. By now I definitely recognize Thai when spoken among several different languages. I was not able to do so two weeks ago.

In these quotes, the diarist stated she was encouraged, pleased, and proud whenever she was able to do something. She was relieved and found school less frustrating when she was able to keep up with the other students.

The researcher takes these expressions of relief as evidence that the language-learning process was enhanced for the diarist. The diarist recognized these incidents as signs of encouragement and confirmation that she was capable of learning a new language. She wrote, for example: “That means I have the capacity of word recognition” and “now I definitely recognize. I was not able to do so a week ago.”

She was making progress. It seems to the researcher that it was very important to the diarist to find factual proof that she had the capacity to learn Thai. Every time the diarist was able to perform as well as her classmates, her self-confidence got a boost, which in turn enhanced her learning. This led the researcher to look for the types of instructional settings, instruments, and techniques that helped the diarist keep up with her
classmates and participate in classroom tasks. Several additional factors were found in the diary that enhanced the diarist’s language learning process: small group or pair work, careful scaffolding, and meaningful and relevant exercises.

**Small-group Setting and Pair Work**

The journal entries offers evidence of several reasons why the diarist preferred small-group or pair work as a setting that enhanced her language-learning process. The diarist pointed out that the small group setting gave her the opportunity to ask questions without having to do so in front of the whole class. She thought this setting provided her with more individualized help from both teacher and classmates. The diarist liked the fact that she was able to practice and reproduce sentence structures more often in a group setting than during a whole class exercise. In a small group, the diarist also had the opportunity to catch up with the class. The above findings are highlighted in the following quotes:

The small group setting gave me the opportunity to ask clarification questions. It is easier to ask my classmates and not have to ask in front of the whole class. Also the teacher is available on a more individual basis during these group exercises. The written models helped me to reproduce the sentence structures I had not been taught because I was absent. I was able to catch up again.

Group practices finally gives me the opportunity to catch up with writing down the new vocabulary words and phrases and use them in context. The instant feedback from my practice partners helps me to solidify the new knowledge and restores my self-confidence.

The first diary entry indicates that helping the diarist catch up with other students reduced her anxiety (fear of not being able to keep up). In the second quote, the diarist states that the small-group settings gave her the opportunity to set her own pace, which enabled her to request the scaffolding she needed to participate successfully and
keep up with the class. The diarist also pointed out that the instant feedback she solicited from her practice partners helped solidify new knowledge and restored her self-confidence. The diarist observed that being able to restore her self-confidence was a key factor in not giving up the effort to learn Thai, as indicated in the following two quotes: “Group practice gives me more processing time and I can ask clarification questions,” and “To be able to slow down, ask questions and verify answers, getting this needed feedback keeps us all on task.”

The small-group settings enhanced the diarist’s language learning process because she had the opportunity to set her pace, ask questions, and verify answers that kept her and her peers on task.

Meaningful and Relevant Practices and Exercises

Meaningful and relevant exercises played an important role in delivering effective language instruction to older adults. Throughout the diary, the researcher has found many descriptions of what the diarist called “meaningful exercises.” The first description reveals what made the exercise meaningful to the diarist. She wrote:

We start the new lesson off with practicing our little learned introduction dialogue—Hello? How are you? Fine. What is your name? My name is . . .. This helps me to learn and memorize not only the dialogue but also the names of the students in class. Quite a meaningful little exercise.

The dialogue contained useful phrases the diarist needed in her everyday encounters in Thailand. Dialogue was relevant, and needed to be practiced and memorized. But what made the exercise especially meaningful was the fact that it was an authentic task. The diarist was actually using the new language to ask real questions to real people she did not yet know. It was a real information exchange, a real-life task that
any native speaker would have to perform. How important this aspect seems to have been for the diarist comes through in the next citation:

The second part of the lesson was used to practice words from the previous days in very meaningful contexts. Every student was an expert on their own countries’ foods. For instance, they knew what the prices of specific foods were in their own country. Therefore, as students we could ask genuine questions and got genuine answers. It was interesting to see that code switching, incorporating English terms where we didn’t know the Thai term for foods, still let us practice the new structures and new vocabulary and let us collect a lot of authentic information. It surely inspired students to ask many questions and receive expert answers. A few new words were introduced by the teacher as they became relevant within the context. Overall, these were very effective successful exercises in spite of code switching.

As a student, it was important for her to be able to “ask genuine questions and get genuine answers.” She also made an interesting observation about the usefulness of code switching in the context of authentic language practice. Since vocabulary at the beginning stage of language learning is very limited, the students’ creative use of new vocabulary is also very restricted. Being allowed to interject English names for countries and foods, the students were able to collect a lot of authentic and new information. The diarist wrote, “It surely inspired students to ask many questions and receive expert answers.” This provided extensive practice of new vocabulary and sentence structures without making the practice boring.

The next two quotes exemplify another way that meaningful and authentic practice enhances language learning and how it is accomplished:

After break the teacher introduces new vocabulary, mainly adjectives, through TPR, acting, hand motions, pantomime. We respond by imitating the sounds and appropriate motions. Then the teacher contextualizes these adjectives for us by asking us about our countries and our foods, teaching the necessary question words. The practice becomes quite intense but very enjoyable because we can ask genuine questions about each others’ countries and in return get real information. Is California beautiful, hot, and cold? Is the food in California cheap, spicy? We can
choose questions to ask each other and we can express our likes and dislikes as well as opinions about our own country and other countries’ towns and foods. This relaxes the atmosphere. There is a lot of laughter and surprises when stereotypes about countries are not confirmed.

I discovered a few unexpected cognates, relating to country names and foods. I find myself relaxing a bit during this practice section. I am trying to decode the words first by just listening to them, and refer to the transliteration only when I cannot discern what word I am hearing.

The diarist revealed that being able to exchange information and opinions, likes, dislikes, with her peers was very satisfying, and that it relaxed the atmosphere through all the laughter and surprises. She relaxed and was able to push herself to let go of her “crutches,” trying to decode words without first referring to the visuals. The interesting, authentic conversation with laughter and surprises enhanced her language learning process. The following quote suggests that meaningful exercises were not only fun, informational, and satisfying, but also helped students relax to the point where they realized they could do more than they thought:

The teacher exploits all of this for interesting and engaging practice sessions during which she solicits students’ opinions and their likes and dislikes. She makes the students compare and contrast their own likes and dislikes with those of their own countries in general. In this respect, our simple utterances in Thai are meaningful and convey authentic knowledge about ourselves, and our countries that, in many instances, is new to our classmates.

In the diarist’s eyes, the teacher made the exercises meaningful by structuring them in a way students were able to convey something about themselves. These exercises taught the students to represent themselves in the new language.

Appropriate Scaffolding

The researcher found ample evidence in the diary for the assertion that the diarist’s language learning was enhanced when she received appropriate scaffolding
during task participation. Appropriate scaffolding made it possible for her to complete exercises successfully and to participate in practices at her level. In the following quotes, she referred to a few of the teacher’s specific scaffolding practices that facilitated learning:

I was able to participate in the exercises with relative ease. Many of the exercises were basically substitution drills where each student had pictures of food that needed to be integrated into sentences. The pictures also represented the different parts of the sentence structure. We only had to integrate our food items into the long sentence. These visuals helped to break down the long sentences into sequential phrases that could be tackled one by one. This helped me not to go on overload instantly. It was enough scaffolding to enable me to practice and memorize lots of the vocabulary necessary to ask questions and give answers without having to memorize the sequence of the sentence structures. This, in turn, provided enough repetition for me to get a sense for the lengthy answers to questions.

The diarist wrote that it helped her to have pictures of new vocabulary and written sentence models so she could concentrate on each sequential phrase. Breaking down the tasks into smaller sections and providing visual support made it possible for her to participate and practice at her own level. She further pointed out that repetition was another important factor in successful language processing.

The next quote refers to the effective scaffolding techniques that provided contextual cues, background knowledge, and precise instruction for practice.

The new vocabulary was relatively easy to understand and use because of the contextual cues and the accumulated background knowledge. By now I know everybody’s first and last name and the country they are from. This makes it easier to understand and answer the “who-questions” of the students and the teacher, and it helps in practicing the personal pronouns. I was relieved that I was able to keep up with the students. The teacher had planned a practice review without adding a lot of new information and made sure which sentence pattern we should practice.

The diarist recounted what made it easy for her to participate in the exercise: contextual cues, accumulated background knowledge, understanding what sentence
structures to practice, and a manageable amount of new information. In the next quote, the diarist reflected on her learning-style preference. She wrote:

Reflecting about the lessons today, I found that I respond well to pictures and the transliteration of words. It seems to me that both tools free capacity, e.g., energy for recall of words and phrases. Also, for the first time I conscientiously tried to find sound associations, approximations for particularly foreign sounds, but no words in English or German came to mind. Suddenly, though, a word from the German dialect I grew up with came to my mind. It sounded just like the Thai word for the number one. Worked great! I will not forget the word again.

The diarist realized that she preferred visual cues for scaffolding. From the very beginning, she wrote how important it was for her to have a written representation of the language. In many places in the diary, she wrote that the transliteration system helped her memorize the language and gave her the necessary scaffolding to hear what was said and decode the meaning.

This gives me a visual help for recognizing and memorizing all the extremely strange/foreign sounds. I started to get confused. It was particularly difficult because everything was solely oral/aural. There were no transliterations written on the board, which would have helped me hear and approximate what the students were asking. I realized how dependent I am on a visual representation of language.

The point the diarist made in the passage was that it seemed to her that both “tools” (transliteration and pictures) freed up capacity and energy to recall words and phrases. When she received this kind of scaffolding, her anxiety level was minimized. This freed up mental capacity and energy that she was able to invest in language-learning strategies such as scanning her memory for stored sounds that might approximate a new sound that needed to be produced. The diarist made another point about the helpfulness of written scaffolding:

Doing my written homework, I realized how dependent I am on visual representation of language. I had no trouble understanding my teachers written questions and knew instantly what the answer had to be. The only thing I double-
checked was the tonal symbols and the meaning of some vocabulary. It further was helpful to set my own pace, saying the words out loud, trying to practice saying the tonal sounds, experimenting on my own to get the tones right.

She preferred to have time in class and at home to double-check her answers to make sure they were correct. She liked to practice the new sounds and words first to make sure she could approximate them. It seems to the researcher that the diarist used the written scaffolding as a tool for independent study, which can be seen as a need for extended processing time and practicing time.

Establishing a Positive Status in Class

The researcher found evidence in the diarist’s recordings that she had a need to establish herself in the class as a successful and intelligent adult before she was able to pay undivided attention to her language learning. She had to experience intimacy and acceptance by her peers and teacher, feel secure in the social hierarchy of the classroom by maintaining an acceptable status in class, and feel in control of her own interactions and language-learning destiny. Already during the first day of class, the diarist’s inner security was shaken by the fact that all her peers seemed to be way ahead of her. She wrote:

The other students seem to be very comfortable with the phrases and the dialogue we had to practice!!! I am a total beginner! They can’t be! It is frustrating when it seems I am the only one who is so slow! It just doesn’t feel good to be by far the slowest in the class.

On the second day, the diarist’s self-confidence, her inner security, and her hope to gain an acceptable status in class received a massive blow. The diarist described a traumatic experience involving a classmate who left the class for good when he was faced with a task level that seemed unachievable to him. When the diarist saw herself having to
practice her comprehension of Thai numbers in front of the whole class and the teacher
after this event, she evaluated her chances of doing well as terrible. Her anxiety

*skyrocketed.*

My anxiety level really starts to spin out of control when every student has a turn to
show his/her capability in front of the class. While I am still trying to come up with
a speech, an explanation to give when it will be my turn, to keep my face, my
dignity before my peers and teacher – instead of paying attention to learning my
numbers – suddenly one of the male students jumps up and states, “I can’t do this!”
and rushes out the classroom. Then it was my turn. I presented the class with my
speech, that I am a true beginner and therefore need my notebook and please ask me
small, simple numbers. The students were very encouraging and helpful (and so
was the teacher).

The diarist feared losing face in front of the class and teacher before she could
establish herself as a successful and intelligent adult, and instead be perceived as too lazy
and/or too dumb to learn the numbers. Because she felt she had nothing to lose, she tried
to regain her status in class. She used rationalization, positive self-talk, and preparing
others for interaction (i.e., soliciting the students’ and teacher’s help in order to be able to
participate in this exercise). These strategies helped her stay in class, present who she
was, and express and negotiate her personal learning needs within this advanced
beginners class.

Once the diarist had established an acceptable status for herself in the class,
she had the courage to speak up for herself. She was a true beginner and everybody else
was a false beginner. As her internal security increased, she had the courage to speak up
in class and voice her needs, so that she could participate in the learning tasks.

Once she felt that strong sense of internal security and realized her lack of
linguistic ability in Thai did not jeopardize her status as an intelligent adult in the class,
she was able to focus learning Thai. Although the diarist still struggled with rising
anxiety when she was overwhelmed by information overload or task levels that were too
difficult for her, she continued to be her own advocate. She wrote:

I reasoned with myself that it was a total waste of time to sit through a session
without understanding or being able to participate. I had to become my own
advocate, express my learning needs and request appropriate help… During the rest
of the class I recuperated quickly from my loss of dignity. I was able to reestablish
myself in class by being able to follow the teaching and even being able to
contribute when others didn’t know the answers and I did. I was really shocked
about myself to see how important that was for my self-worth.

The diarist noted that she was shocked to recognize how important her dignity
was to herself. Every time she was unable to participate in class, her ideal self-
presentation and internal security were diminished. When she was able to follow
instruction and contribute to the class when her peers were unable to respond, she quickly
recovered from her loss of dignity. The entries show that the diarist gained confidence
after each successful task. This positive feedback helped her feel in control of her self-
image, even though the classroom interactions were still quite often intimidating. For
example:

The other students in the class seem to have some trouble wrapping their mind
around this concept. During recess some of my class mates confessed that by now
even they had to write a lot more down than in the beginning of the course because
they are confronted with new vocabulary and grammar. Maybe I am catching up to
their pre-knowledge of the language.

But I was the only one who knew that umbrellas don’t belong on the ground
because their work is to protect our heads. … It was very interesting to me that all
the students in my class who have been in the country for many months or have
come to the country many times, had no or very little knowledge about these
cultural expectations.

The next quotes show that when the diarist knew she was making progress in
learning Thai, her self-confidence and sense of security in her self-presentation increased
steadily. The diarist wrote:
For the first time I start to be able to discern chunks/words, so I can ask: “What does this mean?” Before, everything was just a jumble of strange sounds, without beginning or end. I am able to pick up the sounds of a word and transcribe them correctly when the teacher says them.

Today class-time seemed much less frustrating than yesterday. It seemed to me that I was able to keep up with the other students during the many and varied exercises. During recess some of my class mates confessed that by now even they had to write a lot more down than at the beginning of the course, because they are being confronted with new vocabulary and grammar. Maybe I am catching up to their pre-knowledge of the language.

This whole encounter encouraged me, because I realized that I was able to discern Thai sounds and that means I have the capacity for word and sentence recognition.

Towards the end of the language course, the diarist summarized:

I was not able to do so two weeks ago. Finally, I am catching on and I am able to participate in the class exercises.

The instant feedback from my practice partners helps me to solidify the new knowledge and restores my self-confidence. It seems that being able to restore self-confidence is a key factor in my not giving up and quitting. To be able to slow down, ask questions, and verify answers – getting this needed feedback keeps us all on task.

The diarist asserted that internal security, self-confidence, and establishing an acceptable status in class were key factors that prevented older adult students from giving up on learning Thai. Positive feedback was essential in keeping their self-confidence high.

Interviews and the Classroom Observations
Findings—Inhibiting Factors

Fear of Failure

Analyzing the interviews from the students, teachers, and principal and examining the field notes from the class observations, the researcher found that fear of failure is a factor causing anxiety in older adults and inhibiting the process of learning a
new language. For example, Teacher P who has worked with older adults for many years, stated in her interview:

The older adults are less confident when it comes to foreign language learning. They come to me even before they have started the first lesson and make excuses voicing their concern that they are not good students. They worry very much about not being good language students. This holds especially true when it is their first foreign language experience or when they have had negative language learning experiences during their school years.

Older adults often have less faith in themselves when learning a new language. This becomes their biggest obstacle in making progress in it.

Student D expressed why and how the fear of failure interferes with successful language acquisition. He stated:

If you doubt yourself, you will fail! You have to leave your EGO at the classroom door! Many of my acquaintances have given up to learn Thai. Why? You need to be determined – the pressure is too great – to give up is easier than to stick it out.” You convince yourself to go and study on your own is less threatening to your EGO. But then you never do it.

Student OJ viewed his fear as severe stress. He also talked about his fear of failure and how it interfered with his language learning:

I know I can’t handle stress. Why I don’t know. I have been diagnosed with post-traumatic stress disorder. It is good that we don’t have tests. What causes me stress in class is that I don’t comprehend, I don’t pick up language and I don’t seem to be able to retain new information. When I leave the classroom I feel that I have missed more than I learned. People laugh at me because I have gone to school and I still can’t speak Thai, I can only communicate on a very basic level, like pidgin English. This is very embarrassing. I freeze in school when I get corrected.

The Principal of the school confirmed the finding that many older adults will abandon learning a new language at their age when the task is much bigger than they expected, and they will not invest more in the project because they fear that they will fail. She voiced: “A lot of them [older adults] abandon the project [of learning Thai] because they are not willing to practice more. The task is too risky for them, they fear to fail.”
The researcher found that fear of failure was expressed many times in subtle ways (the student was not even aware of it and probably would deny it when asked). For example, Participant Observer (PO) recorded the following observation:

Several students are pressing the teacher for clarification. They don’t understand. Many new words and structures were introduced but no practice or comprehension check followed. The students are confused. They can’t let it go even though the teacher shows many signs of frustration with the students. The students assert, “I don’t understand this. This is not clear to me. What is the difference between . . . ?

The observation indicates that students will risk the teacher’s disapproval and short temper because they are desperate for answers. The students felt they would fail if their questions were not answered.

Comparison with Peers (True Beginners Versus False Beginners)

Comparing themselves with peers is another factor that often inhibits the language learning process in older adults. Student OJ expressed it this way:

I don’t like being at the bottom of the class – through all my growing up I felt this way. I hate it. I had many bad school experiences. I did much better later in life. I find the class very hard. The other students seem nice and understanding. We don’t get tested and don’t get grades, but I need to know where I stand in class. I think the other students in class are much smarter than I am. I think that, because they are getting it right all the time. Maybe the other [student with same name] is like me. Knowing this makes me not wanting to speak up in class.

Student OJ’s not wanting to participate/speak in class did inhibit his language acquisition. It is also interesting that another student denied that he compared himself to his peers, yet he was acutely aware of the fact that he was the “only one” who had trouble understanding in class. Student K stated in the interview: “I never compare myself to the others that’s why I never feel frustrated!”
Later he stated: “I am the only one in class who has trouble understanding!
But I must not concern myself with the others. I must not slow down the rest of the class.”
(In the discussion section later in this chapter, Student K’s statements are interpreted further.)

Too Fast Pacing

Too fast pacing during instruction is another inhibiting factor that negatively interferes with the language learning process. When students do not have enough time to assimilate the new information, it causes them to feel overwhelmed. They get their information mixed up, get confused, and forget what they already know. Students in both classes commented on it. Student D explained:

Most the work in class I didn’t like, because it seemed always too much work. Maybe it was that I had too much information to deal with at one time. You know, timing is everything. The right tempo is important. I would have liked more review. The amount of new vocabulary at any given time plus the new structures were very overwhelming. This is not very effective teaching. It is too confusing.

Student S expressed the same fact:

With all my learning I need time, I need to absorb everything at my pace. I need to process everything slowly and systematically. And the teacher, students and the tapes I bought are too fast for me. I get confused and I don’t want to make mistakes. So everything becomes very stressful. I mean, it becomes stressful to participate. You rather want to hide.

Student OJ stated: “Basically everything is too fast! The teacher expects too much in too short of a time! It causes me to make more mistakes.”

While watching the reaction of the students in the classroom, the PO found that most of them showed signs of being overwhelmed when flooded with new information and not having time to process it. She wrote in her field notes:
**Classroom observation:** Several students are pressing the teacher for clarification. They don’t understand. Many new words and structures were introduced but no practice or comprehension check followed. The students are confused. They express: “I don’t understand this. This is not clear to me. What is the difference between . . .?

After class, several students expressed to the PO their concern about the pace of the class: “Four more weeks of this! We are already confused. Then we will be totally confused.”

These interview quotes and classroom observations indicate that too fast an instructional pace led to information overload. This caused anxiety and stress, and interfered negatively with students SLA.

**Physical Limitation Relating to Age**

Measurable physical limitations that are responsible for interfering with SLA do exist. For example, this was true for Student OJ. He had a hearing deficit. He was wearing hearing aids because of age-related hearing deficits. He explained to the interviewer:

I have a hard time to hear the new sounds. The students all have different accents, that doesn’t help and the teacher constantly speaks English and she speaks very fast. I don’t hear the words, because I am old and I even speak slowly in my own language!

I need a patient tutor because I am old and I have a hearing problem. I have hearing aids. I have trouble to hear the sounds. Maybe that’s why I can’t understand what the teacher is saying.

The student blamed his age as the reason for his difficulty in hearing new words. He also blamed the speed of the language spoken by the teacher as another reason why he could not pick up the words. The above quotes indicate that Student OJ’s
difficulty in picking up sounds and words was due, to some degree, to his compromised hearing.

Many older students assumed they had deficits in their learning capacity because of their age. The most cited one was a memory deficit. This deficit is very difficult to prove or disprove without expert testing. Nevertheless, many students believed their memory capacity had decreased with age. The PO recorded many student complaints: “Student S and student J make remarks like “my old brain! I can’t remember like I used too!” I wonder if I am to old to learn a new language. My poor brain!”

**Instructional Factors**

The researcher found that several instructional techniques caused fear and anxiety in her research subjects. Student D voiced one of them:

I didn’t like a lot of what was going on in class, because so many teaching methods/techniques stressed me out. For example, I did not like being called to the board and being put on the spot in front of everybody. I don’t like making mistakes, making a fool out of myself.

Student D not only stated what causes him stress, but explained why. He does not like to be put on the spot because he does not like to make mistakes; he equates mistakes with showing himself to be a fool to his peers and teacher. This view was shared by all older adults in both classes. For example, Student J expressed it this way: “You have to speak in front of all the students. You must dare speak even when you don’t know what to say, that is very difficult. It is stressful because you don’t want to make a mistake.”
Teacher P and Teacher M also pointed out that older adults do not like to be called on before they are ready to respond.

Student J and Student W (husband and wife) referred to another instructional technique, which raised stress and anxiety levels in older adults—listening to long stretches of discourse. They recalled:

The teacher read stories in Thai to us. Afterwards she asked questions. In the beginning we had a very hard time with it. Quite frustrating, when we didn’t understand half the things. We had to pay close attention, concentrate very hard. We stuck it out and in the end it paid. We learned a lot.

It is interesting how Student J interprets the stress levels he felt when the teacher had students listen to extended dialogue. He recalled:

The teacher always and constantly spoke Thai to us without a word of English, even outside the classroom when we had lunch with her. I could not follow her. I would get very frustrated and very tired. I stuck it out, because I had my wife and she is much better than I am.

These statements indicate that a student’s level of comprehension is a determining factor in how stressful the situation becomes for the student. Student J evaluated his stress level as being much higher than that of his wife, Student W. He might have given up learning Thai if it had not been for his wife. He was not able to follow the teacher’s discussions, while his wife, who said she understood half, recalled them only as “hard.” Again, many students recalled similar experiences and reactions.

Most students saw the transliteration system as another inhibiting factor in the language-learning process. The use of a transliteration system, instead of teaching the Thai alphabet, was detested by many students because it caused a lot of confusion and became a major source of frustration, even when most students saw it as a necessity. For example, Student OJ asserted:
The transliteration they are teaching us here I find difficult and confusing. It is just another layer to learn that does not make sense to me at all. It only slows me down. Why can’t we learn Thai with the help of English phonics? I just don’t like the transliteration system. I need proper phonics not hieroglyphs. When I am totally lost during a lesson I will start to write everything down in my own system, how I hear it, and how it makes sense to me. If she [the teacher] doesn’t like it, I don’t care.

**Student OJ** developed a very negative attitude towards the transliteration system because it did not represent the sounds he heard, and it confused him more than it helped him. **Student J**, who shared some of **Student OJ**’s complaints, pointed out that without a transliteration system, independent study at home would not have been possible.

**Student J**: The transliteration system was helpful in learning Thai, without it, it would have been almost impossible, even though quite a bit of the system was confusing and not consistent in my mind. At least we had something to go by when we tried to study on our own. It helped us to remember what we studied in class.

While the students voiced that the system was not consistent and often confusing, most students believed that the “imperfect” transliteration system was better than not having a writing system at all. This is exemplified in **Student D**’s statement:

To learn the pronunciation was very hard for me, to copy the word just by listening, to learn them by heart that way, I mean to memorize them without being able to read them was very intimidating, especially the tones when you are not able to differentiate them, when you hear them. The transliteration system did help me to recall the words and helped me to reproduce them, even though many sounds were just very rough approximations.

Another instructional factor that had an inhibiting impact on students’ language learning process was the lack of meaningful language practice during class time. The older students in class had an ambivalent attitude towards the teacher’s instructional approach, which never varied during the entire language course. Some of the students’ answers during their interviews contradicted what the researcher observed.
during class. When the researcher PO asked the students how they felt about Teacher M’s approach to language instruction, they insisted they liked it. However, the researcher’s field notes revealed that the students’ classroom reactions to the teaching method were different from their answers. For example, the notes from several classroom observations indicated students were resistant or ambivalent toward the teacher’s instructional-approach.

**PO classroom observation:** Always the same, Teacher M never changes her teaching approaches. Lots of teaching “about language” in English but we never actually need to use language for communication purpose. She (Teacher M) explains the grammar well. I (PO) like it, because I feel comfortable with grammar. The students with little previous exposure to grammar have a hard time. Cultural explanations are also important to Teacher M. She spends a lot of time on it. I (PO) like this as well. The problem is that there is very little time for actual language practice and rehearsal, or any practice of meaningful conversation.

The PO records in her field notes that she liked this style of teaching because she was familiar with it. Yet, at the same time, she complained that she missed practicing meaningful conversations. In the next quote, the PO complained about the boring drills. She further described the reactions of the other students towards these kinds of drills.

**Classroom observation:** Always the same! Teacher M gives a lecture, explains the grammar, introduces new vocab by writing them down, making the students pronounce them, giving the meaning in English, using substitution drills to practice them. The teacher directs every move of the students (words uttered by the students)… Now you ask question! You answer! Now it is your turn…! She speaks those commands while she points to each student like a circus director! Makes for very boring drills. Students run out of questions to ask, since the answers are prescribed. Students start to push back by voicing: I can’t do it. I don’t understand, or by wanting answers to their questions. The class atmosphere is becoming negative. Students are not relaxed; they show signs of frustration, rolling their eyes, raising their eyebrows, shrugging their shoulders.

The students resisted by asking questions, insisting they did not understand, and did not contribute to the exercise. They showed signs of frustration and disapproval
with the process and teacher by rolling their eyes, raising their eyebrows, and shrugging their shoulders.

The following recorded classroom observation indicates that there was never any opportunity for the students to practice or rehearse a real-life situation in the classroom: “**Teacher M said:** ‘Now you know how to ask all people for their opinion!’

*But we were never asked to ask each other in class.*”

The students’ reaction to this kind of total teacher-controlled instruction is described in this field note:

**Classroom observation: Teacher M** does not allow any diversion from the pattern being practiced. The students try to be creative with their answers in spite that the teacher reprimands them for going outside the basic vocabulary and sentence structure and teacher demanded pattern, but the students just keep on doing it. The students don’t understand or ignore the teacher’s rising frustration and keep up their behavior. The teacher gets upset and starts yelling at them. She demands that the students obey her instructions. She thinks they are just crossing her and deliberately not obeying her. The students just don’t understand that the teacher wants them to follow the pattern. She does not want them to answer the question truthfully. For example **Student OJ** will not answer the question “Is John tall? with “Yes, he is tall,” because John is in reality short. **OJ** tries again and again.

The students’ behaviors indicate they were not satisfied with the teacher’s instructional approach. The students kept resisting the teacher’s instruction. They did not follow the pattern. Despite what they stated during the interview, they constructed meaningful answers modeled after real-life situations. These quotes indicate that the students were not satisfied with **Teacher M’s** instructional approach.

One more instructional approach seems to have interfered very negatively with students’ language-learning process. It is the teacher’s intensive and extended error correction, which became very destructive for two students in **Setting II.** The **PO** described the following events:
Teacher M is very strict on correct pronunciation. She always makes sure that everyone pronounces correctly. She specifically “singles out” Student S and Student OJ. It makes the other students feel uneasy. The teacher said: “Let me check one by one! No, no, no, don’t like it! Say it again!” The other students feel awkward and “laugh.” Teacher M draws attention to the fact that Student S has a hard time with pronouncing Thai vowels, hearing and producing tones, by singling him out for extra practice in front of everybody. She further ridicules him by saying: “What is wrong with you? Did you not study?” The student’s pronunciation deteriorates with each try.

Student S is also singled out by Teacher M. She draws everybody’s’ attention to the fact that he has trouble to distinguish between two specific vowels. She says: “This is just for you, because you have trouble! It is important for you to learn this right! Don’t look at your wife for help!” Student S laughs embarrassed and shifts uncomfortable in his seat and makes some smart remarks to make his classmates laugh. (he is a medical doctor).

Another time Teacher M tries to make a joke after Student S mispronounces a specific word for the hundredth time. She said: “You have to pay a dollar every time you make that mistake again!” The joke did not feel like a joke. Everybody felt like she was very condescending. Student S grinned sheepishly.

Student S knew that he had trouble hearing and pronouncing Thai sounds. He tried hard to correct his mistakes. He wanted to get the pronunciation right. He tried repeatedly under the direction of the teacher. He felt more and more embarrassed since success was not forthcoming and all the other students were witnessing his difficulties.

His signs of discomfort increased and his success diminished. He took this abuse without protesting or leaving (see Discussion for possible reasons). Nevertheless, it is obvious that this kind of error correction did inhibit his language-learning process. The PO did record another student’s reaction to this severe treatment of errors:

Classroom observation: Student OJ had a lot of trouble. The teacher worked with him a long time while we had to wait for our turn, just watching. It became embarrassing for all of us.

Classroom observation: Today Student OJ had a lot of trouble again. The teacher worked with him a long time while we were just watching. It became more and more embarrassing. He was not allowed to ask one question. He got corrected very sternly. “If you would do what I tell you, you would be fine! Tension built and
came to a head because Student OJ never followed her instructions! He just does not understand what the teacher wants. He tries again and again. She tells him: “What are you saying? I don’t understand you! This is not my language! Teacher M does not try to help him in an encouraging way. She yells addressing the whole class and him:” He always makes that mistake! Why don’t you listen to me! Why don’t you follow the pattern! The teacher complains to the other students in the class about OJ. Teacher M loses her temper more and more. The 69 year-old student has been made to look like a fool and arrogant foreigner. After the temper tantrum of the teacher Student OJ can’t perform at all. He is totally frozen. Everything he utters is wrong. The teacher finally lets peers help OJ. Slowly he relaxes a bit, but as soon as the class is over, he literally fled the classroom.

Another example of very harsh error correction occurred with Student OJ.

Being singled out in front of all the students was counter-productive for Student OJ. The teacher accused him of not wanting to listen to her or accept help. In the end, the teacher gave up and let the students help OJ. This kind of feedback was devastating to the 69 year old who explained in the interview with the researcher why he needed to learn Thai and that he was committed to the task. Student OJ disappeared right after class and did not show up for two days. Later in the interview, he stated that he returned to class because he needed help:

**Student OJ:** I have a very strong desire to speak Thai! It is embarrassing when you do not understand what people are saying to you, especially your spouse/partner. She speaks little English. So communicating is very difficult, very stressful.

I don’t mind so much when she [teacher M] singles me out, especially if the correction is helpful to me, and I understand what she wants. I am used to it, it happened to me in many classes before. I have the guts to ask her questions, too, but if I ask her too much she closes down and she gets angry.

I need help with practicing. I need someone to correct me. My girlfriend (he was divorced by then) loses her patience with me very quickly. To have a patient tutor would be wonderful.

**Student OJ’s** statements from the interview confirmed that harsh error correction like Teacher M’s did not enhance the language-learning process, but instead severally inhibited it. By not coming back for two days, **Student OJ** showed that he did
mind being singled out and ridiculed, but he preferred any kind of help to no help at all. He was desperate to learn Thai, and that is why he returned. In the case of Student S, not giving up on learning Thai after constantly being singled out was probably due to his female partner, who had a much easier time learning Thai and made enjoyable contact with Thai people outside the classroom (which she indicated during interviews).

Interviews and the Classroom Observations
Findings—Enhancing Factors

Correction of Perceptions

The interviews revealed that when language students realized that their perceptions about the language learning process were wrong or unrealistic, they relaxed and set more realistic goals for themselves. The students felt less frustrated and less anxious about potential failure, and started to enjoy what they were doing. For example, Student D expressed the following:

I had unrealistic expectation when it came to language acquisition. I thought I was an intelligent guy (I have a PHD) and therefore I just would learn the language without any great effort and in no time. I stressed when I found out I couldn’t do it. I felt like an idiot. When I learned and understood that learning a language takes due time no matter what, I could relax and enjoy the process of learning. What I expected from myself was unrealistic.

The quote indicates that the language learning process was enhanced after the student corrected his unrealistic goals. The energy needed to ensure the student’s dignity could now be used to learn the language.

Student S’s comments revealed how important students’ expectations are when it comes to setting realistic language-learning goals. He stated:

We [his female partner and he] never had grand expectations. Our goal is not to become very fluent speakers. We want minimal conversational skills and want to
work at it every year some more. We never expected to be fluent instantly. We had reasonable goals from the beginning. First we tried to learn Thai on our own. We just wanted to learn some vocabulary, but we didn’t know anything about tones. When we wanted to order food nobody understood us. That’s why we enrolled in this class. Pronunciation is important. I still have a hard time to hear!!!

Student S and his partner set out to learn Thai by having attainable goals for themselves. Student D had expected to learn Thai quickly. His frustration levels were constantly high and dropped only after he changed his perception about language learning and set reasonable goals for his study. Student J and his wife Student W also had realistic expectations and goals for their L2 acquisition. This helped them deal with the difficult language-learning process. For example, Student J stated:

We had no expectations when we started the class. We knew it was a difficult language to learn. We had been in Thailand before we decided to live here. So we knew we had to learn the language and we knew it would take us time to do so. No surprises there.

The students’ responses indicated that realistic language-learning goals and realistic expectations about the language-learning process are necessary for a positive language-learning experience. Changing unrealistic expectations and unrealistic language goals does enhance the language learning process.

As Teacher P pointed out in her interview, believing in your ability to learn another language is important for a positive language learning process. She asserted:

They [older adults] are less confident when it comes to foreign language learning. They come to me even before they have started the first lesson. They worry very much about not being good language students. I believe that all people can learn another language no matter how old they are or what background they have. All they need is to believe in them self. I believe they have the same ability as the young. The older adults often have less faith in themselves when it comes to learning language; this becomes their biggest obstacle in making progress in language learning.
**Student D** observed rightly, “If you doubt yourself, you will fail!” A positive self-perception and a belief in one’s ability to learn a new language as an older adult is an enhancing factor in SLA.

**Positive Classroom Atmosphere**

The interview notes and classroom observations indicated that a positive classroom atmosphere enhanced the language learning process of older adults. The findings from the two classroom settings were similar, but expressed from different viewpoints. The findings from **Setting I** were expressed as positive experiences for students in that setting, which enhanced their language learning experience. Students in **Setting II** complained about the lack of a positive classroom atmosphere due to tensions with the teacher, and this inhibited the learning process at least for the two older adult learners.

**Student J, Student W, and Student K** from **Setting I** reported the following about the positive classroom atmosphere:

**Student J:** It was very helpful that the students were so nice and always ready to help. We trusted and respected each other. It made learning easier.

**Student J and Student W:** The teacher was very approachable and a good cultural broker. She explained well. Sometimes we had lunch with her.

**Student K:** I am never frustrated in the classroom. All the students are kind and interesting. The teacher is very pleasant; she is kind and has a nice demeanor.

**Student K:** It was very comfortable in the classroom. All students had the same purpose [same goals for learning Thai]. I especially enjoyed having people from all over the world. I didn’t feel afraid in the class.

Every student in **Setting I** reported a positive classroom atmosphere, which was created by the students and teacher. The anxiety level in the classroom was low, as **Student K** indicated by stating “I didn’t feel afraid.”
The students in Setting II, however, spoke of their ambivalent relationship with the teacher, but their positive relationship with their peers. The PO documented that students tried to support each other, especially when the tension between the teacher and the class increased. They did the same when the teacher singled out a particular student. The students reported their intense embarrassment and mental shutdown because of the teacher’s negative attitude and condescending remarks. For example, the PO reported the following:

**Classroom observation:** Students want to help each other when they realize that tension is building between teacher and the weaker performing students. These students don’t understand what the teacher asks them to do. There is total miscommunication. The other students try to calm the situation by trying to reword what the teacher wants **Student OJ** to do. He tries again but is only halfway successful. It is not an environment for successful language learning.

**Student OJ** reported in the interview how he interpreted what was happening between the teacher and himself: “

The teacher does not fully explain things to me. I think she doesn’t like to be asked questions by the students – it is almost like she thinks we are questioning her skills. I don’t feel comfortable with our teacher. She is very set in her ways, in her mind. She does not accommodate student needs. For example, she cannot deal with student questions. I don’t get answers I need because I don’t understand. She is not happy, when I ask questions. She acts like she thinks: “Who are you to ask that question?” She is not patient or encouraging. – Maybe that is just my imagination.

He thought the teacher herself might have felt threatened by the students’ questions and resisted by becoming angry. He further pointed out that she was not flexible in her teaching and unwilling to accommodate his learning needs. **Student OJ** went on to say:

I don’t mind so much when she singles me out, because I need help with practicing my speaking, especially if the correction is helpful to me. But most of the time I don’t understand what she wants. I need a patient teacher. She just yells at me. I am
used to it. It happened to me in many classes before. I don’t want to give up. I do have the guts to ask her questions, but if I ask her too much she closes down and she gets angry.

Student OJ revealed that he had experienced this kind of treatment by teachers in the past. “So I am used to it!” This is probably partly why he did come back to class. Student OJ found the teacher unhelpful and difficult to work with. He had hoped for a teacher who would cater to beginners’ needs, but instead the teacher spoke so fast that he could not understand a single word she was saying. In the students’ eyes, the teacher did not contribute anything towards a positive class atmosphere; on the contrary, the students helped make the class work for everybody. The PO recorded:

Classroom observation: After class Teacher M voices to a couple of students: “I have been a bad teacher. I yelled at a student. I lost my patience! I am sorry! (She did not apologize to OJ). The students are very kind trying to put the teacher at ease by saying: “Oh its fine, its okay, we all make mistakes! But the most vulnerable students (the ones who have trouble to keep up with the class) have left already.

Classroom observation: When the students talked to the PO afterwards, the general feeling among them was: “Let’s make it work. Let’s help to defuse the tension during instruction; it is not healthy for students or teacher! PO observed that this attitude reflects the characters of the students. They are none-confrontational, including the two students who are consistently singled out by teacher M for being a problem in class.

These excerpts indicate that the classroom atmosphere of Setting II was not relaxed because of tensions between the students and the teacher. This did not enhance the language learning process despite positive peer support. In contrast, Setting I had a positive classroom atmosphere conducive to the learning process.

Positive Feedback (Being Able to Successfully Do Something)

The interviews produced little evidence that the language-learning process is enhanced by positive feedback that results from successful attempts in the new language.
Students from both settings revealed that they had positive experiences with native speakers outside the classroom environment, and this boosted their self-confidence in learning Thai. The Thai interlocutors gave the students positive feedback about their attempts to communicate in Thai. **Student W** and **J** as well as **Student S** (with his partner) and **Student K** commented about these encouraging experiences. Statements relating to classroom experiences, however, were sparse. This is understandable when one considers the negative experiences the older students had in **Setting II**. They were never encouraged or told they had done something well or correctly. The only comment about positive feedback noted in the classroom observations concerned the **PO** herself:

**Classroom observation:** I [PO] did a good job. The teacher had little to correct. She approved of my pronunciation. Made me feel secure in the classroom.

**Classroom observation:** This time around my (PO) position in class feels quite differently than the first time. One student asked me during break, if I had a lot of experience in learning languages because I seemed to catch on to the Thai sounds and the transliteration system very easily.

The **PO’s** status in class differed the second time around. She felt encouraged because she was performing well in class in the eyes of the teacher and her peers. The students from **Setting I** pointed to the fact that they made progress in listening to stories and extended small talk, which had been very hard at the beginning of the course. They did not give up, and in the end, they had learned a lot. The students were able to see their progress and enjoy success in their language learning. **Student W** recalled:

**Student W:** The teacher exposed us to a lot of small talk and simple stories, in spite that it was difficult we learned a lot.

**Student W:** Speaking Thai all the time is hard but very rewarding. Real Thai people start to understand you and you understand them!
These quotes indicate that students who were able to identify tangible progress in their language learning were encouraged to make further gains. Teacher P’s assertion strengthens the findings that being able to do something, or an actual or perceived improvement of L2 proficiency, is an enhancing factor in the language learning process. Teacher P stated: “The main techniques I apply are: give the older learner more time, make sure they do understand, in order to encourage them to believe that they can learn.”

Small Group and Pair Work

Findings from the interviews and classroom observations were incongruent regarding small-group and pair work as an enhancing factor for language learning. Most students from Setting I found small-group exercises very helpful for several reasons.

Student D stated:

I liked small groups. They were not so stressful. Everybody had the chance to answer many questions. During group exercises I always would speak up. We really got to practice talking. We could set our one pace and the many repetitions really helped!

Student K described why small-group exercises and pair work were helpful to improve his speaking skills:

Small group activities are better than big group activities. You get to know the students better. There is better communication. You get to speak more. I do speak in small groups, and I can ask questions when I don’t understand which I do in small groups. But I never ask in front of the whole class. I am shy. I also can ask the teacher questions about specific things I don’t understand. This I will never do in a big group …

Student W commented on Student K. She stated:

He is so shy; he never speaks up for himself. I know he doesn’t understand half the time. His English is pretty week so he doesn’t understand the explanations in
English. I think it is his Japanese culture that prevents him from being more assertive. Maybe he is only shy. I don’t know.

Student K shed some light on his behavior explaining: “I don’t want to slow down the whole class. This would be very impolite. I don’t want to impose on the other students.”

Students from Setting I had daily experience with various pair work and small-group exercises, whereas the students from Setting II never participated in these kinds of activities. Nevertheless, Student S, a participant in Setting II, expressed a negative view of group work during the interview. He stated: “I don’t like group work! During group work you only reinforce each others mistake!” It is like the blind leading the blind!

Student S’s opinion about group work was solely based on past negative experiences, which the researcher had no knowledge. Students expressed contradicting opinions concerning small group activities and pair work as an enhancing factor in the language learning process, depending on their varied experiences.

Meaningful and Relevant Practices and Exercises

The findings under this topic were as diverse as the students being interviewed. What one student found helpful, another student found stressful. In some instances, it became clear that students changed their attitude towards certain kinds of exercises and practices as the course progressed. What was stressful in the beginning of the course ended up becoming enjoyable and fun as the course progressed. However, none of the students recalled any practice or exercise they enjoyed and found helpful in
the beginning of the course, which later became stressful. (Possible explanations for these findings will be examined under Discussion.)

Students in Setting I reported various practices and exercises they found very useful. Student D stated:

The teacher often made up stories about us. She read them twice, and after the second time, she asked questions. That was very good for my comprehension training. We learned to listen to extended text which got longer the more we advanced. Since it was about ourselves we had a lot of context that helped me understand and guess intelligently.

Student W described the same instructional practice this way:

It was very hard. In the beginning it took a lot of concentration, paying attention, but we learned a lot. Not only the teacher gave talks. We ourselves had to give little monologues in class. We had to talk about ourselves, e.g., what we did over the weekend. That was fun, too. So we got to know each other and we learned new things from each other.

These statements reflect students’ approval of information exchange practices. These meaningful and authentic exchanges were described as helpful and fun because they could have taken place in the real world. The students agreed they learned a lot about each other and from each other. Student J and Student W (husband and wife) referred to TPR (Total Physical Response) exercises when they talked about acting out words. They explained:

We did act out words (a kind of TPR). First we all were very nervous. Old folks like us don’t like to jump around. We felt very awkward, a bit embarrassed. But then, all of us did it, and after we participated a few times we all had a lot of fun. And best of all, we remembered our words and phrase for ordering drinks without effort. It worked much better than mindless drills.

The students’ description indicated that meaningful and fun exercises and practices enhance the language-learning process, even when they are new and embarrassing for older adults who have never participated in such activities. According to
Student J and Student W, these kinds of practices are more effective than mindless drills. The researcher takes this as an indication that meaningful and relevant practices enhance the language learning process of older adults.

Appropriate Scaffolding

Some students from Setting I indicated that individualized scaffolding by the teacher, when appropriate and necessary, helped them stay on task and prevented them from giving up. Two scaffolds were mentioned by the students as factors that enhanced their language learning process: appropriate task levels and the transliteration system. For example:

Student D: Most of the time I understood about 80% what she [the teacher] said; that was okay. The bar was at the right level for me.

Student J: The transliteration system was helpful in learning Thai. Without it would have been almost impossible, even though quite a bit of the system was confusing and not consistent in my mind. At least we had something to go by when we tried to study on our own. It helped us to remember what we studied in class.

The older adults in Setting II did not recall any scaffolding that enhanced their language learning. Student OJ, however, was very vocal about the kind of scaffolding he would have liked from his teacher. He stated:

Having been in teaching positions I know what a student needs to succeed. Pay attention where the student is then adapt your teaching so he/she will be able to understand. Further, they need practical applications and don’t swamp them with too much information at a time. That means for me don’t ask me to remember too many words and structures at one time.

Student OJ pointed out that it is important for a teacher to know what the student already does and does not know, and then adapt the instruction accordingly. The teacher should know how much new information a student can process without becoming
overloaded. For him, it was important that a teacher be able to make a student understand. From his standpoint, he did not get that support from his teacher.

During the first days of the course, the PO recorded the following:

**Classroom observation:** Teacher M gave the students a lot of individual attention scaffolding them to form, produce, and recognize Thai sounds. She spent extended time with individual students (who needed a lot of time while everybody else had to sit and watch). She called only on volunteers. She waited until students were ready to answer. She made plenty of jokes to ease, to avoid tension, to reduce anxiety levels.

The interviews and classroom observations indicate that the teachers and students agreed that appropriate scaffolding is an enhancing factor in the language learning process.

During the interview, Teacher P summarized the scaffolding techniques she considered to be enhancing for the language learning process of older adults:

Older adult students like to hear more repetition. I will repeat new words new structures more often. They like to practice until they are sure they know the new input. I will not press older students for answers unless they are ready to answer. I keep very close watch of their body language, their eyes. I never put them on the spot. I try not to embarrass them. I have to wait until they are ready to take the risk to answer … Older learners don’t like to guess. They will guess only when they can make an educated guess, when they understand the context or/and have the background knowledge. They also insist on more explanations, want to know why, and the educated ones want to know grammar explanations, more so than younger learners who are more tolerant of ambiguity and love to play with the new language. Older learners are often visual learners, but it is important to learn to listen and train your ear. It is important not to rely only on visual help. If the students do, they often miss what they already know. They don’t hear what they already know. Often they ask for explanations and visual help too soon. The main techniques I apply are: giving the older learner more time, making sure they do understand, in order to encourage them to believe that they can learn. I structure the input and let them know what we are going to learn and talk about. That gives them the necessary context. They like to “plan ahead.” The given context let them do it. Older learners like boundaries. They feel more secure to practice new words and structures when they have models first. Older people want to be safe and correct, they don’t like to make mistakes.
Being Able to Establish a Positive Status

For older adults, it was important to establish a secure and positive status within their learning environment. The language learning process is greatly enhanced when older adults know that their peers and teacher respect them for who they are. The opposite is just as true. A negative status in the classroom inhibits the language learning process. The PO’s observation about herself underscores this point. She recorded:

Classroom observation: This time around my status is quite different from the first class experience. Today a student asked me during break if I had a lot of experience in learning languages because I seemed to catch on to the Thai sounds and the transliteration system very easily. I feel very comfortable in the class. I am able not only to keep up with the teaching, but also to perform better than most of the students. I understand what the teacher wants; I can answer all her questions with ease. It seems like a total reverse from the first class, where I was at the bottom of the class and was afraid that everybody was looking down on me. I took the student’s question to mean that I was doing well and other students had noticed it. I feel liberated. I don’t have to worry about my status in class. I can concentrate now on learning Thai and my task as a participant observer.

Other statements from older adults and teachers refer to the fact that a compromised status, or self, is an inhibiting factor in the language learning process.

Student D stated:

You have to leave your EGO at the door. No one likes to be looked at as not being smart. You want people to respect you. You need to be able to show that you can do it. Many of my acquaintances have given up to learn Thai. Why? You need to be determined – the pressure is too great – to give up is easier than to stick it out. You convince yourself to go and study on your own is less threatening to your EGO.

In this statement, Student D indicated that having your self/ego compromised makes many older adults abandon learning a new language. Many older adults expressed the same idea. They hated being at the bottom of the class, not being respected, being laughed at, being thought of as stupid, etc. On the other hand this could indicate that being able to maintain a healthy ego in class means being able to establish a positive
status, and this will automatically enhance the language learning process. **Student OJ** expressed the same concerns and pointed out how important it was for him to be respected by the teacher and his peers. He had the need to feel secure and validated by everyone in class, despite the fact that he received respect only from his peers. **Student OJ** reported:

> In short, I think learning a new language at our age is very difficult and very confusing. As an adult you don’t like it when people laugh at you … or you have the feeling that the teacher doesn’t want to be asked questions. Maybe she thinks you are too stupid. I did ask her though… and the students were really nice. We got to know each other very well and we had a lot of respect for each other.

**Teacher M** pointed to self-confidence, pride, and big egos as having a negative influence on the language learning process. **Teacher M** stated:

**Teacher M:** Men have more self-confidence than women. They often have been top students; they are very proud; they have a big ego; they are not open to learning a new language or using new methods for learning. They look down on the instructor and criticize the used methods in class. They will not accept instructions from the teacher. That’s why some will choose a different teacher.

**Teacher P** applied different reasoning about how and why the ego of older adults inhibits their language learning. She explained this by comparing younger adults to older adults:

Younger students do have their challenges as well. Not all are confident in tackling a foreign language, but in general they are not so afraid to try. They are not so afraid to lose face. They have not yet reached high positions in life. They are not yet up in the hierarchy, so they don’t have so much to lose yet. They have not so much “ego.” Making mistakes is not a disaster for younger adults. They are much more willing to learn by trial and error. The older adults cannot do this because of their professions and positions in society. Others expect them to know everything or at least to be good at it.

**Teacher P** asserted that older adults are afraid to make mistakes because everybody expects them to know everything or to be good at everything. They are afraid
to try new things because they might fail and lose face. They have much to lose by making mistakes: they will lose status and their ego will be compromised. The researcher concluded when older adults are able to establish a secure positive status in class, their language learning is enhanced.

**Discussion—Inhibiting Factors**

**Fear of Failure**

The study provided evidence that fear of failure is a main factor that influenced the language learning process of older adults negatively. Diary data showed that the diarist suffered extreme anxiety caused by the fear of failure before she even started the language course. Data also revealed that many different factors fed into her fear of failure. The diarist’s anticipation of failure at times was caused by past negative experiences, which caused symptoms of anxiety. She flashed back to a former teacher telling her she was too dumb to learn a foreign language. These anxiety symptoms are aggravated by her fear of losing status as a good language learner and credibility as a competent language teacher.

This holds true for all individual learners who suffer from fear of failure. The individuals’ learning history and actual learning experiences account for the variation of factors that feed into the fear of failure. The diarist referred to this fact many times in her diary. The interview with Teacher P, who has taught older adults for many years, confirmed these finding when she stated in her interview that many older adults worry they are not good language learners. She asserted that many older adults come to her even before their first lesson. The fear of failure becomes their biggest obstacle in making
progress in language learning. **Teacher P** and some students also pointed out that this fear is often related to past negative language learning experiences.

Nevertheless, there is another explanation as to why the diarist’s fear of failure reached such high levels. The very fact that the diarist not only recorded her learning, but also had the role of a participant observer in this study (recording and analyzing how well she was learning) put an additional layer of pressure on her. She had to prove to herself and to others that she was a capable language learner. Her reputation as a language teacher and researcher was at stake. The observer’s paradox fed directly into the diarist’s extreme fear of failure.

The study revealed that most older adults in the study suffered from fear of failure. The findings from the interviews and classroom observations confirmed that fear of failure was an inhibiting factor for most of the research subjects. The findings from this study support Roumani’s (1978) findings that the strongest psychological challenge for older adults learning foreign languages is that fear of failure outweighs their desire to succeed. This would explain the fact that many older adults do abandon learning languages. In their interviews, students and teachers referred to many students they knew who quit language learning for that reason. The collected data supports the finding that fear of failure is a main factor that causes anxiety in older adults and inhibits their language learning process.

**Comparison with Peers (True Verses False Beginners)**

Evidence in the data suggests that older adults compare themselves with their classmates. Older adults have the need to evaluate their performance to see how well they
are doing, especially when they fear failure. The data revealed that comparison with peers can become an inhibiting factor in the language learning process in two ways.

First, if most students in a language class are “false” beginners, true beginners will find they are at the bottom of the class when they start comparing themselves to the rest of the students. They do not understand what the teacher or their peers say or do. The true beginners conclude the course is too difficult and/or they are not as smart as the other students. Many data samples from the diary describe how this process caused severe symptoms of anxiety in the diarist and led one student to leave the class for good.

Second, students who believe they are at the bottom of the class and feel they cannot keep up with the rest of the class will conclude the class is too difficult and will run the risk of dropping out of class. Evidence in the diary and interviews revealed that, in both circumstances, older adults experienced fear of losing face in front of other adults in class including the teacher. They felt they were not able to establish themselves as intelligent and successful adults because of their lack of linguistic knowledge. They showed debilitating symptoms such as making more and more mistakes, forgetting what they already knew, freezing up, or leaving the classroom.

This study confirmed findings from other research studies that reported similar results for younger adults and youth (e.g., Frantzen, 2005). Other researchers (e.g., Bailey, 1983) interpret comparison with peers as a sign of competitiveness. This study did not find any evidence of competitiveness among older adults. Data indicated the need for comparison among older adults diminished as soon as they had establish a positive status in class and were validated by their peers and teacher as intelligent adults. Data indicated that older adults’ frustration rose when they felt they were unable to
demonstrate to their peers and teacher that they were good language learners through their performance in class.

In conclusion, if older adults who are true beginners compare themselves to false beginners, the comparisons can become an inhibiting factor in their language learning process and cause older adults to abandon their effort.

**Too Fast Pacing**

Data from the diary and the interviews revealed that older adults struggled with the pace of instruction. Many passages in the diary described why and how too fast a pace was an inhibiting factor in an older adult language learning process. Not having enough time to assimilate new information was overwhelming for older adults. Older adults got the information mixed up, and confused. They forgot what they already knew. Older adults experienced information overload and showed various signs of anxiety, even panic, which was detrimental to their language learning process.

Research in neuroscience and the psychology of older adults point to several characteristics of older adults that help to explain why finding the right pace in instruction is crucial for them. Findings in neuroscience (see Stemmer, 2010; Tammaro, 2000; Beck, 1994 as cited in Pace & Topini) indicate that aging affects the brain functions responsible for processing speed, parts of working memory, and executive control processes (e.g., planning, organizing, decision making, and attention regulation). Findings indicate that older adults need more time to decode new information, while fixing new information into memory takes older adults as long as it takes younger adults. Lehr (1991) found that the capacity to take in and process several stimuli at the same time declines with age (cited in Wegmann & Pomino, 2010). This explains and supports the
findings of this study: older adults need adequate time to process new information, which is crucial for successful language learning. The psychological challenge older adults face is the heightened fear of failure (see Roumani, 1978), which causes older adults to reject any task they may not be able to complete successfully. This supports Pellegrino’s finding (2005) that “learners will reject goals in which they perceive costs that are too great or that carry too strong a risk of failure” (p. 26).

These findings point to a connection between too much information in too short a time leading to the feeling of overload, which produces anxiety and/or the fear of failure. In older adults, too fast a pace turns into a debilitating factor in the language learning process, one that can cause many adult learners to quit.

**Physical Limitations Relating to Age**

In this study, older adults worried about two things when they voiced their fear of being “too old to learn.” They worried about their diminishing learning capacity and about their “physical” limitations (i.e., not hearing and seeing well or not being able to sit on hard and uncomfortable chairs).

All older adults worried about their declining physical abilities. Notes by the diarist pointed to the fact that she did get tired, mentally and physically, much faster than when she was younger. She worried that her aging brain was responsible for her memory capacity slowing down. During the interviews, older adults made remarks hinting that this had crossed their mind as well. Researchers have found that the fear of memory loss is actually greater than actual loss (Pace & Topini, 2004; Roumani, 1978; Schulz & Elliot, 2000; Stemmer, 2010; Ullman, 2005). They attribute this fact to a psychological aspect. Often a small suggestion will enable them to recall the lost information.
In the literature of neuroscience and gerontology, some findings indicate that certain brain functions are affected by aging while other are not (for details see Stemmer, 2010; Pace & Topini, 2004; Wegmann & Pomino, 2010). Research in this area is still in its infancy, and there are almost no studies of language learning in older adults. Some research affirms that adults can learn regardless of age. Older adults can compensate for any deterioration in their faculties through more skillful use of other faculties that developed with age. This assumption is based on recent research findings (Stemmer, 2010) that the brain is able to reorganize itself because the brain’s plasticity does not deteriorate until very late in life.

For some older adults, real and measurable physical limitations connected to the peripheral nervous system existed (e.g., hearing deficits). Not being able to hear well can interfere negatively with learning a new foreign language. This was documented during classroom observation and interviews with one older adult who used a hearing aid. He had severe problems following the class because he did not “understand” (i.e., could not hear what the teacher said) as he stated. It was beyond the scope of this research to determine if the student’s level of hearing deficit was or was not too severe for him to learn the language in a normal classroom setting. Data for the student with the hearing aid indicated that his diminished hearing capacity did interfere with his language learning process because no provisions were made to compensate for it.

**Instructional Factors**

One of the questions the researcher explored was, if specific instructional approaches or methods caused anxiety in older adults and inhibited the language learning process. Data from the diary revealed that anxiety surfaced and caused symptoms of fear,
even panic, every time the diarist was faced with tasks she was not capable of participating in because the level was not appropriate. Anxiety symptoms were never caused by a specific approach or method nor by a specific kind of exercise or practice. Anxiety always surfaced when the diarist did not comprehend something and no scaffolds were available that would allow her to participate in the activity. Data from the interviews and the classroom observations confirmed this finding.

This led to the conclusion that extreme anxiety was not caused by approaches or methods of teaching, types of tasks, practices, and exercises, but by the wrong level of task difficulty. Anxiety escalated when the older adults realized their classmates were able to perform a task without difficulty while they could not. Self-doubt about their language-learning capability would surface, bringing with it a debilitating fear of failure. This scenario could become a vicious cycle, the fear of failure could outweighing the need to succeed, and the student might quit language learning.

The researcher found evidence in the interviews, classroom observations, and diary entries that the level of stress felt by older adults for different tasks depended on their level of comprehension. The higher the risk of making mistakes—because of incomplete comprehension or insufficient time to process a question—the higher the students’ stress levels. The research subjects resented being put on the spot and being called on before they were ready to respond. These findings support previous research. For example, Berndt (2003, as cited in Wegmann & Pomino, 2010) found that older adults need security in the sense of making sure that a requested reaction or answer is correct. Pellegrino (2005) found that students equate making mistakes with representing themselves to their peers and teacher as being stupid.
Data revealed another inhibiting factor that had an impact on individuals’ language learning process. It was the lack of meaningful language practice during class time, even though the data indicated that older adults seem to have an ambivalent attitude towards the teachers’ instructional approach. As pointed out in the data analysis, some students reported that they liked a certain exercise, while others despised it. This finding supports the results from previous research. Koch and Terrell (1991) found considerable variability in learners’ reaction to activities. Their subjects indicated that they felt more anxious or equally anxious under the Natural Approach as compared to other methods and approaches.

Most research subjects were ambivalent on the use of a transliteration system. The diarist reported that she liked meaningful exercises, but she reported that even meaningful exercises caused her anxiety. She liked teacher-centered teaching with an emphasis on grammar, because she was familiar with the approach and could show her knowledge during certain meaningful group exercises. The data point to the fact that no one factor causes anxiety: “language anxiety exists within a complex network of learning factors” (Yan & Horwitz, 2008, p.174), which influence each other in multiple ways and directions and can cause anxiety symptoms to surface.

Students from Setting II who experienced no meaningful small group exercises during the entire period of classroom observation showed a strong dislike and frustration with endless, meaningless drills. Even the students who reported a favorable evaluation of the teaching approach continued to resist the teacher’s instruction. They boycotted drills by ignoring requested patterns and constructing meaningful answers modeled after real-life situations. Data indicates that the lack of meaningful practice
interfered negatively with the language learning process. This finding supports previous research. Roumani (1978) stated that older adults have no patience for meaningless or irrelevant learning. One of the reasons seems to be that older adults tend to take language courses to expand their knowledge rather than acquire job skills. They want to integrate their new learning into their existing body of knowledge. According to Pellegrino (2005), the new learning has to fit into new important goals or it will not be learned successfully. Data showed that older adults do set language-learning goals, which they expect to reach by taking classes. The conclusion is that meaningless and irrelevant exercises and practices inhibit older adults’ language learning process.

Data indicated that intensive and extended error correction had a negative influence on the language learning process of older adults. The interview data analysis with Teacher M and the observational data produced answers as to why the students and teacher did not change their behavior during the course of the class, knowing that this kind of error correction was detrimental to the learning process.

Two factors influenced error correction and generated strong negative feedback. First, students were being singled out for correction. Being called upon for an extended period, students froze. They did try to provide meaningful answers, but did not understand that the teacher just wanted them to repeat sentence patterns. Second, the teacher interpreted this behavior as being obstinate and rejecting her expertise as a language teacher. As she stated in her interview, Teacher M held a negative bias towards many male foreigners who came to her country as NGOs, trying to change the culture of her country. She interpreted the students’ attempts to answer as, “They are not open to learning a new language and using new methods for learning. They look down on the
instructor. They will not accept instruction from me, the teacher.” This negative perception towards her students did influence her interpretation as to why students had no success in learning Thai. The negative perception of her students also prevented her from changing her approach to error correction, which in turn did severely inhibit two male students’ language-learning process. This finding supports Aydin’s (1999) and Palacios’ (1998) studies (as cited in Horwitz, 2001), which pointed to teachers’ attitudes towards students as an important source of anxiety.

Discussion—Enhancing Factors

Correction of Perceptions

Data indicated that a revision of negative or unrealistic views about language and language learning always reduced anxiety in the learner. The diarist’s anxiety was reduced significantly when her misconceptions about the Thai language as a tonal language were corrected and again when her anticipated fears of teaching methods did not materialize. The interview and classroom observation data indicated that students relaxed and their anxiety levels dropped when they realized some of their perceptions about the language learning process were wrong or unrealistic, and when they set new, more realistic language learning goals for themselves.

Student responses reveal that realistic language learning goals, realistic expectations about the language learning process, and a positive self-perception (having faith in your own language learning ability) are necessary for a positive language learning process. This supports findings in the literature that learner beliefs about language learning and their own learning capability are anxiety-provoking (see Yan & Horwitz,
Aydin (1999, as cited in Horwitz, 2001) suggested that learner perceptions are another factor that contributes to classroom anxiety. These are negative self-assessments of language learning abilities and high personal expectations. She further found that a teacher’s attitude toward students is a major source of anxiety. In conclusion, the data from the study indicates that anxiety is greatly reduced when the learner changes negative perceptions and sets realistic language learning goals.

**Positive Classroom Atmosphere**

In the diary data, the researcher found evidence that a positive classroom atmosphere enhances older adults’ language learning process. She found that the teacher is very instrumental in creating a positive classroom atmosphere. The teacher in Setting I was described by the diarist as tuned into the specific needs of older adult students, providing help and necessary scaffolding so that students can successfully finish their tasks. She was very personable and talked to every student in the class. She was genuinely interested in her students. Students from Setting I felt that the teacher was nice, helpful, easily approachable, kind, and had a “nice” demeanor. Students also pointed out that they had lunch with the teacher on occasion. The conclusion from the collected data is that the teacher was able to establish mutual respect between herself and her students, which contributed to a positive classroom atmosphere and enhanced the language learning process.

This finding is consistent with results from previous research. Palacios (1998, as cited in Horwitz, 2001) found that the level of perceived teacher support had the strongest influence on anxiety reduction. Frantzen (2005) found that the instructor was the most important factor in building a positive classroom atmosphere.
Data from the diary and interviews showed that students from Setting I also contributed to a positive classroom atmosphere. By getting to know each other, the older adults gained mutual respect and admiration for each other and their accomplishments in life. This increased the level of trust among students, and they developed the courage to ask each other for help. Data indicated that the more older adults felt comfortable with their peers and their teacher, the more their language learning process was enhanced. This statement becomes even truer when contrasted with the finding from Setting II, where the classroom atmosphere was not favorable to the language learning process. Strong tensions between the students and teacher produced a negative classroom atmosphere. The lack of trust and respect between students and teacher caused fear of failure in some students to increase and caused symptoms of anxiety to surface, while the other students became indignant with the teacher’s teaching.

The data underscore the findings from previous research. Palacios (1998, as cited in Horwitz, 2001) found that positive teacher support—how much the teacher talks with the students, trusts them, is interested in them and their ideas, and helps them—is the strongest influence on anxiety reduction in a formal instructional setting. Samimy and Radin (1994) found that peer support was a main factor that positively facilitated the language learning process. Its lack hindered the learning process. The researchers found that “the learners’ initial anxiety in their adult participants was mitigated as they experienced a secure relationship with the teacher/counselor and the group support” (p. 386). The data from this study adds to the previous findings that older adults need to have a secure relationship with their teacher and supportive classmates to enhance their language learning process.
Positive Feedback (Being Able to Do Something Successfully)

Feedback is perceived as positive when the learner is able to successfully participate in the classroom. Positive feedback was found to be a crucial factor in reducing symptoms of anxiety. Every time the diarist realized she was making real progress in her language learning, she was encouraged, even proud of herself. She took these incidents as proof she was capable of learning a new language. Her self-confidence got a boost, which in turn enhanced her language learning process. Data from the interviews and the classroom observations indicated that the language learning process was enhanced for older adults when they received positive feedback. The collected data also affirmed the findings from previous studies. Pellegrino (2005) and Bailey (1983) pointed out that with each successful performance of various tasks, students gain confidence that they are able to reach their language learning goals. This improves the student’s self-image and sense of security, which in turn enhances language learning. Actual or perceived improvement in L2 proficiency is an enhancing factor in the language learning process.

Small Groups and Pair Work

Interview data and classroom observations indicated that small group and pair work enhanced older adults’ language learning process. Nevertheless, during the interview, one male participant from Setting II claimed that he resented any kind of group work, but only made vague references as to the reasons why. He referred to negative past experiences and stated that he believed that during group work, only peer mistakes get reinforced. Since he had no opportunities to participate in group or pair
work during class, no additional data could be collected. According to Schumann (1997) the stimuli appraisal system produces the learners’ value system, which assesses, “the personal relevance of stimuli associated with language learning and thus leads to action patterns that enhance or inhibit language acquisition” (p. 21). This appraisal system is constantly at work during SLA. Language learners appraise teachers, methods, activities, materials, and peers in the language classroom. This provides an explanation as to why the research subject had such a strong negative reaction towards group work. If an activity has been appraised as unpleasant or irrelevant, it will be rejected in future encounters.

The diary data indicated that group and pair work enhanced the diarist’s language learning. She had the opportunity to influence the working pace and could request help from her teacher and peers to participate in the group activities successfully. The extended practice opportunities and instant feedback from practice partners solidified new knowledge and restored her self-confidence, which the diarist and the researcher identified as a key factor in not giving up learning Thai. Older adults from Setting I also indicated that group and pair work enhanced their language learning for the same reasons. They found group and pair work less stressful. For example, for shy people it was easier to participate orally, it provided more opportunities to practice the learned, and the students were able to influence the pace.

In conclusion, the data indicated that older adults who experienced positive group activities see group learning as an enhancing factor in their language learning process. However, older adults who had had negative experiences with group learning in the past may be less receptive to the use of group work.
Data revealed that meaningful and relevant exercises played an important role in delivering effective language instruction to older adults. The findings from the interviews, classroom observations, and diarist were multifaceted. Data showed that the research subjects changed their attitudes toward certain kinds of exercises and practices during the duration of the course. What was stressful in the beginning of the course became enjoyable and fun as learners became more competent in certain language skills. “Meaningful” and “relevant” were described by older adults as exercises, dialogues, and information exchanges that were pertinent (authentic) in their everyday life outside the classroom. When students practiced authentic tasks or were asked to exchange information, opinions, likes, and dislikes with their peers, these authentic conversations relaxed the class atmosphere because of the interesting and surprising answers. In conclusion, interesting, authentic tasks do enhance the language learning process for older adults.

There are findings within the study’s data and the literature that contradict findings in other researches. For example, the diarist reported experiencing severe anxiety during a TPR exercise she described as a very interesting and meaningful exercise. The researcher found evidence in the diary that her anxiety was not caused by the type of exercise but by the task level. The diarist was not able to participate in the exercise because the required verbal responses were too complex for her. In contrast the other research subjects reported apprehension, stress, and various anxiety symptoms in
connection with the relevant and meaningful exercises themselves, and not with the task level.

Previous research studies, which examined various instructional conditions and their influence on anxiety, found great variability in the learners’ reaction to activities. One task judged comfortable by some could be stressful to others. Koch and Terrel (1991) found, “that 60% of their subjects with previous classroom language study indicated that they felt more anxious or equally anxious under the Natural Approach than under other methods” (ascited in Aida, 1994, p.164). Previous research indicates that there is not a cause-effect relationship between certain types of instructional activities, anxiety reduction, or enhancement of the language learning process. This study already identified one interfering factor: the task level for participating students. Horwitz (2001) referred to cultural differences as another interfering factor. Certain types of exercises and interactions can be unfamiliar, even frightening, depending on the cultural background of students. This would hold true for age cohorts for the same reasons: different age groups will have experienced different types of classroom organizations and activities. Therefore, certain types of exercises and classroom interactions may be unfamiliar (for further explanations see, Fred Karl (2009) Einführung in die Generations- und Altenarbeit). This helps explain why the diarist/participant observer found herself enjoyed teacher-centered instruction and grammar explanations. She enjoyed this kind of instruction because it was familiar; she was good at grammar and could outshine her peers, proving that she was an intelligent adult.

The research data led to the conclusion that meaningful and relevant language activities enhance the language learning process when the teacher makes provisions to
counterbalance interfering factors. The research data supports the argument that the lack of meaningful practices and activities interferes negatively with the language learning process of older adults.

**Appropriate Scaffolding**

Diary data revealed that appropriate scaffolding enhanced the diarist’s language learning process. Appropriate scaffolding prepared her to participate successfully in various classroom tasks. Data showed that every time she received appropriate help, her anxiety level dropped. This freed some of her mental capacity and energy, which she invested in language-learning strategies that helped improve her language skills. Every time the diarist realized she was making real progress in her language learning, she was encouraged, even proud of herself. The diarist took these experiences as proof that she was capable of learning a new language. Her self-confidence got a boost, which in turn enhanced the language learning process.

Data from the interviews and classroom observations indicated that appropriate and individualized scaffolding enhanced older adults’ language learning progress. Older adults need scaffolding so they do not feel foolish and are willing to participate in class. For example, data revealed that research subjects requested additional repetition and more practice to make sure that they know the right answer. Practicing with the help of models or patterns was one way to avoid making mistakes. Because older adults do not like making mistakes, they do not want to be put on the spot or given tasks above their actual level of competence. The data also revealed that older adults wanted scaffolding that provided tools that increased their control over their own learning. They
wanted context, background knowledge, and often grammar explanations from their teacher.

The data from the study led to the conclusion that no one specific scaffolding technique enhances the language learning process. Every scaffolding technique that supported and helped the research subjects to successfully complete a task enhanced their language learning process. This increased the older adults’ self-confidence and security. Horwitz (2001) and Pellegrino (2005) reported similar findings for young adults. They found that teacher support needs to be tailored to the specific concerns of each individual learner through instructional interventions (appropriate scaffolding). This increases the self-confidence of language learners and enhances their language learning process.

Establishing a Positive Status in Class

Analysis of the research data revealed that older adults had a very strong need to establish a secure and positive status within the class. They wanted to be validated as successful and intelligent adults. They wanted to establish a positive status within the class first before participating in the task of learning a new language. When the diarist experienced closeness and acceptance by her peers and teacher, she felt secure in the social hierarchy of the classroom. When she felt her presentation of self was threatened, she abandoned the language-learning task for the sake of preserving her dignity. Only after she thought she had an acceptable status in class did she feel in control of her own classroom interactions and learning destiny. Students in both class settings felt that threats to self/ego were the main reason why older adults think language learning is difficult and often abandon language learning. One research subject expressed it this way: “many older adults give up to learn Thai because they feel that their status as intelligent,
capable individuals is threatened by requested language learning activities.” The same assertion was made by all of the older adults in the study.

Data revealed that research subjects in both class settings tried to fit within the class ranking at the start of the course. They did this by comparing themselves to the rest of the class as discussed under “Comparison with Peers.” Study data led this researcher to the conclusion that older adults use self-comparison to determine their relative standing in class. She interprets this as evidence that older adults have the strong need to establish a positive status in class. They are not overly interested in where they exactly rank in the class hierarchy. They want to prove to their peers and teacher that they are intelligent, successful people. Older adults tend to abandon the class if they find themselves developing an inferior image.

This interpretation of the collected data differs from previous research studies. Bailey (1983) interpreted similar data involving young to middle age adults as competitiveness among the class-members, a factor, which had a negative effect on their language learning. Older adults in this study did not care who was “the best” or “the worst.” They only worried about being respected as intelligent, successful human beings. There was ample evidence in the data to conclude that older adults need to establish a positive status in their learning environment before they can focus on language learning without worrying about self-image. Being able to establish a positive and secure status and being validated in class does enhance the language learning process for older adults.

Previous research found that younger students show signs of avoidance and withdrawal to avoid humiliation or embarrassment. Foss and Reitzel (1988), Ehrman (1996), and Horwitz (2001) Yan and Horwitz (2008) confirmed this assertion. Foss and
Reitzel (1988) found that students who show signs of high self-consciousness exhibit behaviors of avoidance and withdrawal to avoid humiliation or embarrassment. Ehrman (1996) asserted that anxiety surfaces when the learner’s sense of status as an intelligent, capable individual is threatened. She wrote, “Anxiety is often linked to fear that one will fail in some way: on an assignment, speaking in class, on a test, in a final grade, in competition, maintaining one’s social position in the community, in interactions with native speakers, or on a job” (pp. 137-138). When these findings are put in the context of research on older adults—research claiming that older adults have a heightened fear of failing which outweighs the need to succeed—then withdrawal from language learning is strongly connected to a student’s fear of failing and the threat of not being recognized as an intelligent and capable individual. In conclusion, symptoms of anxiety are reduced when older adults feel respected by their peers and teacher, and when they experience a sense of community. Establishing a secure and positive status in class greatly enhances the language learning process of older adults.
CHAPTER V

CONCLUSIONS, IMPLICATIONS, AND FUTURE RESEARCH

Conclusions

The study set out to investigate the following two research questions:

1. What are the underlying factors that produce symptoms of anxiety in older adult language learners and how do they impact self? How do these factors inhibit participants’ language learning process?

2. What are the underlying factors that reduce symptoms of anxiety in older adult language learners and how do they impact self? How do these factors enhance the participants’ language learning process?

This study described the role of anxiety and self within the specific language-learning context of the research subjects. The findings suggest that language-learning anxiety in older adults exists within a complex network of inhibiting and enhancing factors that influence each other in a multidirectional way.

_Inhibiting factors_ that have a major impact on the language learning process of older adults’ are: 1) fear of failure, 2) comparison with peers (true versus false beginners, 3) too fast pacing that leads to overload, 4) physical limitations related to age, 5) too high task level, 6) lack of meaningful practices, and 7) negative error correction.
Enhancing factors that have a major impact on the language learning process are: 1) correction of negative perceptions and unrealistic goals, 2) positive classroom atmosphere, 3) positive feedback (being able to do something successfully), 4) small group and pair work, 5) meaningful and relevant practices, 6) appropriate scaffolding, and 7) establishing a positive and secure status in class.

Summary of the Inhibiting Factors

Fear of Failure

The fear of failure is a major cause of anxiety symptoms in older adult students who learn a new language, and the biggest obstacle in language learning. It is the major reason for older adult learners to abandon language learning.

Several factors are behind the fear of failure. An individual’s learning history and actual learning experiences are two of these factors. For example, any negative language learning experience older adults have had in the past exacerbates the fear of failure and creates anxiety. These anxiety symptoms are further compounded by the fear of not being able to establish a positive and secure status in the class as an intelligent and successful adult.

Comparison with Peers (True Versus False Beginners)

Comparison with peers helps older adults evaluate their performance. However, the findings revealed that peer comparison can be a debilitating factor in the language learning process for the following two reasons: 1) the learner is the only true beginner, finds him/herself at the bottom of the class, and concludes that the course is too difficult and/or the other students are smarter; 2) the learner finds him-/herself at the
bottom of the class and fears losing social and intellectual status with his or her peers and teacher. For true beginners in an environment of all or mostly false beginners, comparison with peers can become debilitating enough to cause older adults to abandon language learning.

**Too Fast Pacing That Leads to Overload**

The findings supported the notion that too fast pacing during instruction was an inhibiting factor in older adults’ language learning process. Not having enough time to process new information and integrate it into existing knowledge was overwhelming for the research subjects. When they were not able to complete a task successfully, they rejected it. They showed various signs of anxiety, even panic, which was detrimental to the language learning process.

These findings point to a connection between too much information in too short a time frame, which leads to feelings of overload, anxiety, and/or the fear of failure. In older adults, this quickly turns into a debilitating factor causing many to quit language learning.

**Physical Limitations Related to Age**

The findings indicated that older adults worried about their diminishing learning capacity and their “physical” limitations (not hearing and seeing well, or not being able to sit on hard and uncomfortable chairs). This fear of being too old fed directly into their fear of failure. This is a psychological challenge not related to a physical deterioration of the brain. The fear of memory capacity loss is actually greater than the actual loss.
The findings support the notion that some older adults have real and measurable physical limitations connected to the peripheral nervous system, such as a hearing deficit. Not being able to hear well can have a negative impact when learning a foreign language, if no provisions are made to compensate for the hearing deficit.

**Too High Task Level**

The findings revealed that no specific instructional methods or specific exercises/practices caused anxiety symptoms in the older adults that inhibited their language learning process. However, anxiety surfaced and caused symptoms of fear and even panic when research subjects were faced with tasks they were not capable of participating in because the task level was too high.

However, the student’s level of comprehension determines how stressful the work becomes. The higher the risk for making mistakes – because of incomplete comprehension or not having enough time to process the question – the higher the students’ stress levels become.

This can become a vicious cycle: too fast a pace leads to overload, lack of comprehension, and the inability to perform a task. This causes the student to make comparisons with his/her peers, which leads to negative self-evaluation, self-doubt, and fear of failure. If this cycle repeats itself, the fear of failure can outweigh the desire to succeed and the student might quit language learning. The conclusion is that no one factor causes symptoms of anxiety in older adult language learners, but “language anxiety exists within a complex network of learning factors” (Yan & Horwitz, 2008, p.174) that influence each other in multiple ways.
Lack of Meaningful and Relevant Practices

Meaningless and irrelevant exercises and practices inhibit older adults’ language learning process. Older adults have no patience for meaningless or irrelevant learning because they tend to take language courses to expand their knowledge rather than acquire a job skill. They want to integrate new learning into their existing body of knowledge. It has to meet their language-learning goals—learning and practicing useful, relevant, and authentic language discourse.

Harsh Error Correction

The final finding is that severe and negative error correction inhibits the language learning process and produces anxiety symptoms in older adult learners. Data analysis revealed two factors that led to very negative feedback and inhibited the language learning process severely: 1) a student being singled out for error correction, and 2) error correction being administered by an instructor holding negative biases towards students.

The teacher’s negative perceptions and attitudes toward students did influence her assessment as to why students were not successful learning Thai. It also prevented her from changing her approach to error correction, which in turn severely inhibited the language-learning process of the students who were singled out.

Summary of the Enhancing Factors

Correction of Negative Perceptions and Unrealistic Goals

Changing negative or unrealistic perceptions about language and language learning always reduces anxiety in older adult learners. The research subjects’ anxiety
levels dropped when they learned that some of their perceptions about the language learning process were wrong or unrealistic, and when they were able to set new and more realistic language learning goals for themselves.

Realistic language learning goals, expectations about the language learning process, and a positive self-perception – having faith in one’s own language learning ability – is necessary for a positive language learning process.

Positive Classroom Atmosphere

The study revealed that a positive classroom atmosphere enhances the language learning process for older adults. Two factors are instrumental in creating a positive classroom atmosphere: the teacher and peers.

The teacher was the most important factor in building a positive classroom atmosphere. When the teacher was able to establish mutual respect between herself and her students, it contributed to a positive classroom atmosphere, and the research subjects’ language learning process was enhanced. The level of perceived teacher support was found to be the strongest influence on anxiety reduction.

Another factor contributing to a positive classroom atmosphere is a supportive classroom community. Older adults need to experience a secure relationship with their peers to enhance their learning experience and mitigate their initial anxiety.

Positive Feedback (Being Able to Do Something Successfully)

Positive feedback was found to be a crucial factor in reducing symptoms of anxiety. When older adults were able to identify tangible progress in their language learning, their language learning process was enhanced. With each successful
performance, students gained confidence, and their self-image and sense of security improved, which in turn enhanced their language learning process. This finding under-scres the conclusion that an actual or perceived improvement of L2 proficiency is an enhancing factor in language learning.

**Small Groups and Pair Work**

Small group and pair work enhance language-learning processes because they provide older adults with the opportunity to influence the work pace, request help from their teacher and peers, and participate in the class activities successfully. Small group and pair work also provided the research subjects with extended practice opportunities and instant feedback from their practice partners. This helped older adults solidify their new knowledge and boost their self-confidence. However, older adults who had had negative experiences in the past, continued to have a negative attitude towards group learning. Nevertheless, the data indicated that older adults who experienced positive group activities saw group learning as an enhancing factor in the language learning process.

**Meaningful and Relevant Practices and Exercises**

Meaningful and relevant exercises played an important role in delivering effective language instruction to older adults, despite the fact that the findings were multifaceted. When older adults practiced authentic tasks, which real people perform in real life, or when they were asked to exchange information, opinions, likes and dislikes with their peers, all of the research subjects reported that these authentic conversations relaxed the class atmosphere because of interesting and often surprising answers.
These exercises enhanced the language learning of older adults if the teacher made provisions to counterbalance interfering factors. However, the lack of meaningful activities did have a negative affect on the language learning process of older adults.

**Appropriate Scaffolding**

The study revealed that appropriate scaffolding enhanced older adults’ language learning. Older adults wanted scaffolding, which increased control over their own learning. When the research subjects realized that they were making real progress in their language learning, their self-confidence increased, which in turn enhanced the language learning process.

No one specific scaffolding technique enhanced the language learning process. Nevertheless, every scaffolding technique that supported and helped the research subjects to successfully complete a task contributed to their language learning. This in turn further increased the older adults’ self-confidence and security.

**Establishing a Positive Status in Class**

The study’s final finding is that all of the research subjects exhibited a very strong need to establish a secure and positive status within the classroom environment. The older adults in this study did not seem to care who was “the best” or who was “the worst” student. They worried about being respected as intelligent, successful human beings. They demonstrated a need to establish a positive status within the class environment before they were able to participate in the task of learning a new language. The findings further suggest that, for older adult language learners, a correlation may exist between abandoning language learning and the inability to establish a secure and positive status in class and fear of failure. When older adults are convinced that they are
“failing” a class, when they are constantly on overload, because they are not able to participate in the class, their self-image is threatened. Consequently, they abandon the class.

Older adults used self-comparison to determine their relative standing in class. The research subjects were not overly interested in their position in the class hierarchy; they only wanted to prove to their peers and teacher that they were intelligent and successful people. Older adults tended to quit a class if they find themselves developing an image that they consider substandard.

Bailey’s (1983) results in a study involving young to middle age adults reveal that competitiveness among class members has a negative effect on the language learning. In this study, ample evidence was found to conclude that this assertion did not hold true for these older adults. Older adults used self-comparison with their peers to establish positive status in their learning environment before focusing on the language learning. In older adults, symptoms of anxiety were reduced when they felt respected by their peers and the teacher, and when they experienced a sense of community. Being able to establish a positive and secure status and being validated in class enhances the language learning process for older adults.

In summary, the data analysis in revealed that anxiety in older adults was not caused by certain types of tasks, practices, or exercises, but by the level of difficulty (which caused fear of failure to surface). When the research subjects were confronted with incomprehensible input, too much input and to process in a given time, or when they had to pay attention to too many components at the same time, high levels of anxiety surfaced. The anxiety escalated when the older adults realized that their classmates were
able to perform the tasks without any difficulty. As a result, they questioned their language-learning capability and the debilitating fear of failure set in. This kind of scenario has the potential to become a vicious cycle. If this cycle repeats itself, the fear of failure can outweigh the desire to succeed, and the older adult might abandon language learning all together.

Pedagogical Implications

The findings of this study on the beginning foreign language learning process of older adults suggest that language-learning anxiety exists within a complex network of inhibiting and enhancing factors, which influence each other in a multidirectional way. The results point to specific areas that need to be addressed to help older adults experience a more successful, satisfying, and anxiety-free foreign language-learning process.

One major finding is that older adults need to establish a positive and secure self-image and status within their classroom environment before they are able to participate in the language learning process. This implies that the teacher’s major role is to create a positive classroom atmosphere and supportive classroom community based on mutual respect and trust. This kind of teacher role surfaced as the most important/crucial factor for successful and anxiety/stress-free classrooms, regardless of approaches and methods. This finding implies that on the one hand, teacher training for older adult learners needs to stress strategies for building positive classroom communities, and on the other hand, teachers need to learn about stress management strategies, which they can teach to their older adult learners.
Nevertheless, the research suggests a few guidelines that should be considered when preparing to teach a language to older adult learners.

Suitable Syllabus Design

When designing a foreign language course for older adults, one needs to keep in mind some specific psychological and physiological characteristics of this age group. These specifics need to be taken into account with respect to syllabus design, language teaching approaches, and methods when choices are made in these areas. Each individual language learner needs to be seen as a social agent engaged in tasks in different domains and contexts. The aim of language courses is to help learners develop linguistic, sociolinguistic, and pragmatic competence in relation to their needs and goals. This is an important consideration, since the study revealed that often, older adults have little patience for meaningless content that has no relevance in their lives or for their language learning goals.

This research suggests that people over 55 undertake language learning to enrich their lives rather than to advance their careers. Therefore, it is necessary to anticipate the domains (personal, public, occupational, educational) and contexts of language use (places, institutions, people, objects, events, actions) in order to construct effective syllabi. Only then can it be determined what words and structures, functions and socio-cultural knowledge, and skills the learners will need to accomplish tasks in the contexts relevant for them. The same holds true for productive and receptive language skills.
As J. D. Brown, (1995) stated, when evaluating the most suitable language teaching method for older adults, the teacher has to be aware that approaches, syllabi, techniques, and exercises interact and affect each other. A teacher will have to make informed choices from “available approaches, syllabuses, techniques and exercises in order to adapt to a particular group of students in a particular situation for the purposes of the most” (p. 17) to identify effective and efficient ways to help this specific group of students learn a language.

In order to make informed methodological choices, a teacher must know who the students are and what their needs are. It is important to acknowledge that all language learners have human needs alongside linguistic needs. Before any methodological choice can be made, a needs analysis should be conducted. It should encompass subjective and objective information that helps define the particular language learning needs of a language-learning group in specific learning and teaching contexts.

Looking at older adults as the target group, the teacher needs to pay close attention to the human aspects of language learning, such as the physical, social, and psychological contexts. When evaluating suitable language teaching methods for older adults, one has to realize that older adults seek a learning environment where they are validated, have some control over their learning, and enjoy secure status. An Instructor also needs to pay attention and make adjustments to students’ physical, physiological and psychological changes needs that may arise in this age group.

The most common teaching methods are based on a combination of principles from a communicative/functional approach and principles from structural/cognitive and
affective/motivational approaches, depending on the teaching goals and the teaching unit stage. The teacher needs to evaluate and choose methods, techniques, and exercises that support the specific language learning needs of a specific group of learners in a very specific context. The data describes many incidences how Teacher P adjusted her techniques and exercises by giving specific scaffolding to students with less advanced language skills so they were able to participate in the tasks. The negative implications are described in the research data, when teacher M did not change or adjust her teachings methods when they did not produce positive learning.

Language Teaching Techniques

Teachers need to evaluate the techniques to choose for best results. They need to assess the possibility of cognitive slowdown in older adults, the psychological difficulties students display, their accumulated knowledge or lack of knowledge, and past language learning experiences. Any language teaching techniques can be used with older adults as long as they are adapted to the specific needs of the individuals in this age group. The more familiar the language teaching techniques and activities are for students, the less likely they will experience high anxiety and frustration levels or cognitive problems. Unfamiliar activities (e.g. jigsaw activities, information gap exercises, role-lays, etc.) may cause discomfort because of high levels of anxiety, or because they seem to be too “childish.”

However, the research data showed that any teaching technique can be employed with the necessary precautions. Especially over time, the students in setting A learned to enjoy role-plays. The research data confirmed that older adults not only are able to learn new skills, they benefit from new meaningful positive learning experiences
that relate to their daily life tasks. Research in cognitive neuroscience has shown (see Stemmer 2010; Ball 2002 as cited in Pace & Topini, 2004, p. 99) any teaching technique can be used with the necessary precautions. Older adults are not only able to learn skills, they benefit from new meaningful and positive learning experiences that relate to their daily life tasks. New learning experiences improve memory and other cognitive skills as well as physical skills in people between 65 and 94, as long as the new experiences are within a positive social context and supported by a sensitive teacher.

Methods that rely strongly on oral/aural skills and/or offer de-contextualized input are not suitable for older adults since they rely too heavily on hearing, fluid intelligence, and memory which might be compromised in older learners. Methods that lower the affective filter and emphasize meta-linguistic skills seem to be more effective for the language learning process in older adults (Pace & Topini, 2004, p. 99).

Teachers have to guard against students’ feelings of “overload” because it induces instant fear of failure. Teacher support needs to be tailored to the specific language learning needs of each individual learner. Every instructional intervention (appropriate scaffolding) needs to ensure successful participation in all language-learning tasks. This enhances the self-confidence of the older adult language learners and their language learning.

If a classroom teacher is aware of what the learners bring to the classroom, he or she will be able to create a positive classroom environment and provide learning tasks that are enjoyable and appropriate for all students. This will reduce classroom anxiety and frustration caused by unknown schemata, lack of background knowledge, too fast pacing, task that are too complex, unknown linguistic knowledge, and lack of familiarity with
the skills and strategies necessary to complete tasks successfully (see Nunan, 2004, p.120).

Finally, a physically appropriate and comfortable classroom setting is needed, and provisions for physical needs and comfort are also necessary. For example,

- Good lighting is much more important for older adults than younger learners. Diffused lighting, preferably incandescent lamps, are helpful. Reading materials in larger font sizes are also helpful.
- Background noises should be eliminated.
- Seating arrangements are important. Every student should be able to see the teacher, fellow students, and teaching tools like writing boards, screens, etc. Circular seating arrangements can be effective. Comfortable seating should also be provided.

Above all, creating a relaxed atmosphere to lower the affective filter is indispensable for teaching older adults.

In Summary

The results of the study suggest that older adults can learn regardless of age. They do not lose their ability to learn languages. Older adults are able to learn a language when provisions are made for their psychological needs. These include a heightened “need to establish, maintain, and protect their sense of personal social-psychological security in terms of their sense of status, validation, control, and safety” (Pellegrino, 2005, p. 52). Moreover, when provisions for the older adults’ physical needs are made, foreign language learning becomes a meaningful, enjoyable, life enriching, and anxiety free experience for older adults.
Future Research

This research has identified many factors that inhibit or enhance the foreign language learning process of older adults and offered insights into the relationship and interaction with anxiety and self. The findings suggest that language-learning anxiety in older adults exists within a complex network of inhibiting and enhancing factors, which influence each other in a multidirectional way. Future research needs to investigate these complex networks to reveal the interconnectedness of the factors (e.g. by constructing and analyzing an interrelationship digraph matrix) (see Yan & Horwitz, 2008).

The major finding of the study is that older adults need to establish a positive and secure self-image and status within their classroom environment before they are able to wholeheartedly participate in the language learning process. To better serve and empower older adults to learn foreign languages, research needs to be conducted on appropriate language-learning strategies, which specifically address coping strategies for dealing with anxiety and stress. Research further needs to identify the most effective context in which to teach these coping strategies to older adult learners. For example, is it more effective to teach these strategies simultaneously with language instruction, or should they be taught as a separate class?

The research approach contributed to an understanding of the factors and their interrelationships strictly grounded in a specific contextual environment. Different factors might appear in different settings. Also, future studies need to explore the interaction among individual factors that inhibit or enhance the language learning process of older adults. Stricter and more systematic procedures for collecting and analyzing data need to
be followed to minimize subjectivity and biases when interpreting verbal data. This would include raters in the analytical processes.
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APPENDIX A
Interview questions for students
1. Name
2. Date
3. Nationality
4. Age
5. Sex
6. Mother tongue
7. What other languages have you learned, to what extent?
8. For what purposes have you learned this/these language(s)?
9. Have you lived abroad? How long? Did you use the language of the country?
10. What language are you currently learning?
11. Why do you want to learn the language? (interested in the language, in the culture, want to live here, have friends who speak the language, need it for my career, need it for traveling, others)
12. What do you expect from the language course?
13. What do you expect from the teacher?
14. What teaching methods do you prefer?
15. What kinds of classroom activities do you like and find helpful?
16. What kinds of classroom activities don’t you like? Why?
17. What do you find frustrating and/or raising your anxiety level during class time?
18. What are the most enjoyable activities during class?
19. What language learning strategies are you currently using? Which are the most useful ones for you?
20. Do you talk to the teacher about your language learning needs?

Interview Questions for teachers
1. What do you know about the needs of older language learners?
2. How are they different from younger learners?
3. Do you try to accommodate their specific needs?
4. How do you try to accommodate them?

Interview questions for the principle
1. Have the numbers of older language learners increased or decreased during the last years?
2. Do you have any statistics or can you provide any estimation?
3. Do you have any explanation for the increase or decrease?
4. Do you try to accommodate this specific group of learners and their needs?
5. What do you think their specific needs are?
Informed Consent

My name is Dagmar Waters. I am a MA student at California State University, Chico, and I am conducting research for my MA thesis, A Language Learning Diary Study: The Experience of Learning Thai as an Older Adult. I would like to ask you some questions that will take 30 - 60 minutes. Your participation is completely voluntary. There is no penalty if you choose not to participate or if you choose to stop participating in the middle. There is also no anticipated benefit or risk if you do chose to participate. Your responses will be kept confidential and not linked to your name in any way. Would you like to participate?