

# NEWSLETTER 17

## European English and Older Learners

ForAge is a multilateral network partly funded by the European Commission Lifelong Learning Programme. A partnership of 15 members from 13 countries has worked for three years on the theme of later-life learning. The project's goal is to share information and best practice about later-life learning and the benefits it brings.

ForAge raises issues such as the availability of learning for older people and access to it. The network builds upon rich experiences from European projects and initiatives, by analysing their value and impact and disseminating information about them.

*As part of its mission, the ForAge network aims to raise issues that are related to the development and sustainability of later-life learning opportunities.*

*One key issue is how English is used in European projects. There are two main aspects to this:*

*(a) The use of English in the development of projects – and Newsletter 16 looked at European English and the ForAge network.*

*(b) The use of English by older learners across Europe – either as pan-European project participants or as later-life learners.*

*Newsletter 17 looks at European English and older learners.*

### Older learners and English

The European Commission's 2012 *Special Eurobarometer 386 Report: Europeans and their Languages* found that English is the most popular foreign language in Europe, with 38% of all Europeans saying they can speak it. ([http://ec.europa.eu/public\\_opinion/archives/ebs/ebs\\_386\\_en.pdf](http://ec.europa.eu/public_opinion/archives/ebs/ebs_386_en.pdf)). People in Hungary, Ireland, Italy, Portugal and the UK are the least likely to be able to speak any foreign language. In terms of age, people over 55 are the least likely to speak other languages.

Age	At least 1	At least 2	At least 3	none
15–24	74%	37%	12%	26%
25–39	64%	31%	12%	36%
40–54	55%	25%	10%	45%
55+	38%	17%	7%	62%

### **Languages that respondents speak well enough to be able to have a conversation, in Europe, 2012**



April 2015

# NEWSLETTER 17

## European English and Older Learners

### Language in a changing world

For older people in our society – particularly those being encouraged to learn and share experiences with others across Europe – there are various questions around learning English.

- Literacy levels of older people vary considerably across Europe: in what way do they impact on ability and motivation to learn another language?
- Is English a language the older people learned when they were younger and if so how do they maintain their language skills?
- Many older people were compelled to learn a second European language in their childhood yet are now learning English. Do their earlier experiences help their later-life learning?
- How and where are older learners being taught English, what do they want from their new language and what quality controls exist over the teaching?
- As tourism across Europe is enhanced by more open borders, are older people enjoying these opportunities or does a lack of confidence in their English inhibit their travel? Do the majority of older tourists travel in 'own-language' groups?

The ForAge network exists to promote later-life learning across Europe and is concerned with the availability of learning for older people, the quality of that learning and the danger that older people may be left behind in

a rapidly-changing world where language usage is increasingly related to technology and social media.

In addition, where the ForAge network tries to work across disciplines, how and where do these sectors explore common understanding of terms and how do new 'European English' words come into common usage? To help answer some of these questions ForAge has launched a Lexicon of terms in use today around the areas of ageing and education: [Later-Life Learning: Lexicon of Terms](#).

There are debates to be had about the expansion of European English, and its impact on older people, as well as hearing from older people across Europe about their recent and current experiences with this language. A larger discussion, but one beyond the scope of the network, is the impact that European English is having on British English.

Research indicates that learning a language in later life and being bilingual may assist cognitive ageing and offset the possibility of some forms of dementia:  
<http://www.theguardian.com/education/2014/sep/13/am-i-too-old-to-learn-a-language>  
<http://onlinelibrary.wiley.com/doi/10.1002/ana.24158/full>

### What is 'European English'?

European English is an element of a received variant of English called 'English as a lingua franca' (ELF) defined as 'the use of English as a

---

April 2015

## NEWSLETTER 17

### European English and Older Learners

common means of communication for speakers of different first languages' (*Vienna Oxford International Corpus of English* <http://www.univie.ac.at/voice>).

When English is studied as a foreign language the learner focuses on native speaker norms in order to identify with the culture and values of 'educated' English speakers. ELF users focus on functionality, drawing on other cultural backgrounds and code-switching into other languages to achieve efficient intercultural communication. English native speakers, unfamiliar with ELF, may find themselves at a disadvantage as they do not know how to use English in this kind of communication and may have no effective knowledge of other European languages on which they can draw.

#### Communication and older adults

The EU promotes proficiency in at least three European languages – mother tongue and two others (*Barcelona Objective 2002*) and recognises that 'It is also essential to ensure that languages are not a barrier to participation in society, and that marginalised language groups can be identified, represented, and included in society.'  
[http://ec.europa.eu/languages/policy/learning-languages/languages-in-education\\_en.htm](http://ec.europa.eu/languages/policy/learning-languages/languages-in-education_en.htm)

In addition to the questions posed earlier, the ForAge network would like to learn more about the following issues:



- National data on proficiency in European languages by age.
- The status afforded to language as a tool for national and European integration.
- National language policies relating to the integration of older adults from minority communities.
- The possible role migration across Europe has played in the use of English by older people.
- Opportunities for older adults to learn European languages; data about participation in language learning by older people.
- National initiatives to stimulate interest in and engagement with Europe by older people.
- Testimonies of older learners about their experiences with the English language – in early life, recent and current.

**Jim Soulsby** ([Jim.soulsby@btinternet.com](mailto:Jim.soulsby@btinternet.com))

*ForAge facilitator, for the ForAge network*

---

April 2015