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# **Barriers Encountered by Adult Learners in the Context of Learning a Foreign Language, the Age Parameter**

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**Abstract** – Learning foreign languages and the constant educational inclination created by the subject of the foreign language itself, due to the interest it exudes, attracts more and more adults. This paper discusses the barriers that encourage or deter an adult from choosing an educational program in general and foreign language learning in particular. The inhibitory factors throughout the thematic length of education are basically distinguished by the same characteristics, with the foreign language specializing them to some extent in the spectrum of its subject matter. A quantitative research approach was carried out using questionnaires and the subjects were adults who have participated in a foreign language learning program in the prefecture of Thessaloniki. The research findings indicated that the main barriers were a lack of interest or goal setting. Consequently, by identifying the barriers and placing them in the modern social model, adults would disregard the inhibitory factors and would choose a language learning program with pleasure, as long as it met their needs, if it consisted of the appropriate teaching staff and on condition that it met, according to them, all the necessary conditions for learning and engagement of their interest.

**Keywords** – Adult Education, Barriers, Obstacles to Participation, Foreign Language, Age Parameter.

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## **I. INTRODUCTION**

Today's era, which is characterized by drastic changes and developments at the social, economic, technological and cultural levels, imposes the need for continuous improvement and redefining of adults' knowledge and skills. Rapid technological advances combined with the internationalization of the economy are forcing human resources to adapt to a new working reality regime, in which a constant competitive challenge inheres. The difficulty of joining the job market and the difficulty of staying in it, lead to the wide-spread phenomenon of unemployment.

Everyday life itself pushes modern people towards retraining and vocational reorientation, with the parallel need for a balance between professional and personal life. Obtaining multiple qualifications, in addition to the characteristic of continuous renewal, often presents the combination of leisure activities with the educational character. The main triptych of qualifications consists of general education, technical knowledge and basic social skills. General education concerns the conception of meanings, the decryption of information and the combination of knowledge, with its ultimate goal being the autonomous interpretation of reality. Technical knowledge, on the other hand, is directly related to employment, as it touches on the concept of specialized training, while the basic social skills are related to planning, goal setting, interpersonal development, cooperation and what is defined as "learning how to learn" [1].

## **II. THEORETICAL CONTEXT**

### **A. Barriers**

What often puts the effectiveness of learning at stake is the existence and the process of overcoming a number

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of barriers that adults face and which can be categorized into three subgroups, with the first being those that arise due to poor educational organization. Because of the greater need that adults have, compared to children, of being responsibly treated, an educational program that lags behind in terms of coordination or infrastructure or is significantly impaired in goal setting, reasonably creates feelings of discomfort, limits the interest shown and causes a negative attitude in learners. The next category of barriers is based on the social obligations and duties of adults, which are part of their daily routine and which can distract and disorientate them from their educational goal.

The last distinction of barriers, with their main source being individual personality, concerns internal barriers and branches into two more subcategories, the first being those related to pre-existing knowledge and values. The already established value system of adults in combination with their cognitive reserve, often reproduces the phenomenon of a persistent attachment, and therefore the inability to accept new learning objects or educational methods. The main explanation for the above lies in the reduced malleability of adults, who, getting carried away by the early mentality they have built, find it difficult to assimilate new knowledge, let alone review previous beliefs [2]. Yet, in addition to the beliefs they have already acquired, adults have also invested emotionally in their views of the world, so transforming them can give them a sense of questioning their personality or judgment, which will obviously create friction between the group.

Internal barriers also include those that result from psychological factors, intertwined with character traits such as lack of self-confidence or low self-esteem. Stress is a completely independent category, having its roots in fear of failure or subsequent possible criticism, but also to uncertainty or lack of self-confidence. Many adult learners do not feel confident in living up to expectations and learning challenges, and are overwhelmed by feelings of fear over various forms of assessment due to their association with the likelihood of failure. In fact, a negative experience from the school environment is able to subconsciously create a negative predisposition for the learning process. Resentment and uncertainty are often encountered in vulnerable social groups, whose members, assuming that education is more accessible to those who possess a knowledge base, question their potential [2].

### *B. Defense and Resignation Mechanisms*

Adult learners who have been called upon to adopt new knowledge or values but are inhibited by internal barriers are led to develop various mechanisms in an effort not to break free from their habits. Possible conflict with the instructor's suggestions can lead the adult to resign directly or indirectly from the educational process. As far as more intense defense mechanisms are concerned, the difficulty learners face in responding can translate into negativism, shifting the conversation topic, distorting what has been said, even constructing arguments in the service of convincing others about the correctness of what they say.

Regardless of stressors, student behavior can also be affected by the instructor's mishandling, in the presence of unfamiliar actions, such as unannounced videotaping of the seminar or incomplete clarification of the seminar objectives. Proper management of issues by the instructor, such as a smooth and productive shift in the topic of discussion, can therefore enhance the creativity of learners. To deal with barriers, the instructor should have sharpened diagnostic skills, strong intuition and sensitivity, communication skills and comfort in coming up with alternative solutions.

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### *C. Inhibiting Factors*

Sometimes the way to identify the factors that make adult participation difficult is more difficult than that of identifying motivational factors. Alt & Beatty (1997) [3] highlight, based on research, some categories of adults that do not take part in educational activities, including people with learning or physical disabilities, people from specific minorities such as immigrants or unemployed people, adults on low incomes, people with “poor” educational experience or geographically excluded people. In addition to the above, within the framework of taking on adult roles either as a result of free will or legal requirement, the socially marginalized to penitentiary, nursing or other institutions and those who fulfill their military service are added to the category [4], [5].

According to Carp, Peterson & Roelfs, the factors that lead to an inhibition regarding adult participation in education are categorized into situational and institutional / structural inhibition factors and dispositional factors. According to them, the majority of the inhibitory factors concern institutional conditions, which are related to the way the institutions which run educational programs are organized and how they operate [6].

The first category concern situational inhibitory factors, such as the cost of participation, lack of free time, family or business responsibilities, lack of transportation means or reading space and the discouraging opinion of family or friends. The main factors that act as a deterrent, i.e. the institutional or structural factors, include the time or schedule of attendance or completion of the program, the strictness of attendance or compulsory attendance, bureaucratic issues related to both the terms of participation and certification, the evaluation and finally the interest that the lessons inspire.

It is impossible not to take into account, among other things, the dispositional factors. The most prominent factor in this category is lack of self-confidence and then the fear of someone exceeding the age limit, lack of willingness, fatigue or frustration stemming from school mentality, fear of excessive ambition and finally the lack of goal setting and specific learning orientation [7].

Even if there is psychological preparation and conscious commitment from the part of the adult, the barriers of cultural, social and psychological content cannot be set aside. The established value system of adults, which has its bases in initial socialization, baptizes all these barriers as “perceptions”. The perceptions that are formed during the first stages of a person's life, based on school experience and family influence, are also those that determine the degree of resistance of adults to the educational process. The combination of the unknown and the fear of failure, as a threatening function for adult prestige, ultimately creates an increase in pressure within an overall negative context, resulting in the avoidance of engagement in the learning process.

According to McGivney, the classification of barriers takes place, in a descending order, as follows: cultural and social factors, self-perception factors, personal and psychological factors, institutional, material and economic factors [8] . The sociocultural factors are primarily distinguished by gender, race and social background, i.e. elements associated with regularities that exercise pressure on people. McGivney cites here as an example the manual workers (mainly men) who are usually assumed to have a negative predisposition towards education. Another example, mainly due to the Greek reality and the combination of social roles and gender, is the difficulty mothers face in educational participation, especially when it comes to single-parent families, due to the lack of childcare.

Self-perception then refers to the lack of interest expressed by adults due to the fact that learning does not res-

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-pond to their needs. Usually these adults are convinced that only a highly organized educational action, under the umbrella of evaluation can produce learning, thus declaring their preference for informal learning.

The category of institutional factors is then directly linked to barriers that concern the place of residence of the participants. More specifically, this category includes factors such as incomplete training and educational opportunities or non-existent infrastructure but also possible barriers stemming from the education system itself, such as limited information or high tuition fees. In conclusion, McGivney analyzes material and financial factors with regards to professional or family obligations, lack of transportation means and low availability of time or money. This category reflects the most “plausible” and most reasonable barriers, sometimes obscuring more complex causes.

#### *D. Addressing Barriers*

One of the conditions for effective education is the investigation of the barriers encountered by the learners, along with the appropriate ways to overcome them. Having the team under their responsibility, the instructors strive to overcome the possible factors that hinder learning, adopting an attitude that is governed from the beginning by the belief that the path to knowledge cannot be straightforward. As barriers are an integral part of human nature, the first step for the instructors is to recognize and accept their existence, which will help to better understand the personality of the learners, but also of themselves. Adult negativity may have its roots in childhood experiences, which is why it requires special handling and sensitivity.

The dilemma which learning obstacles bring to the fore, wavers between the encouragement of active participation and the belief in the traditional teacher-centered model. Even if barriers force the instructor to take more disciplined action, initiative and expression, the main components of active participation, should not be overlooked. The possible alternative cases where the results are manifested at a later time or the team lacks the willingness to participate, are not equally capable of undoing the value of active participation in learning. The difficulty of the instructors’ work lies in balancing the emerging barriers, their interventionist limits and the development potential of each group, which will formulate the overall criteria and contexts of their actions.

Value of energy in learning. The difficulty of the trainer's work lies in balancing the emerging obstacles, his interventionist limits and the development potential of each group, which will shape the overall criteria and context of his actions.

#### *E. Barriers and Inhibitory Factors in Learning a Foreign Language*

Learning a foreign language in itself is, with few exceptions, a difficult task. The root of the difficulty lies in the fact that both before and during the process, there is the emergence and interaction of innumerable different factors that alter the educational conditions. In the foreground, we could mention the age factor because it is a fixed and irreversible constant which sometimes excludes a set of participants, [9]. In younger students it is observed that the acquisition of a foreign language occurs as a natural process. On the contrary, in the case of older adults, there is a greater awareness of the effects of its acquisition [10]. The learning speed of younger people is clearly visible, with cases where, under ideal conditions, language acquisition can take place in less than a year. Adults are faced with difficulties in commanding a foreign language due to age, and to factors which largely stem from the chronic internalization of a particular system of mother tongue rules, preventing them from escaping this acquired barrier.

More specifically, the established system of rules of the adults' mother tongue is, in turn, unconsciously transferred to the foreign language. As a result, adults apply the rules of the mother tongue, even subconsciously, to the target language, creating a phenomenon called "interference". The expected consequence is for the students to come to an intermediate stage, which is called "interlanguage", and during which they have acquired a kind of language that includes rules similar to the intended one, with a constant effort to achieve absolute identification. Consequently, the age of the adults, compared to that of a child, may make it difficult for them to free themselves from the insistence on the use of the rules of the mother tongue, confirming the view that there is greater ease in children's learning.

The learning progress in language learning can also be affected by individual differences between students, which can create inequalities within a language seminar. Carroll argues that the acquisition of a foreign language is achieved among three individual differences and two additional teaching variables. In particular, he refers to the following characteristics: talent, intelligence and motivation, which are influenced by the variables of language learning opportunities and the adequate or incomplete presentation of the language material [11]. The difficulty lies in the correct adaptation of the above variables regarding each person individually, starting from the teaching techniques and methods, even from the personality of the teacher.

Many times, the appeal a foreign language has for adults is a product of their desire to be a member of a language community. However, when this desire becomes particularly strong, it automatically turns into an inhibitory factor. Learners, with a dominant mindset that of getting integrated into the new language community, often experience feelings of dissatisfaction with their own society and, even at a more advanced stage, end up rejecting it. Prolonged frustration can therefore lead to identity confusion, with the learner being in a "lost" state between two languages and two cultures. Adults need to soften the charm of their integration into a new community and mentality and find the balance between their own social reality and the new, in order to avoid the emergence of unpleasant feelings and dual identities.

To the classification of non-negligible learning factors must be added those of a psychological nature. The much-discussed term "stress" has troubled the scientific world with its catalytic effect on learning in general. Some argue that it contributes to the smooth learning process, while others support that it can catalyze any form of learning. What can be concluded with relative certainty is that when stress values are at normal levels, then learning motivations are activated, while otherwise, the excessive stimulation experienced by the body inhibits or even cancels the learning process.

Associated with psychological factors, apart from stress, is the ability of any potential speaker to use the foreign language in the country where it is spoken. Practicing the language in the country of origin itself gives a sense of naturalness and creates a comfort to the speaker, as they do not feel as being the center of attention. Eliminating insecurities and a sense of intimacy has a positive effect on the speaker's psycho synthesis, rendering the process of speaking the language outside of its home country almost an obstacle.

Apart from the branch extensions revolving around learning a foreign language, what can have a positive or negative predisposition is the preconception that the adults have formed in their mind about the foreign language. Without much distinction, languages can be divided into those that are more or less widely liked. The origin of the preconception may lie in the person's established perceptions regarding language, to a pleasant or unpleasant experience, such as a trip, or even to an acquaintance with a speaker. As a country and therefore a

language, represents an entire people, the cultural heritage of its temperament, literature, history, culture and tradition, can combine to build a positive or a negative image that reflects on the language itself. Consequently, an inextricably negatively linked language-country relationship can negatively predispose the adult towards learning this language and exacerbate the person's aversion.

### III. METHODOLOGY

#### A. Research Approach

The aim of this research process is to investigate the barriers faced by adult learners in the context of the foreign language. The barriers were studied in terms of the age of the learners at a general educational level but also specifically in terms of the age of the participants in the particular training program they were attending. Additionally, the behavior and opinions of the participants regarding the program's operation process, their instructors, as well as the reasons that would prevent their attendance of future programs were studied and analyzed.

A total of 248 adults taking part in a foreign language learning program participated in the research. 124 were male and the other 124 were women. The age range of the majority of participants was up to 30 years and their main educational level was higher education.

The main purpose of the present research process, through its analysis and conclusions, is to investigate the choices made by adult learners with respect to the foreign language learning program in general and in particular. To substantially investigate their views some research questions were asked and subsequently answered through analysis. The main research question was "What are the differences in the views of people of different ages on learning barriers"?

The IBM Statistics SPSS 23 statistical software was used to process and analyze the data. Initially, all variables were analyzed descriptively for the general formulation of the participants' views on learning and educational programs, and then an inductive analysis was performed to answer the research hypotheses. In the context of the inductive analysis, in the cases of an independent categorical variable and a dependent rating scale (likert), the need arose to apply a prior normality test with the help of the Kolmogorov - Smirnov criterion, from which the non-existence of normal distribution ( $\text{sig} < , 05$ ) was found. This led to the use of the non-parametric Kruskal - Wallis criterion [12].

#### B. Inductive Analysis Results

##### *Differentiation among Adult Views on Learning Barriers in Relation to Age*

Regarding the first three factors that act as barriers to learning, i.e. personal reasons (MV 4.00),  $H(3) = 17,389$ ,  $p = , 001$ , family reasons (MV 3.05)  $H(3) = 15,273$ ,  $p = , 002$  and professional reasons (MV 4.36),  $H(3) = 24,164$ ,  $p = , 000$ , the highest mean value was observed in people under 30. The category with the second highest mean value is that of the 31-40 age group and, with the exception of professional reasons where people over 50 ranked third (MV 3.29), the mean values follow a downward trend. The mean value of economic reasons was higher in individuals aged 41-50 (MV 3.93) and high in the 31-40 age group (MV 3.40),  $H(3) = 14.418$ ,  $p = , 000$ .

Lack of time had a higher mean value in young people up to 30 (MV 3.92) and in the oldest age group which



was analyzed (MV 3.29),  $H(3) = 23,980, p = .000$ . Higher values for psychological reasons - anxiety (MV 4.22),  $H(3) = 25,314, p = .000$  and difficulty of commuting (MV 4.52),  $H(3) = 25,263, p = .000$  were observed in the 41-50 age group, followed by the group of 50-year-olds (MV 4.18) and the 31-40 age group (MV 3.70) respectively. Fatigue was higher in young people, with the highest values observed in people up to 30 (MV 3.90) and then in the 31-40 age group (MV 3.40),  $H(3) = 11,261, p = .010$ . Regarding the variable of fear of failure as a barrier, the results of the statistical analysis did not indicate statistically significant differences and for this reason no reference is made in the table.

Lack of interest (MV 4.46),  $H(3) = 24,001, p = .000$  and the sense of the participant's personality being challenged (MV 4.38),  $H(3) = 10,684, p = .014$  also showed the highest averages at younger ages, more specifically in the 31-40 category for the first variable and in 30-year-olds for the second. Adults under 30 also had the highest mean value (MV 4.28),  $H(3) = 29,872, p = .000$  for the variable regarding previously acquired knowledge and beliefs.

As barriers, poor educational experience (MV 4.74),  $H(3) = 24,745, p = .000$  and frustration due to school mentality (MV 4.63),  $H(3) = 22,262, p = .000$  resulted equally in the highest averages for the 41-50 category. Finally, lack of goal setting (MV 4.60),  $H(3) = 12,768, p = .005$  reached the highest levels for adults in the 31-40 range.

Table 1. Averages and standard deviations with respect to age-related barriers.

Age Barriers	<30		31-40		41-50		>50		Test of Statistical Significance		
	MV	$\sigma$	MV	$\sigma$	MV	$\sigma$	MV	$\sigma$	H	df	p
Personal reasons	4,00	1,192	3,23	1,194	3,00	1,038	2,89	1,197	17,389	3	,001
Family reasons	3,05	,972	3,03	,850	2,22	,698	2,54	1,374	15,273	3	,002
Professional reasons	4,36	,959	3,70	,915	3,11	,974	3,29	1,462	24,164	3	,000
Financial reasons	2,82	,790	3,40	,855	3,93	,917	3,21	1,500	18,418	3	,000
Lack of time	3,92	1,421	2,47	1,279	2,59	,694	3,29	1,301	23,980	3	,000
Psychological reasons- stress	3,13	1,005	3,83	,834	4,22	,847	4,18	1,020	25,314	3	,000
Difficulty in commuting	3,28	,972	3,70	,877	4,52	,643	3,39	1,257	25,263	3	,000
Fatigue	3,90	1,021	3,40	1,003	3,07	,874	3,29	1,272	11,261	3	,010
Lack of interest	4,46	,643	4,53	,571	3,56	1,086	3,68	1,056	24,001	3	,000
Sense of personality being challenged	4,38	,711	4,33	,802	3,70	1,068	3,79	1,101	10,684	3	,014
Previously acquired knowledge and beliefs	4,28	,999	3,87	,900	2,63	1,418	2,89	1,423	29,872	3	,000
Poor educational experience	3,18	1,587	4,53	,629	4,74	,447	3,68	1,362	24,745	3	,000
Frustration due to school mentality	3,05	1,572	4,23	,679	4,63	,565	3,86	1,208	22,262	3	,000
Lack of goal setting	4,21	,767	4,60	,770	4,30	,724	3,82	1,020	12,768	3	,005

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#### IV. CONCLUSIONS

In terms of learning barriers, young people up to the age of 30, followed by the 31-40 age group, basically rated professional, personal and family issues, but also the lack of time and fatigue as the most important barriers.

The economic factor tends to be high in middle age and peaks in people up to 50. Fatigue, on the other hand, has been a major barrier to younger people, declining with age.

The young man seemed to be more connected to the interest that the educational program exudes but also his self-confidence towards it, as the sense of questioning the personality of the young people and the lack of interest worked for them as inhibitors.

Apart from psychological factors or stress, the oldest age group did not encounter any particular problems with learning barriers. The 41-50 year-olds expressed concern about the financial side and the difficulty of commuting, but they also voiced concerns regarding the empirical part due to their poor educational experience and frustration with their school experience. Lack of goal setting constituted more of a barrier for the 31-40 age group. The already cognitive field of older people did not seem to have much influence on them.

Learning barriers can be summed up to lack of time and professional, family and personal issues, which seem to concern young people more. Young people, who are around 30 years old, seem to be burdened by the constant demands and obligations that swell within everyday life due to current events, and as a result, these conditions hinder learning. This is confirmed by the main driving force of young people, which turned out to be flexible hours, while for middle-aged people it was the practical part of commuting and the cost.

In conclusion, the association of age with specific parameters per age scale, such as family status, professional requirements, daily life configuration and school experience or the acquired cognitive background of the individual, can define different barriers when monitoring a teacher. Program and therefore create, depending on age, different learning conditions.

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