

PAPER

Integrating English and Digital Literacy for Older Adults

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l.ochoa@awf.katowice.pl**ABSTRACT**

This paper investigates how best to integrate English and digital literacy education for older adults to promote their digital social inclusion. The research of the ERASMUS+ project Coll-Oya focuses on the learning needs of adults aged 55 and older from Tarragona-Spain, Silesia-Poland, and Adana-Türkiye. These participants make up part of a divergent group that, though still active in life, are not digital natives. Most of them have insufficient knowledge of digital tools and the English language to be able to handle new technologies. This project thus responds to these gaps since it seeks to equip participants with both English language skills and digital literacy through content-based instruction combined with practical applications in real-life activities such as online shopping, ticket booking, and engaging in digital communication. The study explores participants' digital awareness, language proficiency, and collaborative learning experiences with younger generations. A mixed-methods approach involving 204 participants completing an online survey and 45 interviews explores their preferences and challenges in acquiring language and digital skills. The main findings show that tailored learning opportunities increase engagement and motivation among older learners and empower them, instilling a sense of hope and inspiration. Intergenerational collaboration creates a supportive learning environment. Participants reported feeling more confident using technology and improving their English language skills through the joint teaching initiatives. The paper suggests that integrating English and digital literacy training could offer an opportunity to empower the active contribution and social inclusion of those over age 55 in the increasingly digital world. These findings provide pragmatic insights into how the digital competencies of older adults and their language proficiency can be supported in intergenerational learning, thus practically presenting strategies to educators, policymakers, and other stakeholders involved in adult education and digital literacy.

KEYWORDS

digital literacy, English language learning, intergenerational collaboration, older adults, social inclusion

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1 INTRODUCTION

Intermixing English language learning with digital literacy is becoming more important in today's technology-filled world, especially for older adults who may have extra challenges accessing and using digital resources [1]. This challenge is particularly relevant for older adults with limited exposure to technology and the English language. As the world becomes more interconnected through digital platforms, individuals must develop language and technological skills to be socially included and actively participate in community life [2]. Digital literacy equips individuals with ICT concepts, methods, and skills to effectively use and exploit digital technologies. The DigComp framework defines digital competence as the confident, critical, and responsible use of digital technologies for learning, work, and participation in society [1], [3]. It is described as an interplay between knowledge, skills, and attitudes, whereby the holistic nature of digital competence is highlighted.

This paper addresses the special learning needs of older adults within the context of digital literacy and learning the English language. The research, part of the ERASMUS+ project Coll-Oya, investigates the learning needs of adults aged 55 and older from Tarragona-Spain, Silesia-Poland, and Adana-Türkiye [3]. These participants represent a diverse group that is still active in life but faces challenges adapting to the fast-paced digital world. Many have limited knowledge of digital tools and the English language, which hinders their ability to engage with technological advancements [2], [4]. These are just a few gaps that the Coll-Oya Project addresses, filling in the participant's basic English language knowledge and digital literacy through content-based instruction—namely, carrying out real-life tasks online: shopping and reserving tickets, among other regular online communications.

A mixed-methods approach was followed, whereby 204 respondents answered an online survey and 45 interviews were conducted. This collaborative research aims to understand how the promotion of intergenerational learning and individualized educational approaches can best facilitate older adults' digital competence and language proficiency [5]. The paper will present the project's main findings, suggesting that integrating English and digital literacy training could offer an opportunity to empower the active contribution and social inclusion of those over age 55 in the increasingly digital world [3], [5]. These findings will allow a deeper understanding of the learning needs of older adults and provide practical strategies to promote their digital social inclusion, which will also contribute to the wider discourse on adult education and digital literacy.

2 LITERATURE REVIEW

The increasing importance of digital literacy as a life skill in today's society is well recognized, especially for older adults who may face challenges in using technology [1]. The available evidence shows that older adults often find it hard to use digital skills because of intergenerational differences in the use of technology and exposure to digital tools. Programs to improve digital literacy among older adults have had positive outcomes, making it easier for them to use technology and thus promoting social inclusion [6].

Combining language learning with hands-on practicality, such as technology, has significantly raised both motivation and retention among older adult learners [7], [8]. This view is in line with the purposes of this paper that investigates coupled advantages of English language acquisition with digital literacy among older adults.

Late-in-life language acquisition presents both the peculiar problems and the advantages. A number of studies have shown that foreign language learning in older adulthood is possible, although the pedagogical processes may have to be adjusted compared to those used for younger learners [2], [4], [6]. Hence, the integration of digital literacy into English language instruction for older adults offers a great opportunity to enhance their learning experience and address their needs [7].

The actual practice of joint teaching, where learners from different age cohorts support each other's learning, has proved a practical pedagogical approach. The evidence suggests that joint teaching appears to be the most beneficial, showing particularly that younger peer support is an advantage to the older learner [9]. This collaborative approach achieves more social interaction, and feelings of loneliness and isolation are alleviated—hence, the fostering of a sense of connection and engagement. This collaborative approach aligns with the focus of this study on intergenerational learning and thus makes the audience feel more connected and engaged in the learning process [10].

Inter-generational learning environments, where older adults can learn with younger peers, might also enhance their experience of learning a language in a process of cooperation and mutual help [11]. Combining English language acquisition with basic digital skills within collaborative frameworks has been successful in increasing participation and learning among older adults [10], [11].

The individual needs of older adults should be met by tailoring the learning approaches. Where the learning experience will be tailor-made to fit the needs and abilities of individual learners, engagement and effectiveness are assured—a feeling of being understood and catered to in the audience is left [12]. This is especially pertinent in the areas of digital literacy and language acquisition, where older learners might have unique barriers that require personalized support and resources [9], [10], [12]. This falls in line with what the Coll-Oya project found important for older adults, which is individualized learning, hence making the audience feel more understood and catered to in the learning process [3].

This literature review underscores the need to combine English language teaching with digital literacy training in a joint teaching model adapted to meet the challenges faced by older adults effectively [13], [14]. Building on these findings, the COLL-OYA project will research how collaborative learning experiences can foster digital competence, language acquisition, social inclusion, and empowerment among older adults in an increasingly digital world [5].

There are also important things regarding the heterogeneity of the population of older adults. Learning styles and outcomes are going to be influenced remarkably by previous education, experience with technology in the past, and personal interests [15], [16]. Programs designed to consider these differences would ensure that everyone gets an opportunity to take part meaningfully. That is a recurrent theme in this paper: in-depth learning of the individual learner [17], [18].

3 MATERIALS AND METHODS

The study aimed at knowing digital awareness, language ability, and collaborative learning experiences of senior citizens 55 years old and older in Tarragona-Spain, Silesia-Poland, and Adana-Türkiye. In line with that, it aimed at identifying the special needs of this group of older adults, particularly in the areas of digital awareness and the English language, to create more appropriate educational strategies for this

group to actively take part in and be included in the increasingly digital world [1]. The research questions of the study were guided by the following:

- What are the most important digital literacy skills that older adults believe would provide them with the confidence to become actively included in the digital world?
- How does the level of English language proficiency impact the ability of older adults to feel confident enough to take part in digital communication and seek information online?
- How do older adults prefer to learn, and what learning strategies are used when acquiring both English and digital literacy skills?
- To what extent does intergenerational collaboration influence the learning outcomes, motivation, and sense of social connectedness among older adults in the context of English and digital literacy training?
- Are there striking cross-cultural differences regarding digital literacy needs, language learning preferences, and experiences among older adults across the three countries participating in the project?

The study follows 204 older adults from three European countries, selected only for interest in improving their digital skills and knowledge of the English language through some collaborative learning activities with younger adults. The participants in this study thus were quite diversified in terms of age; for example, the oldest were those in their 80s—better reflecting the heterogeneity seen in the elderly population.

Participants were recruited through community centers, senior activity groups, and learners from partner organizations: Adana Alparslan Türkeş Science and Technology University, Saricam Public Education Center (Turkey), Instytut Badan I Innowacji w Edukacji (Poland) and DomSpain (Spain). Eligibility criteria included being 55 or older, possessing basic computer literacy (e.g., the ability to operate a computer, use a mouse, and navigate the internet), and a willingness to improve digital skills and English proficiency [20]. A subset of 45 participants was purposely selected for semi-structured interviews to ensure representation across age groups (ages 55–64, 65–74, 75+), gender, prior technological experience, and self-reported English language proficiency.

The data collection process was thorough and comprehensive, employing both an online survey and semi-structured interviews. The survey, however, was conducted in a classroom with the support of IT trainers. It was hosted on Google Forms, and it is divided into three parts: digital awareness, linguistic awareness, and teamwork. This will help explain in detail their experiences and the needs of participants. The digital awareness section assessed familiarity with and usage of digital devices, internet services, and social media through multiple-choice questions and 5-point Likert scales. The linguistic awareness section evaluated English proficiency, learning preferences, and challenges encountered when using digital tools in English, employing Likert scales to gauge difficulty levels [20], [21]. The teamwork section explored collaborative learning experiences, including preferences for group size and activities and the perceived value of peer support.

Semi-structured interviews with 45 participants provided profound insights into their motivations, perceived benefits, challenges, strategies, and recommendations for integrating English language learning with digital literacy. The interviews maintained a thematic structure, which allowed for the exploration of key topics in a manner consistent across participants but still allowed personal experiences to unfold. Transcripts were thematically analyzed after an inductive coding process,

where codes were iteratively reviewed, generated, and refined to identify patterns and overarching themes [20], [21].

Statistical analyses were performed in two stages using descriptive and inferential methods. Descriptive statistics summarized findings related to digital awareness, linguistic proficiency, learning preferences, and barriers encountered in technology use. Inferential analyses, including t-tests and ANOVA, facilitated comparisons across countries and generalized results to broader populations [22], [23].

Ethical issues were not only considered a formality but taken seriously throughout the research. The study was approved by institutional review boards in each country participating in the study [24] to ensure that the study was conducted in conformity with the highest ethical standards. Consent was obtained from all participants, and the researchers undertook stringent measures to ensure the confidentiality and anonymity of the information [25].

4 RESULTS

These are the results of the COLL-OYA project, shedding light on the relationship between the English language and digital literacy among older adults. Analysis of the survey data and interviews gave us a great deal of insight into the digital skills, language proficiency, learning preferences, and intergenerational collaboration of the participants [21].

4.1 Digital awareness

The survey revealed varying levels of awareness and confidence in using digital technologies across the three participating countries. Areas of high relevance within the scope of digital literacy included social media usage, online shopping, and accessing health-related information. Participants were very much interested in wanting to learn more about cybersecurity and online privacy. Interestingly, a larger portion of the participants reported seeking help from family members or friends when they faced difficulties in using digital tools; hence, social support seemed an important aspect of their digital literacy journey. Online tutorials and community workshops were also found to be good resources.

While around 60% of respondents reported being “somewhat confident” in using digital tools, only 25% considered themselves “very confident.” As anticipated, prior experience with technology was positively correlated with higher confidence levels.

Table 1. Digital awareness by country

Country/Region	Digital Awareness Score (Out of 10)	Usage of Digital Tools (%)	Confidence in Technology (%)
Spain/Tarragona	7.5	85	80
Poland/Silesia	6.8	78	70
Türkiye/Adana	8.2	90	85

Table 1 demonstrates the digital awareness scores, usage of digital tools, and confidence in technology among participants from Spain, Poland, and Türkiye.

4.2 Language awareness

The data gathered in relation to language awareness provided very crucial information on older adults' proficiency in and learning preferences of the English language. About 70% of respondents rated their English ability as basic; another 20% rated themselves as intermediate and just 10% considered themselves to be advanced.

Table 2. English language proficiency

Country/Region	Basic Proficiency (%)	Intermediate Proficiency (%)	Advanced Proficiency (%)
Spain/Tarragona	65	25	10
Poland/Silesia	70	20	10
Türkiye/Adana	60	30	10

Table 2 shows the distribution of the level of English language proficiency among the subjects from the three countries, showing percentages of persons with basic, intermediate, and advanced proficiency levels.

The study showed a big preference for interactive learning methods, such as group discussions and practical exercises, over the more traditional lecture method. This mirrors the adult learning literature that suggests active and engaging learning strategies are the most effective. There was also a strong interest in context-based learning using real-life scenarios. It also showed that some 65% of respondents believed the primary inhibitions in using the platforms are related to their inability to cope with unknown vocabulary and idiomatic expressions, the more so with compelling reasons for learning in practical use or business in international online discourses.

4.3 Collaborative learning

Analyses of the teamwork section of the survey and the interview data provided much insight into the experiences and preferences of older adults in collaborative learning environments. An overwhelming 75% of respondents enjoyed working collaboratively with peers to increase their digital competencies and appreciated the chance to share and learn with younger peers. Mostly, participants preferred working in small groups ranging from 3 to 5 members since they felt that this setup would improve their communication and interaction. This was further confirmed through interviews where participants described the benefits that come with peer support and camaraderie they find in those collaborative environments.

Table 3. Preferences for learning methods

Country/Region	Group Discussions (%)	Practical Exercises (%)	Traditional Lectures (%)
Spain/Tarragona	80	15	5
Poland/Silesia	75	20	5
Türkiye/Adana	85	10	5

Table 3 shows the preferred learning methods among participants from Spain, Poland, and Türkiye. It shows the percentage of those who prefer group discussions, practical exercises, and traditional lectures.

The survey showed that the younger ones had to help the older ones in about 50% of the cases while using a digital device. Teamwork is, therefore, one important aspect in overcoming other challenges that technology poses. Indeed, this comes out richer from the qualitative data in the interviews: examples of intergenerational collaboration in creating a supportive learning environment where young participants often took a mentor role to guide their older colleagues through tasks with patience. This provides strong support for incorporating intergenerational learning in programs for older adults.

4.4 Cross-cultural comparison

A cross-country comparison of the results revealed some interesting patterns of digital and linguistic awareness. For example, Spanish participants expressed more confidence in using social media platforms, while Polish and Turkish respondents showed a higher interest in learning about security measures online. In terms of language learning needs, Polish participants reported much stronger pronunciation and listening comprehension challenges than their peers in Spain and Türkiye, which are the areas that require special support.

4.5 Key findings

The outcome emphasizes the individualized educational programs, which are directed at the special needs and preferences of older adults in the development of digital skills and English language proficiency. The positive effect of intergenerational cooperation shows that involving younger generations as instructors could bring an overall benefit to all parties in the learning environment. Such an approach affords older learners much of the needed technical support and companionship, and offers younger participants the means to develop valuable teaching and mentoring skills and even greater appreciation of the experience and wisdom of adults.

These findings strongly support the conclusion that only when integrated with digital literacy training can English language learning truly empower older adults to take part more fully in today's increasingly digital world. In so doing, such programs make a strong impact on social inclusion, access to information, and the general quality of life among participants by granting them skills and confidence when using online platforms for communication in English.

5 DISCUSSION

The results from COLL-OYA are insightful regarding the interlinkage between English language learning and digital literacy among older adults. This underlines the stipulated concerns in the Introduction on the need to tailor interventions so as to close the gap in digital inclusion. These findings provide insight into the special learning needs of people aged 55+ in Tarragona-Spain, Silesia-Poland, and Adana-Türkiye, supporting the arguments put forward in the Literature Review. Consistent with prior research, it was found from the survey that there was a great difference

between the awareness of digital tools among older adults and their confidence in using these tools.

While many respondents reported using computers and the Internet, their confidence remained low, particularly in digital communication in English. As noted by the Literature Review, such trepidation may be traced back to differences across generations in the use of and exposure to technology. From the findings presented, dependence on family and friends for technical support suggests that social support networks play a critical role in promoting digital literacy among older adults. This clearly calls for education programs that enable intergenerational knowledge sharing. The data on language awareness showed that unknown vocabulary and idiomatic phrases are big obstacles for older adults when surfing through an English online platform.

This finding highlights the important feature of learning in context, that is, relating the learning to real-life scenarios. A major influence in better engagement and retention of knowledge for older learners can be achieved by combining practical digital skills with the learning of the English language. The results strongly show the need for special curricula to be designed incorporating interactive learning methods: group discussions, practical exercises, and project work. The Literature Review notes that personalized learning experiences are very important in facilitating effective learning among the older population.

Moreover, this finding of positive intergenerational collaboration is aligned with previous research regarding the role of peer support in reducing feelings of loneliness among elderly learners. Active participation by the younger generation, taking on the role of instructors and mentors, creates greater engagement and a more supportive learning environment for both generations. The mutual learning that takes place helps the older learner increase their social interaction. That allows the younger participants to develop some valuable teaching/mentoring skills while gaining a great deal more insight into what the older adult life perspective can bring.

The findings also provide the basis for a call to educational institutions and community organizations to consider implementing collaborative teaching programs that could facilitate knowledge transfer between generations. The program may give the elderly the competencies to use digital media and the English language to access information, communicate with their communities, and be independent in an increasingly digital world. While this study informs us on some very important points, further research is needed to determine the longer-term effects of integrated English and digital literacy programs on older adults' quality of life, social connectedness, and cognitive functioning.

More research in diversified cultural contexts will provide a better understanding of the best practices in teaching older learners around the world. The COLL-OYA project showed how important the integration of English language learning with digital literacy training was for older adults, pointing out that specially tailored educational programs—aimed at meeting the specific needs and preferences of the target group—will empower older adults to take an active part in the digital era.

6 CONCLUSION

The COLL-OYA project has provided fundamental insights into what older adults want and need to learn about English language acquisition and digital literacy. The findings underpin arguments that these skill sets are interrelated and imperatives in empowering people in their older age to take part in today's increasing digital society [3], [5], [20].

Based on the data presented in the Results section, the major findings of this project would be that many people over age 55 have basic computer and internet skills but lack the confidence to put these into practice, especially in situations requiring digital communication in English. It would, therefore, mean that there is a need for focused educational programs that go beyond just imparting basic technical skills and building confidence and fluency in using digital tools for practical purposes. The focus of the study on intergenerational collaboration—a concept well-supported in the Literature Review—has been successful. Respondents noted increased motivation and better learning outcomes when the learning process was supported by younger adults, which again supported the idea that a supportive, interactive, and peer-driven learning environment is crucial for effective learning among older adults.

These findings are of importance beyond the level of individual competency in skill building. As noted below, they have critical implications for broader social policies related to digital inclusion and active engagement in society for older adults. Older adults, once properly digitally competent and English language-proficient, will be empowered to:

- Access information and resources more easily
- Engage with their communities more effectively
- Maintain their independence and quality of life

COLL-OYA stands out as a project, convincingly showing that a combination of English and digital literacy training is not theoretical but very pragmatic in nature for the empowerment of older adults in this fast-changing world. It is through the foregrounding of such educational programs in creating intergenerational learning environments that it becomes possible to close the digital divide and ensure senior generations are also active and engaging participants in this age, fully in line with the general aims of promoting social inclusion and lifelong learning highlighted throughout the research.

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9 DISCLOSURE

This paper presents some of the outcomes of the Erasmus+ project "Older Adults Learning English and Digital Literacy in Collaboration with Young Adults", 2022-1-TR01-KA220-ADU-000088953, which is being conducted by INBIE between 2022–2024. The European Commission's contribution to the production of this publication does not constitute an endorsement of its contents, which reflect the views only of the authors, and the Commission cannot be held responsible for any use which may be made of the information contained therein. The Commission cannot be held accountable for any use that may be made of the information contained herein.