



KAPITEL 11 / CHAPTER 11 ¹¹

ELDERLY UKRAINIAN REFUGEES IN THE UK AND THEIR COMMUNICATION ADAPTATION

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Introduction

The forced displacement of millions of Ukrainians following the full-scale invasion in 2022 has created unprecedented challenges, particularly for vulnerable categories of populations such as the elderly. While much attention has rightly focused on immediate humanitarian aid, the long-term process of adaptation, especially in communication, remains a critical area for study and support.

Communication plays a significant role in the immigrants' adaptation and their further integration in the host community (Sarsour, 2022: 97). It is essential for refugees who have to leave their homelands in search of a safety shelter.

For older adult refugees, the exchange of information and experience based on communication is a powerful tool of their socialization as it brings them closer to the environment (Cereci, 2023: 99). It is communication that helps them navigate in a new society as they often face unique linguistic, cultural, and technological barriers.

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These barriers are multifaceted and particularly acute for the elderly, who may already be grappling with age-related cognitive changes, less prior exposure to technology, and established linguistic habits from their homeland. Unlike younger refugees who might adapt more quickly in educational or professional settings, older adults often rely heavily on informal communication for daily living, social connection, and accessing essential services. Without effective communication skills, elderly refugees' risk social isolation, limited access to healthcare and legal aid, and an inability to fully participate in their new communities. This not only impacts their individual well-being but also presents a significant challenge for host countries aiming

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for successful integration.

Therefore, researching this field within adult education is paramount. Adult education provides the structured yet flexible frameworks necessary to address the specific language and cultural adaptation needs of this demographic category. Traditional language learning methodologies may not be sufficient or appropriate for older learners, necessitating innovative pedagogical approaches that consider their life experiences, learning styles, and motivation. Investigating the efficacy of community-based language programs, intergenerational learning initiatives, and culturally sensitive communicative strategies becomes vital. This research can inform the development of targeted educational interventions, optimize resource allocation, and enhance the training of adult educators. Ultimately, understanding and supporting the communicative adaptation of elderly Ukrainian refugees can foster their independence, improve their quality of life, and ensure more inclusive and effective integration policies in the UK and beyond.

This article explores the various aspects of communication adaptation among elderly Ukrainian refugees in the UK, aiming to shed light on their experiences, the strategies they employ, and the vital role that targeted educational interventions can play in fostering integration and well-being. Communicative adaptation refers to the process by which individuals modify their communication behaviors to align with new social norms and expectations within an unfamiliar cultural context (Cereci, 2023). Understanding these dynamics is crucial for developing effective programmes that not only provide linguistic proficiency but also empower older refugees to rebuild social connections and maintain their dignity in a foreign land.

11.1. Literature Review

The issue of communicative adaptation of refugees, including elderly ones, has always been of interest to researchers. It has been investigated either within a broader field of integration of migrants into a host society and labour market, or as a separate research domain. Recent publications devoted to the problem of communicative



adaptation of elderly refugees who had to flee the war include Hauber-Özer & Decker (2025), Janzen & Ochocka (2020), Asfar & Oostrom (2020), Liu (2025) and Xie (2024).

The majority of these publications focus on the challenges and processes of communicative adaptation through English as a Second Language (ESL) learning for refugee integration. A central problem highlighted across these works is the multifaceted nature of language acquisition for refugees, extending beyond linguistic proficiency to encompass social integration and psychological well-being.

For instance, Hauber-Özer & Decker (2025) advocate for participatory ESOL approaches, emphasizing community-based participatory research to empower refugee English learners, addressing the problem of traditional top-down language education models that may fail to meet their specific needs. Similarly, Janzen & Ochocka (2020) explore “excellence in community-based research” with Syrian refugees, implicitly pointing to the challenge of effectively assessing the impact of language learning initiatives on broader integration outcomes. Their work suggests a need for evaluation beyond simply language proficiency scores.

Research also suggests that the psychological toll of language learning is a significant problem. Thus, Asfar & Oostrom (2020) frame language acquisition as a “bitter pill or easy pie”, illustrating the emotional and cognitive burden that refugees face, which is influenced by factors like prior educational experiences and trauma. This thesis is echoed by Liu (2025) who specifically investigates language anxiety among elderly migrants in China, demonstrating how this anxiety can severely impede social integration. While focusing on Chinese migrants, the parallels to refugee populations are clear, highlighting the vulnerability of this demographic group.

Finally, Xie (2024) provides a detailed examination of English learning among late-life Chinese immigrants to the U.S., further underscoring the unique challenges faced by older adults, including potential cognitive decline and limited exposure opportunities. This research implicitly raises the problem of age-specific pedagogical, better to say andragogical, approaches and support systems that are often overlooked in general ESL programs for refugees.



For elderly refugees, however, this process of communicative adaptation can be significantly more arduous due to a confluence of factors regarding language acquisition in older adults. These often include diminished cognitive flexibility associated with age, which can impede the second language acquisition (Caldwell-Harris, & MacWhinney, 2023); a deeper entrenchment in prior cultural communication patterns that makes adjustment to different social cues challenging (Hall, 2006); reduced technological literacy, limiting access to digital communication platforms prevalent in the host society (Fraillon, 2024); and an increased propensity for social isolation, exacerbated by health issues (Rokach, & Patel, 2024) or the absence of established local support networks.

In summary, the major problems raised in the scientific literature include the need for more participatory and community-driven ESOL models, the difficulty in assessing holistically the integration through language, the significant psychological burden of language anxiety and trauma, and the often-neglected specific needs of elderly refugees in their language learning process.

11.2. Research Methods and Methodology

11.2.1. The purpose and the tasks

The purpose of this study is to trace how learning English and communication in English help the elderly Ukrainian refugees adapt in the UK.

To achieve the established purpose the following tasks were performed as part of a major investigation (Babushko & Halytska, 2025) devoted to the communicative adaptation of the Ukrainians who fled the war to the UK:

- questionnaire data concerning the elderly Ukrainians was gathered;
- two questions from the questionnaire were selected;
- the selected information was analyzed and the correlations between the age of the respondents, their degree level of education and questions from the questionnaire were defined;
- a set of constructive recommendations for the elderly Ukrainian refugees was



developed to enhance their level of English and communication.

11.2.2. Participants

72 people, aged 16 to 75 years old, participated in the questionnaire. 66% of the sample fell within the age range of 33 to 60. 34% of respondents (24 people) were aged from 60 to 75. The majority of them came to the UK to escape the war in Ukraine using the “Ukraine Family Scheme” visa route. This allowed Ukrainians to come to the UK to their family members already living in the UK. This also included non-Ukrainians who were part of such a family group (Ukraine Family Scheme, 2024).

11.2.3. Methods

The authors created a questionnaire, the questions of which were first tested, and any unclear or problematic ones were removed. The study was approved by the ethics committee at Canterbury Christ Church University in the UK. The data were collected from students at the same university who were taking English language courses, between March 1 and April 28, 2023. Before taking part, all students received full instructions and were told that their answers should be independent and anonymous, and that participating carried no risks.

The questionnaire had two main parts: one for personal details and another for research-specific information. The personal details section asked about age, education level, job status, how they came to the UK, their arrival date, and how long they stayed with their sponsors. The research section covered diverse topics which were fully described in (Babushko & Halytska, 2025). For this research, the following questions have been selected: importance of learning English; difficulties in communication and their importance; difficulty of the material in learning English; additional ways of improving English.

11.2.4. Data analysis

The quantitative results were analyzed using Spearman’s rank correlation method to ascertain the degree of covariation between two variables. Specifically, the objective



was to determine the presence and direction (positive or negative) of a correlation between distinct data scales, such as a respondent's self-perception of language improvement and their duration of stay in the United Kingdom. It is a standard practice to interpret the Spearman's coefficient in conjunction with its associated p-level, which serves to evaluate the statistical significance of the observed correlation, thereby confirming its substantive validity (DataTab, 2025).

11.3. Results

11.3.1. Importance of reasons for learning English for the elderly refugees

In order to meet the needs of elderly Ukrainian refugees, one University in the UK organized language courses for Ukrainian refugees according to their level of English. Of the elderly refugees, 6 (25%) could not speak English at all, 8 (33.3%) had the false beginner's level and 10 (41.7%) had the elementary level.

As for the degree of education, all of the elderly respondents had higher education. They were Specialist's degree holders as, in their youth, Ukraine as one of the Soviet Republics awarded these degrees to those who had acquired higher education and graduated from universities and institutes.

Here we present the results of the importance of reasons for learning English defined by the respondents (Fig.1).

On receiving these data, we measured different scales: age – degree level of education – the importance of reasons of learning English (Table 1).

The table displays the Spearman's rank correlation coefficients and corresponding p-values to assess the relationship between respondents' age, their degree level of education, and the perceived importance of different reasons for learning English, as well as the overall importance of these motives.

The key findings show that:

- *for business and career reasons* a statistically significant, moderate negative correlation exists between “age” and the importance of “business and career” reasons for learning English ($r = -0.511$, $p < .001$). This suggests that as age increases, the

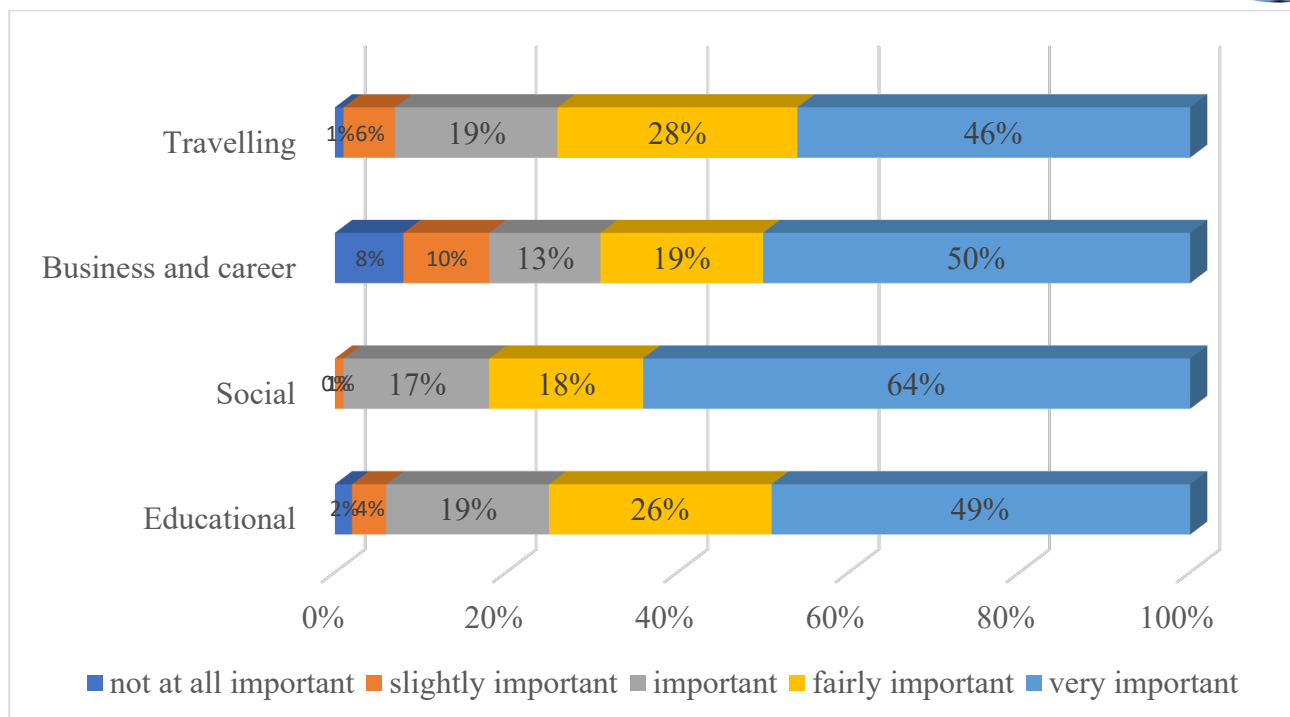


Fig.1 - The answers on the importance of reasons for learning English.

Source: created by authors.

Table 1 - Correlation between scales 'Age' – 'Degree level of Education' – 'The importance of reasons of learning English'

Reasons of learning English	Correlation coefficient	Age	Degree level of education
educational	Spearman coefficient	-0.059	0.132
	p	0.624	0.279
social	Spearman coefficient	0.026	-0.054
	p	0.827	0.661
business and career	Spearman coefficient	-0.511 *** ¹²	0.213
	p	< .001	0.079
travelling	Spearman coefficient	0.112	0.055
	p	0.351	0.654
importance of the motives	Spearman coefficient	-0.299 *	0.155
	p	0.011	0.205

Source: created by authors.

¹² * The stars flag levels of significance. If a p-value is less than 0.05, it is flagged with one star (*). If a p-value is less than 0.01, it is flagged with 2 stars (**). If a p-value is less than 0.001, it is flagged with three stars (***).



perceived importance of learning English for business and career purposes tends to decrease significantly. At the same time there is a weak, non-significant positive correlation between “degree level of education” and the importance of “business and career” reasons ($r = 0.213$, $p = 0.079$).

-for overall importance of motives there is a statistically significant, weak to moderate negative correlation between “age” and the “overall importance of the motives” for learning English ($r = -0.299$, $p = 0.011$). This indicates that older individuals tend to place less overall importance on the given reasons for learning English.

The correlation between “degree level of education” and the “overall importance of the motives” ($r = 0.155$) is not accompanied by a p-value in the table, preventing an assessment of its statistical significance.

In summary, the most notable findings are the statistically significant negative correlations between age and the importance of learning English for business/career, as well as the overall importance of learning motives. Other correlations are either very weak or not statistically significant.

11.3.2. Difficulties for the elderly refugees in communication

The next step was to define the correlation between such scales as “age”, “degree level of education” and “how important are the difficulties for the elderly in communication”. Firstly, there are the results on how important for the respondents are the difficulties in communication (Fig.2).

Based on the Fig. 2, illustrating difficulties in communication for Ukrainian refugees, the most significant results indicate that “insufficient vocabulary” and “difficulties in constructing grammatically correct sentences” are perceived as the most considerable challenges. A large majority of respondents identified “insufficient vocabulary” as a significant issue, 72% rating it as “very important” (40%) and “fairly important” (32%). The criterion “difficulties in constructing grammatically correct sentences” also stands out. While 26% found it “important”, a substantial percentage of the respondents found it “fairly important” (28%) and “very important” (43%). This suggests that forming grammatically correct sentences is a widespread and significant

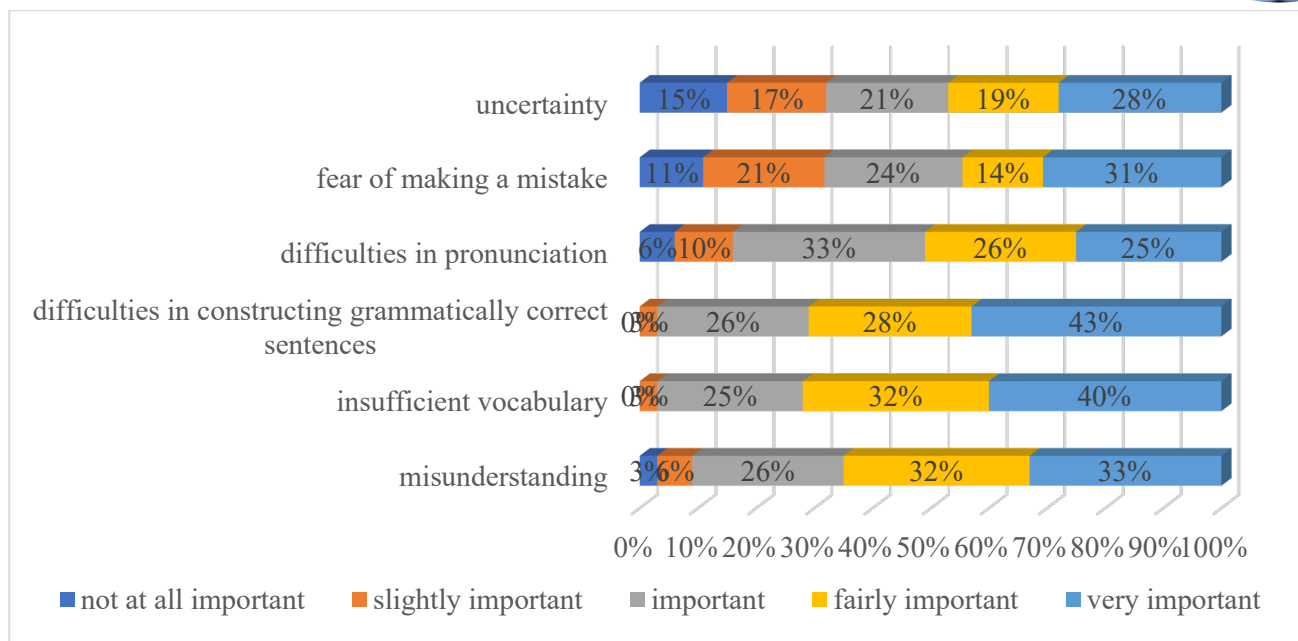


Fig. 2 - The answers on the importance of difficulties in communication.

Source: created by authors.

challenge for these individuals.

However, although “fear of making a mistake” (31% “very important”) and “uncertainty” (28% “very important”) also represent significant challenges, the data suggests that the first mentioned difficulties are quantitatively perceived as greater barriers in the communication adaptation for the Ukrainian refugees. Interestingly, “difficulties with pronunciation” appears to be less of a major concern compared to the other aspects, with only 25% rating it as “very important”.

The results of correlating the above-mentioned scale with “age” and “degree level of education” are presented in Table 2.

The following statistically significant correlations can be seen from Table 2.

Age and Misunderstanding: There is a statistically significant positive correlation between “age” and the perceived importance of “misunderstanding” as a communication difficulty (Spearman coefficient = 0.394, $p < .001$). This suggests that older respondents tend to rate misunderstanding as a more important difficulty.

Degree Level of Education and Difficulties in Constructing Grammatically Correct Sentences: A statistically significant negative correlation exists between “degree level of education” and the perceived importance of difficulties in



Table 2 - Correlation between scales ‘Age’ – ‘Degree level of Education’ – ‘How important are the difficulties in communication?’

Difficulties	Correlation coefficient	Age	Degree level of education
misunderstanding	Spearman coefficient	0.394 ***	-0.142
	p	< .001	0.246
insufficient vocabulary	Spearman coefficient	0.21	-0.201
	p	0.077	0.098
difficulties in constructing grammatically correct sentences	Spearman coefficient	0.058	-0.27 *
	p	0.626	0.025
difficulties with pronunciation	Spearman coefficient	0.282 *	-0.24 *
	p	0.017	0.047
fear of making a mistake	Spearman coefficient	0.297 *	-0.033
	p	0.011	0.786
uncertainty	Spearman coefficient	0.285 *	0.071
	p	0.015	0.56
the importance of the difficulties	Spearman coefficient	0.329 **	-0.114
	p	0.005	0.352

Source: created by authors.

“constructing grammatically correct sentences” (Spearman coefficient = -0.27, $p = 0.025$). This implies that individuals with higher levels of education tend to consider this a less important difficulty.

Age and Difficulties with Pronunciation: There is a statistically significant positive correlation between “age” and the perceived importance of “difficulties with pronunciation” (Spearman coefficient = 0.282, $p = 0.017$). This indicates that older respondents tend to rate pronunciation difficulties as more important.

Degree Level of Education and Difficulties with Pronunciation: A statistically significant negative correlation is observed between “degree level of education” and the perceived importance of “difficulties with pronunciation” (Spearman coefficient = -0.24, $p = 0.047$). This suggests that individuals with higher levels of education tend to view pronunciation as a less important difficulty.

Age and Fear of Making a Mistake: A statistically significant positive correlation



exists between “age” and the perceived importance of “fear of making a mistake” (Spearman coefficient = 0.297, $p = 0.011$). This indicates that older respondents tend to consider the fear of making a mistake as a more important difficulty.

Age and Uncertainty: There is a statistically significant positive correlation between “age” and the perceived importance of “uncertainty as a communication difficulty” (Spearman coefficient = 0.285, $p = 0.015$). This suggests that older respondents tend to rate uncertainty as a more important difficulty.

Age and The Importance of the Difficulties (overall): A statistically significant positive correlation is found between “age” and the “overall importance of the difficulties in communication” (Spearman coefficient = 0.329, $p = 0.005$). This suggests that older individuals perceive communication difficulties as more important overall.

11.3.3. What material is difficult for the elderly refugees during learning English

The following picture was received (Fig. 3).

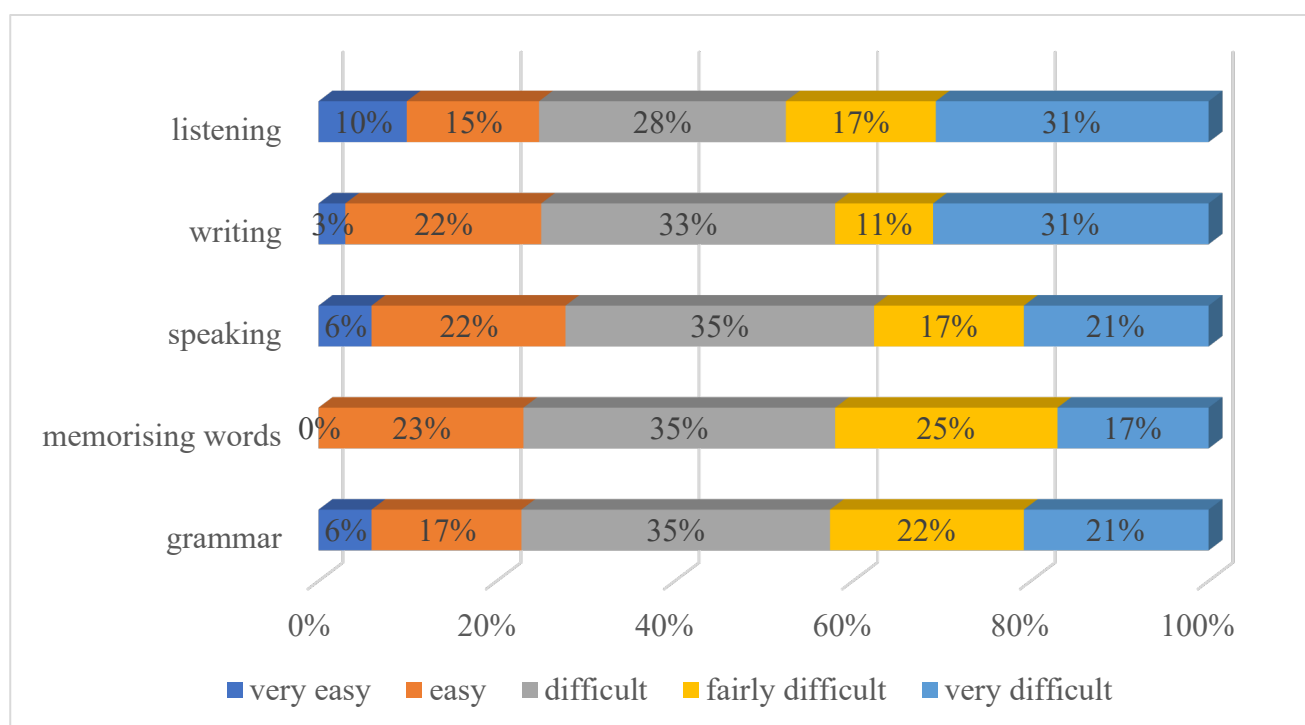


Fig. 3 - What material is considered difficult during learning English.

Source: created by authors.



Based on the Fig.3, illustrating perceived difficulties during English language learning, a significant portion of respondents found various aspects challenging.

The most prominent difficulties reported were:

Writing: 31% of respondents found writing “very difficult”.

Listening: 31% of respondents considered listening “very difficult”.

Grammar: 78% of respondents rated grammar as “difficult” (35%), “fairly difficult” (22%), or “very difficult” (21%), indicating that it presents a widespread challenge for the Ukrainian refugees.

Memorizing words: 77% of respondents rated this as “difficult” (35%), “fairly difficult” (25%), or “very difficult” (17%).

Speaking: 73% of respondents found this either “very difficult” (21%) “difficult” (35%) or “fairly difficult” (17%).

In summary, writing and listening were perceived as “very difficult” by the highest percentage of respondents, while grammar and memorizing words were broadly seen as difficult by the largest overall proportion of respondents.

On receiving these data, we measured different scales “age” – “degree level of education” – “how difficult is the material during learning English” (Table 3).

The analysis of the data from Table 3 allowed us to identify the following significant correlations.

Degree Level of Education and Grammar: There is a statistically significant negative correlation between “degree level of education” and the perceived difficulty of “grammar” (Spearman coefficient = -0.272, $p = 0.024$). This suggests that individuals with higher levels of education tend to perceive grammar as less difficult.

Age and Memorising Words: A statistically significant positive correlation exists between “age” and the perceived difficulty of “memorising words” (Spearman coefficient = 0.415, $p < .001$). This indicates that older respondents tend to find memorising words more difficult.

Age and Speaking: There is a statistically significant positive correlation between “age” and the perceived difficulty of “speaking” (Spearman coefficient = 0.391, $p < .001$). This suggests that older respondents tend to find speaking more difficult.



Table 3 - Correlation between scales ‘Age’ – ‘Degree level of Education’ – ‘How difficult is the following material during learning English?’

Aspects of learning English	Correlation coefficient	Age	Degree level of education
grammar	Spearman coefficient	0.123	-0.272 *
	p	0.303	0.024
memorising the words	Spearman coefficient	0.415 ***	-0.022
	p	< .001	0.857
speaking	Spearman coefficient	0.391 ***	-0.126
	p	< .001	0.304
writing	Spearman coefficient	0.219	-0.057
	p	0.065	0.642
listening	Spearman coefficient	0.519 ***	-0.025
	p	< .001	0.837
the difficulties in learning English	Spearman coefficient	0.478 ***	-0.157
	p	< .001	0.199

Source: created by authors.

Age and Listening: A statistically significant positive correlation can be observed between “age” and the perceived difficulty of “listening” (Spearman coefficient =0.519, $p<.001$). This indicates that older respondents tend to find listening more difficult, with the strongest positive correlation with age among the specific skills.

Age and Overall Difficulties in Learning English: A statistically significant positive correlation is found between “age” and the “overall difficulties in learning English” (Spearman coefficient =0.478, $p<.001$). This suggests that older individuals perceive the process of learning English as more difficult.

In summary, it should be noted that the older the participant, the greater the difficulty in speaking, listening and memorization. There was no correlation between age and grammar and writing. It should also be noted that the higher the level of



education, the less the problem is with grammar.

11.3.4. How do the respondents improve their English additionally

The answers to the question on how the respondents improve their English additionally showed the following ways: attending other language courses, attending language clubs, watching movies, listening to songs, reading books, articles, online applications, having private lessons, and communication with a sponsor (Fig.4).

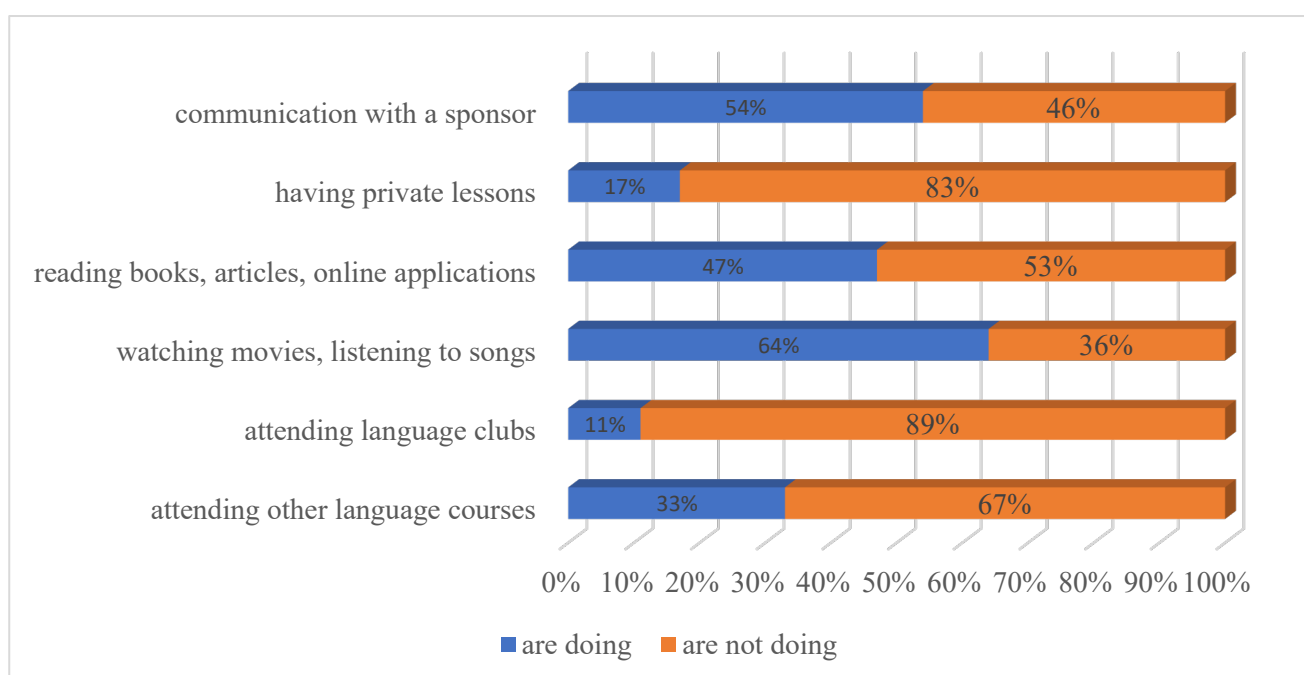


Fig. 4 - The answers on how to improve English additionally.

Source: created by authors.

Fig.4 illustrates that informal and practical approaches are the most widely adopted by respondents to improve their Level of English in additional ways

A significant majority (64%) improve their English by watching movies and listening to songs. Over half (54%) engage in communication with a sponsor as a means of improving their English. Nearly half (47%) utilize reading materials such as books, articles, and online applications for language improvement.

Conversely, more structured or formal supplementary activities are less commonly undertaken. Only one-third (33%) reported attending other language courses and a small proportion (17%) engage in private lessons. The least popular method for additional English improvement is attending language clubs, with only 11%



participation. In essence, respondents primarily rely on self-directed and social activities like media consumption and sponsor interaction for additional English improvement, rather than formal learning environments.

However, the correlation of the data with “age” and “degree level of education” show unexpected results (Table 4).

Table 4 - Correlation between scales ‘Age’ – ‘Degree level of Education’ vs ‘Factors that affect your progress in language learning mostly and How do you improve your English additionally?’

Questions	Correlation coefficient	Age	Degree level of education
how do you improve your English additionally	Spearman coefficient	-0.342 **	-0.034
	p	0.003	0.78
choose factors that affect your progress in language learning mostly	Spearman coefficient	-0.097	-0.026
	p	0.42	0.831

Source: created by authors.

The analysis of the data from Table 4 demonstrates the following most significant correlation:

Age and how you improve your English additionally: There is a statistically significant negative correlation between “age” and “how respondents reported improving their English additionally” (Spearman coefficient = -0.342, $p = 0.003$). This suggests that older respondents tend to engage less in the specified additional English improvement activities. This means that the older the participants are, the improvement of English via additional ways tends to decrease.

11.4. Recommendations for how to make the communicative adaptation of the Ukrainian elderly refugees more effective

The results encouraged the authors to give recommendations to the elderly



Ukrainian refugees in order to make their communicative adaptation more effective and their communication in English better.

- It has been shown that, the older people are, the greater the difficulty they have in learning English. Despite this, it has been demonstrated that small steps can lead to success. Age is not an obstacle to learning English. The students whose average age is 60-75 show persistence in learning English through their language courses, which results in success, no matter how limited, in learning English.

- Practicing the English language (using different resources of learning English) positively influences the ability of the elderly to speak English. Being based in the UK, the environment is ideal for language immersion, particularly when the respondents are unable to hear and speak their native language. Using a new language on a daily basis is a far more efficient way to become proficient than classroom learning. It is advised to take advantage of the opportunity to speak English with native or higher-level English speakers every day, even if your language skills are already good enough for understanding. Follow the 'Learn-Understand-Speak' rule because knowing "how this language works" is very important. It is worth starting with the basic structure of the language, e.g., how to construct sentences/questions, how to change the verb into present, past and future tenses.

- Follow the 'Do-Check-Memorize-Replace' rule. After doing grammar exercises, it is expedient to carefully say each sentence loudly several times to get used to using the grammatical structures and to formulating the sounds of the words. Then make each sentence more personalized: e.g., 'John goes to school' becomes 'My son, John, goes to school'.

- Language proficiency is not only knowledge; it is a skill. A skill, which when developed sufficiently becomes second nature. As with any skill, the more training exercises that are done in English, more proficient a student becomes.

- Mistakes are a normal part of learning a language. One of the biggest barriers to putting new sentence structures and vocabulary into action is the fear of making mistakes. Even though mistakes are a natural part of learning, it can be easy to feel embarrassed or uncomfortable when making one. Making mistakes is a step towards



achieving success and, when learning a language, this is not only necessary, but also a good sign. If a student is not making mistakes, he/she is not trying hard enough to use the language.

Conclusion

It should be noted that communicative adaptation for elderly Ukrainian refugees in the UK seems to be a multifaceted journey.

It is crucial for integration but presents unique and significant challenges for older individuals. These difficulties are often exacerbated by factors such as diminished cognitive flexibility, which can impede new language acquisition, as well as pre-existing linguistic, cultural, and technological barriers.

Furthermore, the data reveals significant correlations between age and various aspects of communication and learning. Older refugees tend to attach higher importance to difficulties like misunderstanding, fear of making mistakes, and overall communication challenges. Concurrently, their age is negatively correlated with the importance they place on learning English for business and career advancement, and on the overall motivation for language acquisition. Furthermore, the higher the education level is, the lower the difficulty in grammar and pronunciation. Age consistently showed a positive correlation with increased perceived difficulty across most aspects of language learning, including memorizing words, speaking, and listening.

Finally, while formal language learning avenues like courses, clubs or private lessons are less utilized, these refugees actively engage in informal methods for English improvement. However, older refugees tend not to use additional ways of learning English widely.

In conclusion, elderly Ukrainian refugees face substantial, age-related hurdles in communicative adaptation. Their learning preferences lean heavily towards informal and self-directed approaches. Recognizing these specific challenges and preferred learning methods is vital for developing targeted, effective support programmes that



facilitate their integration and enhance their quality of life in the UK.

Further research

Further research directions could include the investigation of psychological well-being and communicative adaptation levels of elderly refugees or the exploration of the dynamics and effectiveness of communication between elderly refugees and younger family members or community volunteers in facilitating language acquisition and social integration in the host country.

Acknowledgement

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