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EFL learning in adulthood and later life: experiences, beliefs, and context in Basque Official Language Schools

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This qualitative study explores the English as a Foreign Language (EFL) learning experiences of midlife and older adult learners enrolled in Basque Official Language Schools. It examines their motivations, learning objectives, perceived strengths and difficulties, age-related beliefs and affective experiences, together with the influence of the learning context, intergenerational classroom dynamics and educational background. The study followed a qualitative descriptive design. A total of 71 learners aged 35 to 69, enrolled in A2 and B2 (CEFR) courses, completed a questionnaire, and seven of them took part in semi-structured interviews. Questionnaire and interview responses were analysed through a two-stage thematic coding process organised around the three research questions of the study. Participants reported mainly intrinsic and practical motivations, such as cognitive stimulation, personal satisfaction, communication while travelling and access to information and entertainment, and their learning goals were generally realistic, centred on everyday communication and reading comprehension. Reading was perceived as the strongest skill, whereas listening and speaking were felt to be the most difficult. Age was viewed ambivalently, associated with memory and processing difficulties but also with maturity, experience, time and motivation. The learning context was valued as systematic and intellectually demanding, and intergenerational classrooms elicited mixed views depending on learners' preferences. The findings suggest that EFL learning in midlife and later adulthood appears to be shaped by a combination of motivational, cognitive, affective and contextual factors, as perceived by the learners, with implications for adult language pedagogy concerning oral practice, affective support and flexible classroom organisation adapted to learners' needs.

KEYWORDS
adult education, adult learners, Basque Country, EFL, language learning beliefs, motivation, qualitative study

1 Introduction

Learning foreign languages is widely recognised as a key competence of lifelong learning and is especially relevant in today's globalised and multilingual societies, with more adult learners engaging in this activity recently (Baschiera and Marcinkiewicz-Wilk, 2016; European Commission, 2019; Martínez, 2006; Pawlak, 2021).

In recent years, demographic ageing has increased the prominence of adult education in Western societies, and social and educational policies increasingly emphasise active participation and lifelong learning opportunities (Andrew, 2012; Findsen and Formosa, 2011). Authors such as Mühlig-Versen et al. (2012) explained that it is important to provide resources and opportunities to guarantee that adults can still participate actively in society, including educational resources. In fact, second language learning can help to improve cognitive, emotional, and social aspects in this group (Antoniou et al., 2013; Gómez, 2016). Addressing the issue of engagement, Parisi (2010) noted that learners who have a higher previous educational attainment level tend to be more eager to engage in new complex intellectual and educational activities.

Adults' motivations for learning a new language rarely include passing exams or obtaining official certificates of achievement; instead, they are more often related to communication, media comprehension, mental stimulation, personal satisfaction and participation in everyday life (Ennis et al., 2013; Pikhart et al. 2021; Słowik-Krogulec, 2019). The language learning classroom can also be a space for intergenerational learning. However, while some learners value the exchange of experiences across ages, others prefer to learn with peers of a similar age and background (Bryan, 1993; Gómez, 2016; Newman and Hatton-Yeo 2008).

From an andragogical perspective, adult learners tend to value autonomy, relevance, and practical application (Eguz, 2019; Ennis et al., 2013; Hess, 2014; Koutska, 2024; Mora and Abad, 2016). The picture is not uniform, however. Kormos and Csizér (2008), in one of the largest studies of age-related motivational differences to date, found that instrumental considerations, from better job prospects to access to public positions, remain central for many adult learners, a reminder that the balance between intrinsic and instrumental motives shifts with life stage and learning context. At the same time, Ruiz Calatrava (2009) and Shao et al. (2020) explained that emotional aspects are of importance in this age group, remarking the importance of fostering positive affectivity. For instance, fear of ridicule and frustration are important among this population, especially among those who have a lower educational level and are older. According to a study by Grasso (2017), listening and speaking skills tend to be particularly related to emotional and anxiety problems among adult language learners.

Some studies explain that adults tend to have working memory declines and usually have more difficulties with vocabulary memorisation, listening, speaking, pronunciation or processing speed (Koutska, 2024; Kurdziel et al., 2017; Osle, 2020). However, learners of this group may also show strengths in reading, writing, and grammar-related tasks (Kurdziel et al., 2017; Ruiz Calatrava, 2009). This suggests that age does not determine language learning success on its own. Finally, they usually prefer to learn in formal language learning classrooms in which they can share the learning experience with other learners and be guided by expert language teachers (Kuklewicz and King, 2018; Ruiz Calatrava, 2009).

Many learners still believe that there is an ideal age for learning a language, favouring younger people (Horwitz, 1999). A plausible reading of our participants' insistence on this point is that such beliefs owe less to their own learning history than to the popular currency of the critical period idea, which circulates well beyond academia and quietly shapes what adult learners expect of themselves (Abello-Contesse, 2009; Marinova-Todd et al., 2000). Current research, however, shows that motivation, positive affectivity, educational level, input exposure, intelligence, learning context, learning methods, and strategy use are also key factors (Abello-Contesse, 2009). More recently, Pfenninger et al. (2023) explained that, aside from educational context and social-psychological issues, age effects in learning a foreign language would also interact with variables such as gender, educational level, and socioeconomic status.

Despite recent contributions, research on English as a Foreign Language (EFL) learning in adults remains limited, particularly in formal educational settings such as Official Language Schools (Határ and Grofčíková, 2016; Kliesch et al., 2022; Kuklewicz and King, 2018). Official Language Schools (*Escuelas Oficiales de Idiomas,* in Spanish) are public and formal education centres within the category *Enseñanzas de Régimen Especia*l (Special Education Programmes) particularly oriented to and mainly frequented by adult learners who want to learn or improve their command of one/various modern languages (López Medina, 2010). Moreover, authors like Klimova and Pikhart (2020) have also stated that there is still a significant lack of studies addressing the motivations this group have in order to start learning a new language and the social and cognitive benefits this activity may bring to them.

This study aims to address this gap by providing insights into the language learning circumstances of adult learners of EFL in the context of the Basque Official Language Schools. This article reports on a qualitative strand of a broader research project by the first author (Arenas, 2026) and offers empirical insights into adult learners' experiences in formal EFL learning settings. At the same time, certain parts of the theoretical framework of this article were previously published by Arenas (2024) in a literature review article.

Against this background, the contribution of the study is twofold. It examines adult EFL learning in a public, low-cost institutional setting, the Spanish Official Language School, which has attracted far less research attention than private academies or university programmes, and it does so in the Basque Country, a bilingual minority-language community where a foreign language is learned alongside two official ones. Adult language learning has, moreover, a long research tradition in this community, although largely centred on the acquisition of Basque by adults in specialised centres, where factors such as motivation, anxiety and learning strategies have been examined (Alkalde and Uría, 2010; Perales, 2002; Perales and Cenoz,

2002); the parallel experience of adults learning English in the same institutional landscape has received far less attention. The main objective of this study has been to analyse the language learning experiences of adult learners of EFL at Basque Official Language Schools.

In alignment with the general objective, three specific objectives were formulated:

1. To explore adult learning motivations, objectives, learners' experiences, and strengths/difficulties in EFL learning.
2. To analyse the difficulties, affective issues, perceived benefits and beliefs related to age and language learning.
3. To describe how learners perceive the role of the learning context, intergenerational classroom dynamics, and their educational background in their learning experiences.

2 Research questions

These objectives are addressed through three research questions. RQ1: What motivations, learning objectives, experiences, and perceived strengths and difficulties do midlife and older adult EFL learners report? RQ2: What perceived difficulties, affective issues, benefits, and beliefs do they associate with age and language learning? RQ3: How do learners describe the role of the learning context, intergenerational classroom dynamics, and their educational background in their learning experiences?

3 Methodology

3.1 Research design and theoretical paradigm

This study adopted a qualitative descriptive design (Doyle et al., 2020; Sandelowski, 2000) to explore adult learners' experiences, beliefs, and perceptions of EFL learning. Qualitative description was considered to be the most convenient approach as the objective was to offer a rich and close narration coming from the perspective of each of the participants. The objective was not to confirm a previous theory or to develop a new theory, as in the case of Grounded Theory or Phenomenology. This study was placed within the interactionist theoretical paradigm in Second Language Acquisition (SLA). This paradigm is focused on the relationship between the language learner, cognitive abilities, and the surrounding social and educational context (Norris and Ortega, 2003).

Within this qualitative framework, the study combined two complementary data sources, a language learning context questionnaire consisting of both closed and open-ended questions as well as a series of semi-structured interviews. The closed items of the questionnaire are presented as descriptive frequencies and their aim is to contextualise the qualitative data, without making statistical inferences. The interpretation of the data is based on the answers to the open-ended questions and the interview answers given by the participants.

3.2 Participants and sampling

A non-probabilistic convenience sampling strategy with inclusion criteria was used. 71 participants completed the questionnaire and seven of them took part in the semi-structured interviews afterwards. Participants were aged 35 to 69 and were enrolled in EFL courses at levels A2 and B2 of the Common European Framework of Reference for Languages (CEFR) in the Basque Official Language Schools in Donostia-San Sebastián, Vitoria-Gasteiz, and Éibar. These participant groups were selected to include learners at different stages of adult age and English language development. The A2 and B2 levels were chosen because the contrast between a relatively initial level and an intermediate-to-advanced one is a productive one to compare different experiences of adult EFL learning (Council of Europe, 2020). Escuelas Oficiales de Idiomas (Official Language Schools, EOIs) are Spain's network of public language-teaching institutions for adults, offering CEFR-aligned courses and official certification at modest public fees, which makes them accessible across income levels; in the Basque Autonomous Community they operate in an officially bilingual society where Basque and Spanish coexist and English is the most widely studied foreign language. Learners with less than one year of enrolment were excluded from the study. Throughout the manuscript, the label "adult learners" covers the full 35–69 age range of the sample; adulthood formally begins much earlier, at 18 in the European legal context, but the study deliberately concentrates on established adulthood. Within it, we distinguish between midlife adults, aged 35 to 50, and older adults, beyond 50. This threshold is consistent with previous research on adult second language learning: Klimczak-Pawlak and Kossakowska-Pisarek (2019) note that learners beyond this age tend to show specific motivations, objectives and needs, and Pikhart et al. (2021) likewise treated second language learners over the age of 55 as older adult learners. We reserve the expression "later life" for this second subgroup. Setting the lower boundary at 35 responds to the fact that this age marks a stage of consolidated adulthood, well past initial education and the early working years, an approach consistent with research that treats age in adult foreign language learning as a socially constructed and heterogeneous category rather than a fixed chronological divide (Andrew, 2012; Findsen and Formosa, 2011). This boundary was applied as an *a priori* inclusion criterion during recruitment, so the absence of learners under 35 in the sample reflects the design of the study rather than the composition of the groups surveyed.

The interview sub-sample (4 women and 3 men) was selected using maximum variation purposive sampling to reflect a wide range of participant profiles regarding age, gender, educational level, and English language proficiency. In practice, variation was achieved mainly in gender, proficiency level and educational background, since the resulting age range of the sub-sample (48–66, with six of the seven interviewees over 50) limited the variation in age. Table 1 summarises the sociodemographic and educational characteristics of the participants for the complete sample. Table 2 details the individual profiles of the interview sub-sample.

3.3 Instruments and procedure

Two instruments were employed to gather information. On the one hand, a questionnaire regarding language learning context with the objective of obtaining a general idea about how learners experience their learning process. On the other hand, semi-structured interviews were employed to obtain more details about each individual case and help to interpret in better terms what the questionnaire data had shown in more general terms. While combining both, the first instrument contributes in terms of data scope and the second one in terms of data depth. Both instruments were adapted and translated into Spanish taking into account previous research regarding second language learning (Muñoz, 2010; Paredes, 2010; Yin, 2008). Certain questions were the author's own elaboration. All questions were revised by two experts in language learning and developmental psychology, respectively.

The questionnaire included both open-ended and closed questions regarding four topics, namely learning experiences, learning motivations, perceived learning strengths and difficulties, as well as beliefs about the issue of age and learning context. The questionnaire used for the present study comprised 30 items, 14 closed and 16 open-ended, arranged in an initial sociodemographic section followed by thematic blocks covering those topics, and it was administered through Google Forms (see Appendix B). The interview script included the same topics, drawing on the three thematic blocks of the guide that correspond to this article (learning context and motivation, age and language learning, and learning preferences), while its remaining blocks, devoted to learning strategies, fell outside the present focus, and the interviews were conducted through Google Meet, with an approximate length of 50 min each and being conducted by the first author (see Appendix A). Both instruments formed part of a broader data-collection design that also included the Strategy Inventory for Language Learning (SILL; Oxford, 1990) and additional interview blocks on language-learning strategies; those data address a different research focus and are analysed elsewhere, so only the items and questions bearing on the experiences, motivations, perceived strengths and difficulties, and age-related beliefs examined here were drawn on for this article. With the consent of the participants, the interviews were video-recorded and transcribed verbatim. Before gathering the data, all the participants were informed about the objectives of the study, the voluntary nature of their participation and about the confidentiality guarantees. Table 3 summarises the two data sources used in the study.

TABLE 1 Sociodemographic and educational profile of the participants.

Variable	Category	*n*	%
Phase/instrument	Questionnaire	71	100
	Semi-structured interviews	7	9.9
Gender	Women	47	66.2
	Men	24	33.8
Age	Older than 50	46	64.8
	35–50	25	35.2
Educational level	University	42	59.2
	Secondary or intermediate studies	27	38.0
	Basic education	2	2.8
English language level (CEFR)	A2	35	49.3
	B2	36	50.7

The percentages are rounded. The questionnaire ($N = 71$) offered the general descriptive idea; the semi-structured interview sub-sample ($n = 7$) was extracted from the same population for an in-depth exploration. Two participants reported a basic educational level; percentages are calculated over the total sample ($N = 71$).

TABLE 2 Individual profile of the semi-structured interview sub-sample.

Participant	Gender	Age	Level (CEFR)	School	Educational and professional background	Employment situation
P1	Male	62	B2	Donostia-San Sebastián	Former primary school teacher; prior experience learning other languages	Retired
P2	Female	60	B2	Donostia-San Sebastián	Lifelong learner of Basque and English	Retired
P3	Male	65	A2	Donostia-San Sebastián	High educational level	Retired
P4	Female	66	B2	Donostia-San Sebastián	Former secondary education teacher; learned French in childhood	Retired
P5	Female	52	A2	Vitoria-Gasteiz	High educational background	Administrative worker at a high school
P6	Male	63	A2	Donostia-San Sebastián	University studies in Geography and History of the Basque Country	Trainer of candidates for public employment examinations
P7	Female	48	B2	Donostia-San Sebastián	Intermediate educational level	Administrative worker at Osakidetza (Basque public health service); learned English for work-related reasons in the past

Profiles reconstructed from the information reported across the Results section and from the interview records. The sub-sample comprises 4 women and 3 men, consistent with the sampling description.

3.4 Analysis of the data

A thematic analysis of the obtained information was carried out (Braun and Clarke, 2006, 2021), following a two-step coding process (Dörnyei, 2007).

In the first, inductive phase, all the data were read and coded line by line, allowing the thematic categories to emerge from the data itself (from the bottom up, without imposing pre-existing categories) and, thus, being able to obtain broad categories.

The second phase, best described as one of refinement and organisation rather than deductive analysis in the strict sense, involved re-examining the coded material and mapping the resulting categories onto the three research questions of the study. The fact that two complementary instruments were used allowed for contrasting between different sources, something that reinforced the interpretation of the data. The coding of the data was carried out by the first author by using manual techniques. Being consistent with the constructionist logic of reflexive thematic analysis, this study did not rely on Braun and Clarke's (2021) classic criterion of information saturation, as it is not suited to this type of analysis. Instead, it was assessed whether the participants provided information that was sufficiently rich and relevant to answer the research questions. The specific nature of the research objective, the density and quality of the participants' accounts, and the analytical dialogue established between the questionnaire and semistructured interview data were deemed sufficient to construct meaningful, well-grounded themes that addressed the three specific objectives (Malterud et al., 2016). Figure 1 summarises the analytic process.

To ensure the transparency of the analytic procedures, Table 4 illustrates the evolution of the data from raw data to the creation of themes in selected samples.

The gathered information was first analysed in Spanish to ensure that the richness of the original data was preserved, and it was afterwards translated into English in order to present it to an international scientific community. The translation was carried out by the first author and was revised/corrected by the thesis supervisors.

TABLE 3 Summary of the data sources.

Instrument	*n*	Content and aims
Questionnaire (Google Forms)	71	Closed and open-ended items regarding motivations, objectives, perceived strengths and weaknesses, as well as beliefs about age and learning context. It offers the general descriptive idea.
Semi-structured interviews (Google Meet)	7	Transcribed verbatim and recorded with consent. The same thematic topics were explored in depth in order to contextualise and enrich the questionnaire data.

Both instruments were administered in Spanish; the relevant fragments were afterwards translated into English to make them available for an international readership.

3.5 Assessment of the methodological rigour and quality criteria

The study followed the quality criteria by Lincoln and Guba (1985) for thematic analysis in naturalistic research (Nowell et al., 2017). This study is based on the criteria of credibility, transferability, dependability (reliability), and confirmability, instead of using coding reliability coefficients as a quality measure. At the same time, the study was based on Braun and Clarke's (2021) reflexive conception of methodological rigour. Table 5 shows the relationship between the criteria and the strategies that were employed.

In accordance with the established standards for qualitative research reporting with interviews, the interview phase was documented following the Consolidated Criteria for Qualitative Research Reporting (COREQ) (Tong et al., 2007).

3.6 Researcher reflexivity and positioning

Within the framework of the reflexive thematic analysis conducted here, a single-coder design is not a source of bias

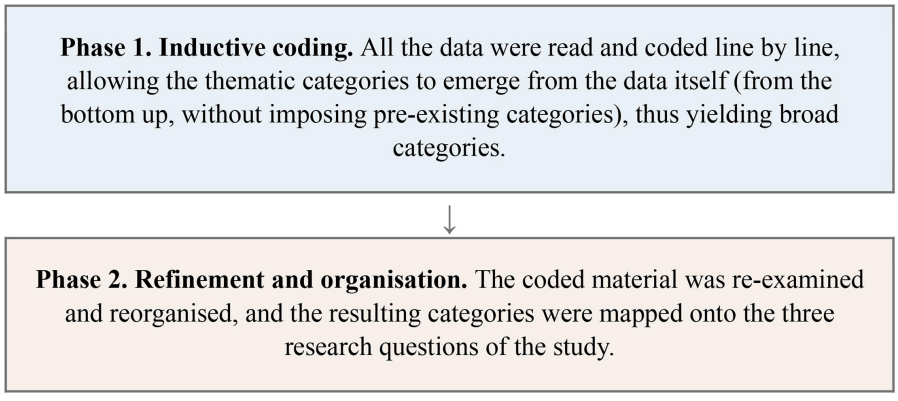


FIGURE 1
Data analysis process following two phases.

TABLE 4 Illustrative coding chain (from raw data to thematic categories).

Illustrative samples	Code	Subtheme	Theme
"…to hear a song and be able to understand it, to be able to respond to someone if they speak to me in English, and so on" (Participant 5, Age 52, Level A2)	Oral daily communication as an objective	Realistic and practical objectives	Motivations and objectives
(..) at a certain age, for example, memory is a handicap. You lose the ability to retain information (..) But, on the other hand, I think that being a certain age gives you a certain experience when it comes to expressing yourself, communicating…" (Participant 1, Age 62, Level B2)	Ambivalent perception of the age factor	Maturity vs. decline	Beliefs about age
"They're very tough at the official school. But, well, I've realised that it's normal. It's different from studying other subjects. Languages are something else entirely." (Participant 6, Age 63, Level A2)	Academic requirements at the EOI	Systematic and demanding learning context	Learning context

The samples are illustrative and were translated from Spanish.

TABLE 5 Strategies used to ensure the methodological quality.

Criteria	Strategy employed in the study
Credibility	Triangulation of data coming from different information sources/instruments (questionnaire and interviews). Using verbatim transcriptions and literal textual quotes to give consistency to the interpretations. The Google Meet video-recorded interviews were shared with the interviewed participants. Google Forms saves the questionnaire answers of each participant.
Transferability	Dense description of the research context (3 Official Language Schools of the Basque Country), sampling criteria and participant profiles (Table 1), that allows the reader to assess applicability to other contexts.
Dependability	Two-step coding process clearly specified (Figure 1) and consistently applied to all the data. Data manually coded by a sole researcher (Aitor Arenas Cendoya).
Confirmability	Explicit audit trail from raw data to themes (Table 4). The original researcher kept his analytic and reflexive notes.

This framework is based on Lincoln and Guba (1985) and on Nowell et al. (2017). The interview phase report follows the COREQ guide (Tong et al., 2007).

requiring neutralisation through inter-coder agreement; rather, it is an interpretive process in which subjectivity must be made explicit and auditable (Braun and Clarke, 2021). The first author designed and adapted the instruments, conducted the interviews, and generated the codes. The first author's background in Education inevitably coloured the research process, both in the rapport built with participants and in the analytical sensitivity brought to their accounts of learning English in adulthood and later life. Rather than treating this positioning as a bias to be eliminated, it was documented and interrogated through a reflective journal that accompanied the whole process of data generation and analysis, recording interpretive decisions and emerging concepts as they arose. Key assumptions were made explicit in the journal and deliberately tested against discrepant evidence in the data, and the fit between the data and the constructed themes was regularly discussed with the thesis supervisors, who acted as critical interlocutors in a peer-debriefing role.

3.7 Ethical considerations

The study complied with the ethical considerations of the Declaration of Helsinki and with the data protection requirements of the institutional framework of the doctoral research from which it derives (Arenas, 2026). The ethical criteria of the University of Deusto doctoral programme in Education were followed. All participants gave their informed consent before data were gathered; participation in the study was entirely voluntary and data were anonymised and treated with confidentiality. In this manuscript, participants are identified only by using neutral labels (for instance, Participant 1).

4 Results

4.1 Motivations and learning objectives

There were varied reasons or motivations to start learning English. Among others, participants mentioned gathering more information and access to sources of entertainment, using English as a space for new socialisation, helping while travelling to foreign countries, and meeting new and varied people. For some, English was also associated with intellectual curiosity and with knowing a foreign language that is considered relevant and useful. In this sense, Participant 2 considered English as a lingua franca of the present time, since it gave access to more information on personal interests and more sources of entertainment. In a similar way, Participant 6 understood the knowledge of English as a way of expanding relationships and thinking differently.

The value of learning this language regarding cognitive stimulation was remarked by Participant 4 (Age 66, Level B2), who stated: "(..) I was worried about having some intellectual activity that would challenge me a little and require a little work. This one was perfect: it interested me, I liked it, and I found it useful". Participant 7 (Age 48, Level B2) pointed out that various close family members of hers have a high level of English, which also served as motivation for her to learn. Finally, she remarked that English could be useful to understand certain texts at her job.

The learning objectives of the participants tended to remain realistic, as they preferred to take small steps in order to

advance in their English learning process. They were aware that a complete mastery of the English language demanded an important amount of both time and effort. Oral communication abilities and having knowledge that could be applied to their everyday circumstances were preferred. For example, Participant 2 (Age 60, Level B2) expressed less interest in writing skills than in the development of other language skills that were considered to be more relevant for her interests and everyday life. Participant 3 (Age 65, Level A2) preferred to focus on oral skills development. Participant 5 (Age 52, Level A2) insisted on the relevance of applying knowledge of English to daily life, as she pointed out: "What I want most is to hear a song and be able to understand it, to be able to respond to someone if they speak to me in English, and so on". Similarly, Participant 6 (Age 63, Level A2) wanted to communicate with others in a basic or average way.

The learning objectives were relatively similar across the different language levels. In order to fulfil these, Participant 1 remarked the importance of communicating and practising frequently in the target language as well as having one's own learning pace according to one's own objectives. Participant 2 pointed out the importance of sharing the learning process with others and asking experts questions. This participant also remarked the importance of being patient and setting realistic objectives. Participant 4 pointed out the idea of making more efforts in the skills or language aspects that may be more interesting or rewarding. Finally, Participant 3 emphasised the need to practise with native speakers or competent learners.

Most of the interviewed participants had a certain experience learning both English and other foreign languages. They considered that, at this stage of life, they now had enough time to devote to this activity. Participant 1 (Age 62, Level B2) felt an intellectual curiosity for learning English in the same way he had learned other languages during his lifetime. Participant 2 (Age 60, Level B2) had been learning languages like Basque and English throughout her life and valued deepening her knowledge of English after retirement. Similarly, Participant 4 (Age 66, Level B2) learned French while a child. For her, English was a pending subject that could be fulfilled after retirement without job-related pressure. Participant 7 (Age 48, Level B2) learned English in the past because of work-related reasons, but not in a stable manner. For her, the present time was the right time to continue learning with intrinsic motivation.

4.2 Learning strengths and difficulties

Regarding the four language skills, 51 of the 71 respondents (71.8%; $N = 71$ valid responses, with no missing data on this item) identified reading as the skill in which they felt most competent, followed by writing (9/71, 12.7%), speaking (7/71, 9.9%) and listening (4/71, 5.6%). They explained that they could return to the text each time they considered it as necessary to confirm comprehension and use support resources such as a dictionary for help. Some older adults also explained that writing is another skill that allowed more time to complete an activity, by allowing time to check for mistakes, self-correction, revision and improvement of the text. In contrast, speaking and listening were considered to be activities that required a rapid response to stimuli, something that did not seem to be easy in general. Moreover, some pointed out that they feel embarrassed or not confident enough while practising speaking, often because of phonetic or pronunciation problems. Among the interviewees, these difficulties were voiced at both proficiency levels, as the accounts below illustrate.

Regarding writing skills, various participants mentioned that they had vocabulary and grammar knowledge limitations that made it difficult to produce extended written texts. Similarly, the interviewed participants expressed strengths with reading and grammar-related skills, while having more difficulties with listening and speaking skills, particularly due to processing speed and phonetic problems as well as a general lack of opportunity for naturalistic practice. As Participant 4 explained (Age 66, Level B2): "Before the exams, I did some online speaking sessions with a teacher… But outside of the classroom, I don't speak at all these days, except when I'm travelling". The difficulties for vocabulary retention were also pointed out: "If there are 25 words, maybe I'll learn 5. Not all of them" (Participant 3, Age 65, Level A2). These testimonies reinforce the idea that oral production and vocabulary retention were two of the most salient challenges in this group.

The participants' perceptions regarding the four language skills further clarify this pattern. Reading was described as a skill that allows the learner to control the time and pace of understanding. It was also considered the easiest language skill while not in an immersion context. Some participants liked reading in their native language and noted that media, the internet and travelling had made many words familiar. One participant found it helpful to read and listen to a text at the same time. Participant 1 (Age 62, Level B2) explained that he makes more progress regarding reading and writing than with the oral aspects of the language because of a lack of an English-speaking environment.

Writing was seen as a skill that allows for time to express oneself as well as to revise and correct mistakes. However, participants also pointed out a lack of vocabulary and grammar knowledge to make extensive or complex written texts. Listening was considered a difficult skill that requires keeping attention levels high. It was also described as a language ability that goes fast and demands immediate translation into the native language, or as a skill that depends on each person's intonation and speed of talking. Speaking, finally, was associated with affective problems caused by difficulties with pronunciation, being a skill that often requires rapid responses to stimuli, creating difficulties to start an utterance or communication exchange, and learners often showing a lack of fluency.

4.3 Perceived benefits and challenges of age

There were very different points of view regarding the issue of age and the learning of a second language. 65.7% of the learners who answered the questionnaire (46 of 70 valid responses; one participant did not answer this item) did not see their age as a positive aspect in their learning process. Many participants explained that they had difficulties with their memories when learning long lists of new vocabulary. Moreover, they pointed

out problems with the phonetic or pronunciation aspects of English, affecting their listening and speaking levels. Most learners exposed the idea that learning languages was easier as a child and as a young person. General learning difficulties with increasing age were mentioned by some participants.

On the other hand, other learners explained that their age gave them more maturity and perspective on the things they wanted to learn. They considered it important that they had more time, motivation and less pressure to devote to learning. The value of lifelong learning was reinforced in certain answers. Specifically, English was seen as a useful subject that opened new possibilities, for instance, meeting new and varied people. Learning this language was also seen as an opportunity to remain active in life, by trying a different activity that could stimulate the brain. Cognitive and learning difficulties were remarked in particular by individual older respondents. Issues related to age tended to be transversal across the different language levels.

Similar ideas were expressed by the interviewed participants. Participant 1 (Age 62, Level B2) pointed out: "I think it has negative and positive aspects (..) at a certain age, for example, memory is a handicap. You lose the ability to retain information (..) But, on the other hand, I think that being a certain age gives you a certain experience when it comes to expressing yourself, communicating, when it comes to structuring ideas…". Positive aspects were also linked to more time available, more educational experience and intrinsic motivation. One participant valued the experience with other languages and the lack of environmental pressure. Another mentioned more time available and mental relaxation than before. After retirement, there would also be the possibility of choosing challenges freely.

Motivation and using learning strategies acquired during the lifelong learning process became important to compensate for memory problems during learning in this life stage. Some participants valued the discipline of going to class, keeping the brain active and enjoying the class context. Others consider that learning new things gives personal satisfaction. In this sense, Participant 2 (Age 60, Level B2) remarked that "Young people probably just want to get their degree and finish as quickly as possible. We may have less time in life, but we have more time to dedicate to a single thing, and find the process itself satisfying." Finally, English was also associated with opening new opportunities and creating new attitudes in life, since it gave the opportunity to know new people and cultures and to think differently.

The negative aspects were equally clear in the data. Some participants referred to general cognitive deceleration and decline, noting that objectives are clearer when someone is mature, although there is physical and cognitive decline to a certain extent. Others explained that memory and speed of learning are better and faster when someone is young. Less mental agility and audacity with increasing age were also mentioned. One participant reported attention problems in the classroom if contents were not of interest. Memory, phonetic and hearing problems were also pointed out; in their view, age gives more maturity and understanding of complex concepts, but memorising is increasingly difficult. Therefore, there were difficulties with vocabulary learning and listening skills.

4.4 Affective issues

Regarding affective issues of language learning, some participants reported satisfaction by making progress in English learning and recovering a student role at their age, while others focused more on the difficulties of the learning process, with its affective complexities. Lower level learners tended to report a more negative or ambivalent affectivity. Participant 1 (Age 62, Level B2) preferred to see English just like any other language that could be interesting and valuable to learn, but not necessarily more important. Participant 2 (Age 60, Level B2) valued learning English as a return to childhood, by being able to learn again. Similarly, Participant 4 (Age 66, Level B2), who used to be a teacher, reported satisfaction by recovering a student role.

In contrast, lower level learners revealed a more complex affective state. Participant 3 (Age 65, Level A2) reported a lack of positive affectivity related to his current low language level. For him, learning English was a costly process in which efforts and results did not always match. In a similar manner, Participant 5 (Age 52, Level A2) said: "Well, it's a bit of a rollercoaster. When I realise I'm doing well, I'm euphoric. I get very happy. When I see that I'm not progressing, I get more frustrated than I thought I would. I get angry with myself." Finally, Participant 7 (Age 48, Level B2) also pointed out that it required an affective balance and support from close people.

4.5 Learning context, intergenerationality and educational background

The EOI learning context was generally considered to be an adequate one to ensure a complete and systematic learning of the English language. However, it was also perceived as being intellectually and academically demanding. Participant 2 positively valued the knowledge of the teachers and the fact of sharing in-person lessons with diverse people. In this sense, Participant 4 highlighted that teachers usually encouraged participation by all classmates in the classroom. Participant 3 pointed out that the EOI context was appropriate for systematic and complete English learning. He also considered the EOI to be an economically accessible learning institution. Similarly, Participant 6 (Age 63, Level A2) explained: "They're very tough at the school. But, well, I've realised that it's normal. It's different from studying other subjects. Languages are something else entirely." Finally, Participant 7 pointed out that the official exam formats increasingly required teaching more material, something that required doing frequent homework and organising the studies on the part of the learner.

Pointing out the increasing relevance of active ageing, Participant 7 explained that language learning was becoming more popular among seniors and, particularly, English learning. In contrast, Participant 5 explained that, in her experience, learning as an older adult was much more common in the educational world than in other areas. There would be more hesitance to learn at this age among people in other areas of society.

TABLE 6 Summary of the main findings by research question.

Research question	Main perceived findings
RQ1. Motivations, goals, strengths and difficulties	Intrinsic and practical motivations (cognitive stimulation, personal satisfaction, travel, access to information); realistic goals centred on everyday communication; reading and grammar perceived as strengths; listening, speaking, vocabulary retention, pronunciation and processing speed as the main challenges.
RQ2. Age-related beliefs and affective experiences	Ambivalent views of age, combining perceived cognitive difficulties with maturity, motivation, clearer goals and available time; satisfaction and frustration coexist; low confidence when speaking, tied to fear of error.
RQ3. Context, intergenerationality and background	The EOI valued as a systematic, intellectually demanding space; divergent views on intergenerational classrooms depending on preferences; predominantly university-educated profiles, described by participants as drawn to meaningful intellectual challenge.

There were marked differences of opinion regarding the value of intergenerationality in the classroom. While Participant 2 valued intergenerational contact in class in positive terms as a way of gaining more knowledge of the novelties of the world, Participant 7 asked the EOI to create specific classrooms according to age. She explained that, in terms of topics of conversation, they had more common ground with people of a similar age.

Regarding the professional and educational background of the interviewed participants, it could be stated that most of them had a high educational background and some among them had been teachers in different educational institutions. Participant 1 had been a primary school teacher in the past and Participant 4 a teacher in secondary education. In the case of Participant 5, she was an administrative worker at high school, her life being closely tied to the school environment, as her mother used to be a teacher. Regarding the educational background of the interviewees, Participant 6 explained that he studied Geography and History of the Basque Country and, later on, prepared people for public employment exams.

Table 6 condenses the main findings for each research question before they are taken up in the discussion.

5 Discussion

The findings of the present study address the three specific objectives formulated in the introduction. Regarding the first objective, the results show that participants' motivations were mainly intrinsic and practical. They tended to learn English to gain access to more information and entertainment, communicate while travelling, meet new people, and keep socially and intellectually active, rather than to obtain certifications (Ennis et al., 2013; Pikhart et al., 2021; Słowik-Krogulec, 2019). Therefore, the data of the study support the idea that EFL learning in later life is strongly related to self-improvement. For many participants, and especially for the older ones, this improvement was closely tied to enhancing their self-esteem and self-confidence, with English learning valued as a way of feeling capable and gaining personal satisfaction from meeting an intellectual challenge (Ennis et al., 2013).

The results linked to the first objective also indicate that participants set themselves learning goals that were, on the whole, realistic and gradual. Rather than aspiring to a very high command of English, most learners aimed to cope adequately with reading comprehension, to reach an average or intermediate communicative ability, and to handle English in everyday situations. This pattern aligns with Martínez (2006), for whom older adults tend to set attainable learning objectives and favour learning at their own pace, and it also resonates with andragogical theories that place autonomy, relevance and practical application at the centre of adult learning (Eguz, 2019; Ennis et al., 2013; Hess, 2014; Mora and Abad, 2016).

As regards perceived strengths and difficulties, participants clearly identified reading as their strongest skill, with writing some way behind, whereas listening and speaking were felt to be the most challenging areas. Participants explained that reading and writing allow more control over time, revision, and the use of support resources. In contrast, oral skills require rapid processing, immediate response, and greater phonetic abilities. This pattern is similar to various authors who associated listening and speaking with emotional and anxiety-related difficulties, as well as slower processing speed, phonetic coding, and vocabulary retrieval issues in older learners (Grasso, 2017; Osle, 2020). At the same time, the findings are related to the idea by Cummins (1981) that adult learners may show certain strengths in reading, writing, and grammar-related tasks because of their higher cognitive maturity and usual previous experience with formal learning.

With regard to the second objective, the findings show a contrasted perception of age. A majority of the participants did not view age as a positive factor in their learning process. The idea that language learning is easier during childhood or youth was clearly remarked in the testimonies, something similar to what Horwitz (1999) found in her study. At the same time, the participants' references to memory decline and slower processing connect with previous studies indicating that older learners may have more difficulties with vocabulary memorisation, pronunciation, listening, speaking, and processing speed (Koutska, 2024; Kurdziel et al., 2017; Osle, 2020).

The results also indicate that age was not read solely in negative terms. Many participants pointed out that being older brought maturity, accumulated educational experience, more available time and less external pressure, particularly after retirement. Some further valued the very act of continuing to learn, the chance to keep the mind active and the satisfaction of stepping back into the role of student. Taken together, these perceptions caution against approaching age from a purely decline-based perspective. Koutska (2024) makes a similar point when she argues that, although adult learners may show slower

reaction times, they can draw on richer life experience and on a sharper ability to communicate appropriately across social contexts.

The results likewise underline the weight of affective factors in language learning. For some participants, learning English was a source of satisfaction, tied to noticing their own progress, to a sense of self-improvement and to reclaiming the role of student in later life. For others, particularly at the lower proficiency levels, the process felt emotionally complex, at times frustrating or ambivalent. This affective duality echoes previous work that has stressed the role of emotional issues in language learning across the lifespan (Marinova-Todd et al., 2000; Ruiz Calatrava, 2009; Shao et al., 2020). Self-confidence and language anxiety, two constructs with a long history in second language research, run through these accounts. The reluctance to speak for fear of error that several interviewees voiced sits close to the foreign language anxiety Grasso (2017) documented among older learners, while the confidence gained from noticing one's own progress appears to work in the opposite direction, sustaining engagement over time.

Turning to the third objective, the Official Language School context was generally perceived as appropriate, systematic and academically demanding. Participants appreciated the expertise of their teachers, the structured progression of the courses and the chance to share the learning process with fellow students. What emerged clearly is that the systematic character of the instruction was itself part of the appeal, since for these learners the school was not merely a space for socialisation and entertainment. Kuklewicz and King (2018) reported a similar pattern, with older adult language learners tending to prefer formal settings where they can learn alongside others under the guidance of expert teachers. At the same time, this context was associated with effort, homework and a degree of academic pressure, which suggests that the learners in this study were actively seeking a meaningful intellectual challenge. That reading is offered as an interpretation grounded in the profile of the sample, rather than as a demonstrated relationship, in which most participants held university-level qualifications and some interviewees had professional trajectories linked to education. Parisi (2010) points in the same direction when noting that adults with higher educational attainment tend to be more willing to engage in complex educational activities. It is also worth noting that, unlike private language academies, EOIs charge modest public fees, so the association often drawn between EFL learning and higher incomes does not straightforwardly apply to this setting; the socioeconomic composition of the sample, in any case, was not recorded, as acknowledged in the limitations.

Intergenerationality, for its part, elicited divergent views. Part of the sample welcomed sharing the classroom with younger or more diverse classmates, an experience they linked to gaining fresh perspectives and staying in touch with contemporary realities, in line with the benefits of intergenerational contact described by Newman and Hatton-Yeo (2008). Others, by contrast, felt more comfortable learning with peers of a similar age, mainly because they perceived greater common ground in communication styles and conversation topics. This preference, expressed by one participant and not shared by others who valued intergenerational contact, partially echoes Gómez (2016), who discussed the possible usefulness of specific second language classrooms for older adult learners; taken together, these divergent views point to flexible grouping and learner choice rather than to age-segregated provision.

More broadly, the findings also connect with the concept of active ageing. The participants stressed the importance of learning English in order to remain active, independent and socially connected (Andrew, 2012) as well as to face a multilingual and globalised society, as explained by the lifelong learning programmes of the European Union (European Commission, 2019).

A caveat is in order before closing. The age-related patterns described here are patterns in participants' accounts; with this design they cannot be disentangled from proficiency level, previous language-learning experience, educational background, employment or retirement status and the time these afford, hearing, socioeconomic circumstances, differences across courses, teachers and sites, or the self-selection of the sample, all of which may covary with age.

All in all, the results suggest that adult EFL learning in Basque Official Language Schools was described by participants as reflecting a combination of previous educational experience, present life conditions, emotional/motivational resources, cognitive factors and practical aims. Learning EFL at a later age was a process that participants experienced as meaningful and as contributing, in their own accounts, to their sense of identity and self-development.

6 Conclusions

This study has provided qualitative information on the English as a Foreign Language learning experiences of adult learners in Basque Official Language Schools. The results show the importance of intrinsic and practical motivations in the learning process; learners tend to set themselves realistic goals, based on communication, reading comprehension and everyday use of the language. In this sense, learning English was reported as a personally meaningful and socially valuable activity during adulthood and the later stages of life.

The study also found that reading and grammar-based tasks were regarded as strengths, whereas oral comprehension and production were considered more demanding skills, the most important challenges being vocabulary retention, pronunciation, processing speed and the scarcity of opportunities for oral practice in natural contexts. Opinions also differed regarding the influence of age; participants associated it with cognitive and learning difficulties, but they likewise saw it in a positive light, on account of maturity, greater motivation, clearer goals and more time available for learning. Their testimonies stressed the importance of affective aspects throughout the whole learning process. As for the context, the Official Language School was generally appreciated as a systematic and intellectually demanding space, while intergenerational classrooms gave rise to both positive and negative perceptions depending on each learner's preferences and expectations.

In terms of pedagogical implications, the findings point to the value of adapting language teaching to the pace, interests, needs and communicative priorities of midlife and older adult

learners. This would involve enlarging the opportunities for oral practice, attending to the affective dimension of learning, and offering flexible grouping options that respect learners' preferences regarding the age composition of groups.

This study is not without limitations. It relied on self-reported data and on a small number of interviews, which restricts the transferability of the findings, and although the interview guide underwent content validation by two experts, no pilot testing was carried out before data collection. Moreover, despite the purposive search for variation, the interview sub-sample spans a limited age range (48–66). The research was also confined to Basque Official Language Schools and did not include participants over 70. Several further constraints deserve mention. Although the questionnaire did gather data on proficiency level, previous language-learning experience, educational attainment and professional background, the design did not systematically control for other factors, such as the time available for study, socioeconomic position, hearing, or differences across courses, teachers and schools, any of which may shape the perceptions reported. Participants were, moreover, self-selected learners who had remained enrolled for at least a year, which may tilt the sample towards relatively positive experiences. The two data sources are nested, the interviews were conducted by a researcher familiar with the setting, quotations were translated from Spanish, and item non-response was possible in the questionnaire. Ultimately, all the findings rest on self-reported perceptions, with no performance-based or observational measures of language ability, memory, processing speed, hearing or classroom effectiveness. Future research could extend the inquiry to other institutional and non-formal learning contexts, to other foreign languages, to teachers' perspectives and to older age groups. For Basque EOIs in particular, the findings argue for preserving the systematic and demanding character that learners value while widening the room for oral practice and for choice in group composition, and they raise the question, well worth pursuing, of whether similar dynamics operate in the adult learning of Basque itself.

In sum, this study has sought to shed light on the realities and experiences of EFL learning in adulthood and later life. At a time when lifelong learning and active ageing occupy an increasingly central place in the social agenda, learning a foreign language stands out as a meaningful and potentially rewarding educational pursuit for midlife and older adult learners.

Data availability statement

The raw data supporting the conclusions of this article will be made available by the authors, without undue reservation.

Ethics statement

Ethical approval was not required for the studies involving humans because this study was conducted as part of a doctoral dissertation that was successfully examined and approved by the University of Deusto. At the time the research was conducted, ethical approval by a formal ethics committee was not required by the University of Deusto for this type of study, in accordance with the institutional regulations in force. The study involved competent adult participants, posed minimal risk, and collected anonymised data. Participation was voluntary, and written informed consent was obtained from all participants prior to data collection. The research was conducted in accordance with the principles of the Declaration of Helsinki and the institutional requirements of the University of Deusto. The studies were conducted in accordance with the local legislation and institutional requirements. The participants provided their written informed consent to participate in this study.

Author contributions

AA-C: Formal analysis, Writing – original draft, Conceptualization, Investigation, Data curation. EB-A: Writing – review & editing, Methodology, Validation. J-DC-S-T: Validation, Supervision, Writing – review & editing. JM-G: Supervision, Writing – review & editing, Methodology.

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Appendix. Data collection instruments

Appendix A. Semi-structured interview guide (thematic blocks used in this study)

The following questions correspond to the three thematic blocks analysed in this article. The remaining blocks of the original guide, devoted to language-learning strategies, are not reproduced here as they fall outside the present focus. Questions are given in English; the study was conducted in Spanish.

Block 1. Learning context and motivation

1. What have been the most important or meaningful aspects or factors influencing your English language learning? (Adapted from Muñoz, 2010)
2. Has there been any particularly significant moment in the improvement of your English learning? Did anything in particular happen? (Adapted from Muñoz, 2010)
3. Do you enjoy learning languages? (Adapted from Muñoz, 2010)
4. What is your main motivation for learning English? (Own elaboration)
5. What would you recommend to a friend who is thinking of learning a new language, English in particular? (Adapted from Muñoz, 2010)
6. Do you feel that learning English has brought you positive things? In which areas? (Own elaboration)

Block 2. Age and second language learning

7. Do you think your age is a positive or negative factor in your English learning? Why? (Own elaboration)
8. Do you think there is a prejudice in society or in your environment against, or sceptical of, language learning in older adults? (Own elaboration)

Block 3. Preferences regarding English learning

9. What is, in general, your preferred way of learning English? (Own elaboration)
10. Which aspects are most important in learning English for you (for example, learning as much vocabulary as possible, or focusing on oral skills)? (Adapted from Yin, 2008)
11. On a scale from 1 to 10, how would you rate your level of competence in each of the four English skills (reading, writing, listening, speaking)? (Adapted from Muñoz, 2010)

Appendix B. Context questionnaire (language-learning-context and demographic section)

The questionnaire also included the Strategy Inventory for Language Learning (SILL; Oxford, 1990), which is not reproduced here as it belongs to a broader data-collection design analysed elsewhere. The section reproduced below gathered the demographic and language-learning-context information used in this study. It was administered through Google Forms.

Demographic variables

- Email
- Age
- Gender (Male/Female/Other)
- Location of the Official Language School (Donostia-San Sebastian/Bilbao/Vitoria-Gasteiz/Eibar)
- Current level of education (Primary studies/Secondary studies/Higher education)

Language-learning context

- How would you describe your current level of English? (Poor/Average/Satisfactory/Very good/Excellent)
- How would you describe yourself as a second language learner? (Poor/Average/Satisfactory/Very good/Excellent)
- Is this your first experience learning English? How long have you been learning it? Which experience taught you most and best? (Open-ended)
- Do you know other second languages besides English? For how long have you been learning them or in contact with them? What is your level in these languages? (Open-ended)
- How do you prefer to learn English? (Listening and speaking/Reading and writing/Role-play and games/Through a dictionary and grammatical rules)
- Why do you prefer to learn English this way? (Open-ended)
- To what extent is English a difficult language for you? (Not difficult/Somewhat difficult/Quite difficult/Very difficult)
- Why? (Open-ended)
- In which of the following English skills do you consider yourself most proficient? (Writing/Speaking/Reading/Listening)