

## English Proficiency of Japanese Third-Age Learners in the English Foreign Language Program: An Explanatory-Sequential Inquiry

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### ABSTRACT

*English as a Foreign Language (EFL) empowers individuals from non-English-speaking countries to acquire English proficiency and opens the doors to countless opportunities. This applies to Japanese third-age learners enrolled in EFL programs for various reasons. However, EFL teachers face challenges in tailoring programs to the diverse needs of third-age learners. Using explanatory sequential inquiry, this study assessed the English proficiency level of Japanese third-age learners engaged in the EFL programs in five cities in Japan. The quantitative phase revealed that the English language proficiency (ELP) level of Japanese third-age learners as a whole is B1 or Intermediate. The rank biserial correlation coefficient shows a significant relationship between sex and ELP. The Spearman rank correlation shows a significant relationship between the third-age learners' ELP and age, educational background, and hours spent learning English per week. The qualitative phase revealed an affirmation of the quantitative findings through the two major themes (motivational factors and factors affecting ELP) generated from the participants' thick descriptions of their experiences. Integrating quantitative and qualitative findings resulted in several meta-inferences and emerging frameworks. It concluded that the ELP development among third-age learners is multifaceted. The complex interplay of sex dynamics, cultural norms, age, motivation, experiences, and learning mechanisms in promoting ELP must be considered. Lastly, the findings served as a foundational reference for designing and developing instructional materials (IMs) for Japanese third-age learners, potentially enhancing their EFL learning experience.*

*Keywords: English as a Foreign Language; English proficiency; Japanese third-age learners; sequential explanatory; Japan*

### INTRODUCTION

English as a Foreign Language (EFL) empowers individuals from non-English-speaking countries (Tripathi, 2017), like Japan, to acquire English language proficiency (ELP), opening doors to countless opportunities. Japan's EFL program is guided by the 2003 action plan to cultivate Japanese with English abilities to make English an official or working language (Hashimoto & Glasgow, 2021) with the supposed help of the teachers (Glasgow & Paller, 2016). Japanese third-age learners enrol in EFL programs for various reasons (San Jose & Madrigal, 2023). However, EFL teachers face challenges in tailoring programs to the diverse needs of third-age learners (Eguz, 2019; Kliesch et al., 2018; van der Ploeg et al., 2020).

In Japan, some studies explored the Japanese third-age learners of English from a wellbeing perspective (Matsumoto, 2019), the pedagogical necessity to resort to cultural products (Smithers, 2022) and techniques for foreign language pedagogy (Ramírez-Gómez, 2019), and the possibility of using a robot to improve Japanese adults' English-speaking skills (Iio et al., 2019). Other than these, there has been a lack of studies, especially those that explore Japanese third-age learners' ELP and the instructional materials designed for them. Given the limited studies on tailored instructional materials for third-age EFL learners in Japan, this study aims to fill that gap by assessing their English language proficiency and learning needs.

This study assessed the ELP level of Japanese third-age learners in five cities in Aichi prefecture, Japan, grouped by sex, age, educational background, and weekly English learning hours. The findings provided insights into their perspectives and experiences, guiding the design of instructional materials for third-age EFL classrooms in Aichi prefecture.

#### HYPOTHESES

1. There is no significant relationship between the third-age learners' sex and their ELP.
2. There is no significant relationship between the third-age learners' age and their ELP.
3. There is no significant relationship between the third-age learners' educational attainment and ELP.
4. There is no significant relationship between the third-age learners' average number of hours spent learning English per week and their ELP.

The following sections will deductively explore recent studies on third-age EFL learners, describe the study's methodology, present the findings divided into three parts (quantitative data, qualitative data, and mixed-method data), and conclude with key insights and future research directions.

#### LITERATURE REVIEW

##### ENGLISH AS A FOREIGN LANGUAGE (EFL)

English as a Foreign Language (EFL) has been emphasised in the global, Asian, and Japanese contexts, evidenced by the globalised society (Baker & Fang, 2021; Ilyosovna, 2020) and the standardised CEFR framework (Piccardo, 2020) for EFL assessment. EFL programs in Asia cater to a wide range of age groups and cultural considerations (Gashi, 2021; Gonja & Musaev, 2023; Snigdha, 2022), with IELTS and TOEFL assessments being used to suit job market expectations (Ikpesu & Nkem, 2021; Lan, 2022;).

In some studies, the role of the Japanese government (Glasgow & Paller, 2016; Rose & McKinley, 2018) in encouraging EFL education is emphasised, with policies emphasising human resource development (Miyashita, 2017) and cultural identity promotion (Minotti & Wertman, 2019). There is also a discussion on strategies (Hidasi, 2019; Saito, 2019; Yamauchi, 2020; Yphantides, 2021) for improving English proficiency (Morita, 2015), reducing language anxiety (Ikoma, 2019), and engaging students in oral communication (Datzman, 2019).

#### ENGLISH AS A FOREIGN LANGUAGE FOR THIRD-AGE LEARNERS

A good number of studies highlight the benefits of foreign language (FL) learning for third-age learners (Gabryś-Barker, 2017), who can benefit from lifelong education and improve communication skills (Eguz, 2019; Pfenninger & Polz, 2018; Pfenninger & Singleton, 2019; Vötter, 2021). FL learning contributes to active and healthy ageing, impacting executive function, self-confidence, autonomy, communicative skills, and overall wellbeing (Brouwer et al., 2020; Irie, 2022; Kacatl & Klímová, 2021; Pfenninger & Polz, 2018; Pfenninger & Singleton, 2019). To achieve these benefits, instructors must address unique challenges like physical and cognitive changes (Geng & Jin, 2023b), emotional factors (Geng & Jin, 2023a), and cultural stereotypes (Singleton & Záborská, 2020).

Approaches like sage-ing, mindfulness, and the selection-optimisation-compensation framework can be practical (Gabryś-Barker, 2017). Educators are encouraged to create a friendly learning environment, adjust teaching methods, and focus on real-life experiences (Eguz, 2019; Kacatl & Klímová, 2021; Pfenninger & Polz, 2018; Ramírez-Gómez, 2019). Studies show that third-age learners adopt proactive strategies, such as using contemporary media and consistent practice, demonstrating resilience and commitment to growth (Eguz, 2019; San Jose & Madrigal, 2023).

#### ENGLISH LANGUAGE PROFICIENCY OF THIRD-AGE LEARNERS

Other studies explore the ELP of third-age learners, highlighting their motivations, cognitive aspects, and pedagogical approaches. These learners pursue English for various reasons, including social engagement and integration (Pfenninger & Polz, 2018). English proficiency is essential for effective classroom participation, international travel, and intercultural interaction (San Jose & Madrigal, 2023). Cognitive factors like working memory and neural organisation are crucial for language proficiency (Hejazi et al., 2019). Explicit language education, materials tailored to their needs, and teaching the correct sounds can promote English literacy (van der Ploeg et al., 2023).

Motivation is vital (Gabryś-Barker, 2017; Hussain et al., 2020; San Jose & Madrigal, 2023; Schiller & Dorner, 2022), but external factors like teaching quality and discrepancies between desired and perceived proficiency levels can demotivate third-age learners (Evans & Tragant, 2020). They also tend to be demotivated by students' negative views toward their peers, teacher-related factors, personal concerns, class characteristics, exam anxiety, failure experiences, and the education system (Han et al., 2019).

#### ELP LEVEL AND THIRD-AGE LEARNERS' SEX, AGE, EDUCATION, AND EXPOSURE

Tailoring materials and teaching approaches to their independence and conceptual frameworks can help them achieve ELP (Blumenfeld et al., 2017). In some studies, ELP is significantly influenced by sex, with female learners typically demonstrating higher competency (Abdullahi & Bichi, 2015; Alkhalwaldeh & Khasawneh, 2023; Galantomos, 2019; Lasekan, 2018; Zhu, 2022). Other studies claim that sex did not influence the learners' English proficiency (Fattahi & Nushi, 2021; Meniado, 2019; Rianto, 2021; Serquina & Batang, 2018; Yousefi & Mohammadi, 2016). The complex interplay of culture and sex has also been discussed (Brinton, 2023; Holbrow, 2022; Nemoto, 2016; Papp & Umemura, 2021), which directly or indirectly impacts ELP.

Another essential consideration for English language proficiency is age, according to the studies of Yoon et al. (2015), Eguz (2019), Słowik-Krogulec (2019), Reifegerste et al. (2020), and Caldwell-Harris and MacWhinney (2023), as they claim that older people typically have a decrease in language ability and comprehension. However, the effects of age are multifaceted and not only based on chronological age (Elise, 2022; Gass et al., 2020; Merriam & Baumgartner, 2020; Mitchell et al., 2019; Ozfidan & Burlbaw, 2019). Studies differ in outcome, whether age affects (Ellis, 2015; Meniado, 2019; Nichols & Joannis, 2016) or does not affect (Serquina & Batang, 2018) the respondents' ELP.

Higher educational attainment is associated with better ELP among learners (Meniado, 2019), and it is a powerful predictor of overall learning outcomes when combined with other factors such as neighbourhood and region-specific poverty levels (Rizvi et al., 2019). Studies show that educational attainment or formal classes may affect (Ellis, 2015) or may not affect (Lardiere, 2017; Merriam, 2018) the acquisition of ELP.

Acquisition and skill development of the English language depends heavily on exposure to the language through reading, watching, and communicating with native speakers (Al Zoubi, 2018; Domingo, 2019). However, the correlation between language experience and ELP is complex and inaccurate (Bacus & Alda, 2023). As a result, it is crucial to modify language curricula to suit the unique requirements, especially for third-age learners who find joy in learning (Inada, 2022).

#### TEACHING ENGLISH TO THIRD-AGE LEARNERS

Third-age English language learners have different needs and interests. Therefore, teaching strategies and resources must be tailored accordingly (Kacetyl & Klímová, 2021). Teachers are critical for creating an effective learning environment to create third-age student profiles and consider age-related changes (Eguz, 2019; Słowik-Krogulec, 2019). Utilising games, encouraging learner autonomy, and using authentic materials are all effective teaching tactics (Schiller et al., 2020). Third-age language learners benefit from improved conversational abilities, autonomy, self-confidence, executive function, and general wellbeing (Pfenninger & Polz, 2018; Pikhart & Klímová, 2020).

Developing a communicative and student-centred strategy is crucial to engaging older learners and enhancing their general wellbeing (Kacetyl & Klímová, 2021). Equally important is the design of instructional materials (IMs) that should be theoretically sound (Khalil & Elkhider, 2016) and responsive to the needs of third-age learners (Exter & Ashby, 2022; Ramírez-Gómez, 2019; Wozniak, 2020).

The literature on EFL emphasises its global and regional importance, particularly in Asia and Japan. It highlights the importance of EFL for third-age learners, promoting active ageing and enhancing cognitive and emotional wellbeing. It also emphasises that third-age learners face unique challenges, requiring tailored instructional approaches and a supportive learning environment.

## METHODOLOGY

### WORLDVIEW AND DESIGN

Figure 1 illustrates the study's framework that guided the study's methodology and analysis by aligning each research phase with a corresponding worldview: postpositivist for the quantitative phase, constructivist for the qualitative phase, and pragmatist for the final integration and application. In the quantitative phase, the postpositivist worldview emphasises objective measurement and statistical analysis to assess ELP. The constructivist worldview in the qualitative phase focuses on understanding participants' subjective experiences through interviews and thematic analysis. Finally, the pragmatist worldview informs the practical application of findings in the design of instructional materials, ensuring the research's real-world relevance and effectiveness.

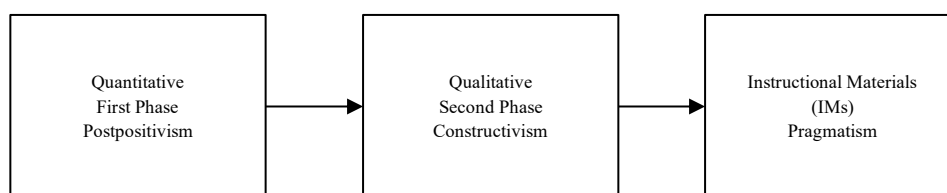


FIGURE 1. Framework

The study used an explanatory-sequential mixed-method research design, which involves data collection phases (Creswell & Creswell, 2018). In the quantitative phase, the researchers collected the data through a researcher-made test questionnaire. The results were analysed and used to plan the second phase, the qualitative phase. For the qualitative phase, the data were gathered through semi-structured interviews. Data were analysed and interpreted to explain the quantitative results acquired in the first phase. The second phase (Qualitative) was built based on the first phase (Quantitative), and the two phases were integrated, which is a unique feature of mixed-method research.

### PHASE I: QUANTITATIVE

The respondents, determined through the total enumeration method (Johnson & Christensen, 2024), were 59 Japanese third-age learners enrolled in the EFL program for the school year 2023-2024 in five cities of Aichi, Japan. In this study, we calculated a total minimum sample size of 42 participants to investigate the rank biserial correlation between a binary variable and a continuous variable, using an effect size of 0.5, an alpha error probability of 0.05, and a power of 0.95. Using the same parameters, the minimum sample size required for conducting a bivariate correlation analysis is 46 participants, ensuring sufficient power to detect meaningful relationships between the variables being studied. However, we chose to include 61 respondents, which is more than the minimum required. This sample size is deemed adequate for detecting a medium to large effect, which suggests a substantial relationship between the variables.

A researcher-made test questionnaire was used to assess the English proficiency level of the respondents. Using Lawshe's Content Validity Ratio (CVR), the questionnaire was validated by ten (10) experts in the field with 0.99 I-CVR (Item-Content Validity Index) and 0.99 S-CVI (Scale-

Content Validity Index), both higher than the minimum 0.62 index for ten (10) experts (Lawshe, 1975). For internal reliability, Cronbach's alpha coefficient is 0.94, which is interpreted as excellent since it is higher than 0.70, which is the benchmark for acceptability (Gliem & Gliem, 2003). The interpretation of the ELP levels was based on the matrix of the Common European Framework of Reference (CEFR), an international standard to describe language ability across reading, writing, listening, and speaking (Council of Europe, 2020).

A two-phase systematic data collection procedure was observed to avoid inconveniences to the respondents. In phase 1, the respondents answered the first part of the questionnaire with 30 items aimed to test their reading skills. On a separate occasion, they answered in phase 2, the second part of the questionnaire, with 30 items aimed to test their listening skills.

Descriptive-correlational analysis was employed to analyse the data. The Kolmogorov-Smirnov test was used to determine the normality of the variable. The result found that the variable proficiency [KS=0.159] was not normally distributed, requiring nonparametric statistics like rank biserial and Spearman rank correlation analysis for inferential questions. They were chosen since the alternative, like the Mann-Whitney U Test, was considered less appropriate for comparing two independent groups, while the Kruskal-Wallis Test was more appropriate for comparing multiple groups. Post-hoc tests were not necessary as the study focused on correlations rather than group comparisons, and the chosen methods were suitable for assessing monotonic relationships without assuming linearity or normality. Moreover, the descriptive analysis explained the respondents' demographic profile and English proficiency level through the analysis of mean, standard deviation, frequency count, and percentage distribution. Rank biserial and Spearman rank correlation were used to analyse the correlation between the third-age learners' level of English proficiency and the demographics.

#### PHASE I: QUALITATIVE

The researchers selected five participants from phase one, based on their ELP test scores, using maximum variation sampling (MVS) (Etikan et al., 2016). Recorded semi-structured and in-depth interviews were conducted in English and Japanese, allowing participants to speak in Japanese, with an interpreter translating their answers for accuracy. Data were transcribed using the Jefferson Transcriptions system (Jefferson, 2004), coded and categorised using software, and analysed thematically using Lichtman's (2013) three Cs paradigm. To ensure the validity and reliability of the data, the researchers assessed the data's trustworthiness using Lincoln and Guba's (1985) criteria: credibility, transferability, dependability, and confirmability. This study adhered to ethical guidelines, providing institutions, respondents, and participants with details about the study's purpose, procedures, and risks. They gave informed consent, anonymised responses, and securely stored data. Data confidentiality was ensured, and participants were informed of their right to withdraw at any time.

The next section presents the results and discussion divided into Phase 1 (quantitative data) and Phase 2 (qualitative data), which are then combined in the last part.



## RESULTS AND DISCUSSION

### QUANTITATIVE DATA

#### PROFILE OF THE RESPONDENTS

Table 1 summarises the demographic characteristics of the participants, highlighting key variables such as sex, age, educational background, and hours spent. When grouped according to sex, 33.9% (f=20) are male, and 66.1% (f=39) are female. In terms of age, 8.5% (f=5) are 45 years old and below, 37.3% (f=22) are 46-65 years old, and 54.2% (f=32) are 66 years old and above. Regarding the educational background, 16.9% (f=10) are high school graduates, 61% (f=36) are undergraduates, and 22% (f=13) are graduates. Concerning the average number of hours spent learning English per week, 61% (f=36) learn English seldom, 25.4% (f=15) learn English regularly, and 13.6% (f=8) learn English always.

TABLE 1. Demographic Profile of the Respondents

Variables	f	%
Sex		
Male	20	33.9
Female	39	66.1
Age		
45 years old and below	5	8.5
46-65 years old	22	37.3
66 years old and above	32	54.2
Educational Background		
High School	10	16.9
Undergraduate	36	61.0
Graduate	13	22.0
Hours		
Seldom	36	61.0
Regular	15	25.4
Always	8	13.6
<b>Total</b>	<b>59</b>	<b>100.0</b>

Late-old adults (54.2%) spend only one to two hours per week learning English despite its benefits for psychological and social welfare (Gabryś-Barker, 2017; Pfenninger & Polz, 2018; Pfenninger & Singleton, 2019; Vötter, 2021;). EFL teachers should address this group's social needs and avoid rigid language instruction. To meet the holistic demands of third-age learners, they should create welcoming learning communities that foster social interaction and psychological resilience (Kacetyl & Klímová, 2021; Słowik-Krogulec, 2019).

#### ENGLISH LANGUAGE PROFICIENCY (ELP) LEVEL

Table 2 presents the ELP level of Japanese third-age learners participating in the EFL Program. The English proficiency level as a whole (M=24.39, SD=6.99) is B1 or Intermediate. When grouped according to sex, the proficiency level of females (M=21.46, SD=5.27) is in the lower intermediate or lower B1, while males (M=30.1, SD=6.46) are in the higher intermediate level or higher B1.

TABLE 2. ELP Level of Japanese Third-Age Learners Participating in the EFL Program

Variable	M	SD	Interpretation
Sex			
Male	30.10	6.46	B1 (higher Intermediate)
Female	21.46	5.27	B1 (lower Intermediate)
Age			
45 years old and below	21.00	3.67	B1 (lower Intermediate)
46-65 years old	22.14	5.77	B1 (lower Intermediate)
66 years old and above	26.47	7.56	B1 (higher Intermediate)
Educational Background			
High School	19.20	5.98	A2 (higher elementary)
Undergraduate	22.72	4.77	B1 (lower Intermediate)
Graduate	33.00	5.63	B2 (lower upper-intermediate)
Hours			
Seldom	20.19	3.58	A2 (higher elementary)
Regular	30.33	6.55	B1 (higher intermediate)
Always	32.13	4.45	B2 (lower upper-intermediate)
<b>Whole</b>	<b>24.39</b>	<b>6.99</b>	<b>B1 (intermediate)</b>

In terms of age, 45 years old and below (M=21, SD=3.67) and 46-65 years old (M=22.14, SD=5.77) are in lower B1 level of proficiency while 66 years old and above (M=26.47, SD=7.56) are in higher B1 level of proficiency. Regarding educational background, high school graduates (M=19.2, SD=5.98) are in higher elementary level or A2, undergraduate (M=22.72, SD=4.77) respondents are in low B1 of proficiency, while graduates (M=33, SD=5.63) are in upper-intermediate or B2 level of proficiency. For an average number of hours spent learning English per week, respondents under the seldom (M=20.19, SD=3.58) category are in A2 or upper-elementary level of proficiency, while respondents under the regular (M=30.33, SD=6.55) and always (M=32.13, SD=4.45) categories are in B1 (upper intermediate) and B2 (lower upper-intermediate), respectively.

The study reveals a significant sex disparity in English proficiency levels among Japanese third-age learners enrolled in EFL programs. Males have a higher proficiency score, indicating a higher intermediate or B1 level, while females have a lower score. High school graduates have the lowest proficiency, while graduates have the highest, indicating an upper-intermediate or B2 level. Weekly English study hours significantly influence proficiency levels.

The study emphasises the need to explore sex-based differences in learning environments and styles and suggests that EFL teachers should create inclusive environments that accommodate diverse learning needs and preferences. Instructors should consider age-related advantages when teaching EFL, incorporating older learners' experiences and real-world language practice (Gonja & Musaev, 2023) and pairing older learners with younger ones (Saito, 2019). Differentiated instruction and goal setting are crucial in EFL programs (Gabryś-Barker, 2017; Ikoma, 2019), and consistent language practice (Yamauchi, 2020, 2022) is essential for third-age learners to achieve higher proficiency levels. Authentic materials and interactive activities can support language competency development and international consciousness (Hidasi, 2019; Koch & Takashima, 2021; Snigdha, 2022; Yurtsever & Dilara, 2021).

#### RELATIONSHIP BETWEEN DEMOGRAPHICS AND ELP

The nonparametric statistical data analysis reveals a relationship between third-age learners' ELP levels and demographic characteristics (see Table 3). The rank biserial correlation coefficient shows a significant relationship ( $r_s = -0.578$ ,  $p = 0.000$ ) between sex and ELP, with males having



higher levels than females, rejecting the null hypothesis and accepting the alternative hypothesis. This suggests that educators should consider strategies to address sex-based variations in language acquisition methodologies (Blumenfeld et al., 2017; Eguz, 2019; Hejazi et al., 2019; Kacetl & Klímová, 2021).

The result differs from previous studies indicating that females outperform males in speaking and writing, particularly in Saudi Arabia (Alkhawaldeh & Khasawneh, 2023), China (Zhu, 2022), India (Lasekan, 2018), and Greece (Galantomos, 2019). It also contradicts previous research showing a negative correlation between sex and ELP, such as Rianto's in Indonesia (2021), Meniado's in the Philippines (2019), and Fattahi and Nushi's in Iran (2021).

TABLE 3. Relationship Between the Third-Age Learners' ELP and Demographics

		Proficiency	Sex	Age	Educational Background	Hours	
Spearman's rho	Proficiency	Correlation Coefficient	1.000	-.578**	.291*	.587*	.741*
		Sig. (2-tailed)		0.000	0.025	0.000	0.000
		N	59	59	59	59	59
	Sex	Correlation Coefficient	-.578*	1.000	-0.256	-.405**	-.475**
		Sig. (2-tailed)	0.000		0.051	0.001	0.000
		N	59	59	59	59	59
	Age	Correlation Coefficient	.291*	-0.256	1.000	0.222	.308
		Sig. (2-tailed)	0.025	0.051		0.091	0.018
		N	59	59	59	59	59
	Educational Background	Correlation Coefficient	.587*	-.405**	0.222	1.000	.565**
		Sig. (2-tailed)	0.000	0.001	0.091		0.000
		N	59	59	59	59	59
	Hours	Correlation Coefficient	.741*	-.475**	.308	.565**	1.000
		Sig. (2-tailed)	0.000	0.000	0.018	0.000	
		N	59	59	59	59	59

Note: \*correlation is significant when  $p \leq 0.05$ ; \*\*. Correlation is significant at the 0.01 level (2-tailed).

The result reveals a significant correlation between age [ $r_s(57)=0.291$ ,  $p=0.025$ ] and ELP, with older learners often having higher skill levels, rejecting the null hypothesis and confirming a significant relationship between third-age learners' ELP. It contradicts Serquina and Batang's (2018) findings that age does not significantly impact English proficiency. Meniado (2019) found a significant difference in ELP levels and age among adult language learners. The differences may be due to environmental, contextual, and individual factors influencing age's effects on second language acquisition (Elise (2022) or cognitive aptitude and linguistic comprehension (Caldwell-Harris & MacWhinney, 2023; Eguz, 2019; Reifegerste et al., 2020; Słowik-Krogulec, 2019; Yoon et al., 2015).

A significant relationship between educational attainment [ $r_s(57)=0.587$ ,  $p=0.000$ ] and ELP among third-age learners is also shown, indicating that those with higher education are more proficient in the language, thus rejecting the null hypothesis and accepting the alternative

hypothesis. The study aligns with Rizvi et al.'s (2019) findings that prior education, including poverty level, significantly predicts overall learning outcomes. Meniado's (2019) findings also show a significant difference between adult respondents' ELP and their educational attainment. It emphasises the significance of formal education in language acquisition, emphasising the need for tailored instructional materials and strategies to support third-age learners' ELP (Eguz, 2019; Kacetyl & Klímová, 2021; Schiller et al., 2020).

The study found a significant relationship between the number of hours spent learning English per week [ $r(57)=0.741$ ,  $p=0.000$ ] and ELP levels among third-age learners, indicating that regular practice and dedication significantly influence language acquisition, rejecting the null hypothesis and accepting the alternative hypothesis. The study supports the notion that exposure to a target language significantly impacts language abilities (Al Zoubi, 2018; Domingo, 2019). It suggests that teachers should offer more opportunities for language interaction in the classroom to help students become proficient in a second language, contradicting Bacus and Alda's (2023) findings.

Potential ties in proficiency scores among respondents could impact the study's correlation results. Ties, when two or more participants have the same score, can reduce the strength of the correlation coefficient, potentially underestimating the true strength of the relationship between demographic factors and English proficiency levels. Additionally, ties could influence the statistical significance of the test, potentially leading to a Type II error. The interpretation of results could also be affected, as ties may mask more nuanced differences in proficiency, potentially affecting targeted educational interventions.

#### SYNTHESIS

The study emphasises the importance of consistent practice and commitment in language acquisition for third-age learners, emphasising the need for immersive learning environments in EFL classrooms (Schiller et al., 2020; Singleton & Záborská, 2020; Słowik-Krogulec, 2019). Teachers should prioritise language exposure and practice when teaching EFL to these learners to improve their overall English competence (Domingo, 2019). The Japanese government may explore institutionalising EFL programs to optimise socio-cultural and economic (Hidasi, 2019), psychological and neurological health benefits (Gabryś-Barker, 2017; Vötter, 2021), and active ageing and overall wellbeing benefits (Kacetyl & Klímová, 2021; Pfenninger & Polz, 2018).

#### QUALITATIVE DATA

##### THEMATIC INSIGHTS

Participants' insights were organised into two (2) major themes: motivational factors (with three subthemes: personal interest, social engagement, and personal enrichment) and factors affecting ELP (with four subthemes: dynamics of sex and ELP, dynamics of age and ELP, dynamics of education and ELP, and dynamics of time and ELP).

## DISCUSSION

### THEME 1.1. PERSONAL INTEREST

Personal interest in English language learning significantly influences test outcomes. Participants' narratives reveal that their passion, like understanding English lyrics in music, can inspire them to study the language later in life. This highlights the importance of intrinsic motivation (Datzman, 2019; Gabryś-Barker, 2017; Hussain et al., 2020; Singleton & Záborská, 2020), stemming from personal hobbies or interests, as a powerful stimulant for language learning. Participants shared the following:

"I like music. But I couldn't understand the lyrics. So, in my 50s, I started learning English."  
(Participant 1, personal communication, February 3, 2024)

"At that time, it (English) was very, very popular for women, for housewives. Many women went to Aeon to study English because their husbands went to work, and the kids were in school. But it was expensive. After that, I continued speaking in English with my friends. I practised by listening to music, watching movies and news in English, and travelling. So, my English skills developed using many different methods and after many years of practice and travel."  
(Participant 3, personal communication, February 8, 2024)

"... I'm interested in English. I joined our Saturday mate group because I want to improve my English, especially speaking.... I study English because it's my interest and my hobby. And later, maybe I can use English when I travel. I'm planning to travel maybe later this year or next year. ..."  
(Participant 4, personal communication, February 10, 2024)

### THEME 1.2. SOCIAL ENGAGEMENT

The study reveals that social engagement significantly influences English language learning experiences and test results (Eguz, 2019; Lee, 2020), with high scores indicating motivation and low scores highlighting practical aspects and social benefits (Hidasi, 2019; Morita, 2015). They shared the following:

"I didn't have a chance to speak English in a conversation during that time. So, I enrolled in KIA. Maybe I was 53 years old."  
(Participant 1, personal communication, February 3, 2024)

"... I joined the Saturday mate because I feel like I have a group of friends who I can talk to every weekend. I can talk about my interests, and I can learn from their stories."  
(Participant 4, personal communication, February 10, 2024)

"... Usually, I'm alone in the house, and I have nothing to do on weekends. So, instead of staying at home, I want to go out and talk with my new friends in English. I also learn interesting things from them and the class."  
(Participant 5, personal communication, February 17, 2024)

These stories highlight the fundamental connection between language skills and social engagement (Lee, 2020). Thus, social engagement emerges as a strong motivator for individuals to pursue English language acquisition, promoting linguistic proficiency, social integration, and community building.

### THEME 1.3. PERSONAL ENRICHMENT

The theme emphasises the significance of personal enrichment for English language learners, emphasising the need for fluency (Irie, 2022), balance between academic achievement and practical communication skills (Marabe & Petalla, 2023; Saito, 2019), and the intrinsic worth of education (Kacetl & Klímová, 2021; Pfenninger & Polz, 2018; San Jose & Madrigal, 2023; Singleton & Záborská, 2020). The participants shared the following:

"I want to speak more fluently... without thinking too much in my brain before I can speak. Now, I have to think in my brain first, then go down and speak.... So, I want to skip thinking too much before speaking. I mean I want to be able to speak naturally. Not too slow. ... And I want to take TOEIC again. ... My last TOEIC score was 735... my target is over 800. It's difficult but I'm enjoying it."

(Participant 1, personal communication, February 3, 2024)

"... English helped me change my character ... because before, I was very Japanese, very shy, and not active. But now, I'm very active and friendly. And my character has changed completely because of learning English. ... I can say yes and no clearly. But Japanese people can't say no directly."

(Participant 2, personal communication, February 8, 2024)

"... We wanted to pass the Eiken test to improve. But it was very academic. We studied English just to pass the test. No speaking skills. Just writing and grammar and listening. And 10 years ago, I passed the exam. ... Yes, Eiken."

(Participant 3, personal communication, February 8, 2024)

The theme of personal enrichment highlights the multifaceted reasons driving English language learning, including linguistic competency, cultural adaptability, self-improvement, and intellectual fulfilment. The participants' stories reflect a very personal journey characterised by resilience, introspection, and an unwavering commitment to continuing learning.

The theme of motivational factors emphasises the importance of personal interest, social engagement, and personal enrichment in English language learning. Personal interest predicts proficiency, social engagement helps improve linguistic skills, and personal enrichment motivates self-improvement and cultural integration. These subthemes highlight the interconnectedness of personal, social, and intellectual aspects in achieving ELP.

### THEME 2.1. DYNAMICS OF SEX AND ELP

The study explores sex dynamics in Japanese English language learning, revealing varying perspectives on sex, language competence, and societal roles (Brinton, 2023; Holbrow, 2022; Nemoto, 2016), with men often pursuing higher proficiency for job prospects. The participants highlight the evolving professional landscape, with women increasingly working in multinational companies, challenging traditional gender stereotypes (Papp & Umemura, 2021) and broader cultural expectations (Brinton, 2023). Women's increased earnings may prompt them to study English more carefully, highlighting the complex interplay of cultural expectations, economic factors, and changing societal roles in Japanese English language acquisition (Brinton, 2023; Holbrow, 2022; Nemoto, 2016). Their answers are stated below.

"... I think female is better than male... because in singing or talking, female is better. Females like talking. So, I think women's English skills are better than men's.... I'm not sure, but maybe when talking, females are better. But in the test, males are better. The test is written and listening. So, maybe males are good at writing and listening."

(Participant 1, personal communication, February 3, 2024)

“I think they (men) study hard. I think some of them are trying to pass the TOEIC or Eiken. In our class, most men have a higher level of English because they study harder for their jobs, and they can get business trips and promotions.”

(Participant 2, personal communication, February 8, 2024)

“... we can say that men’s LP can be a result of their roles and responsibilities. If women’s salaries increase because of their English skills, I’m sure they will also study English harder.”

(Participant 5, personal communication, February 17, 2024)

## THEME 2.2. DYNAMICS OF AGE AND ELP

The study explores the dynamics of age and ELP. Older learners often have higher levels of ELP due to their competitive nature, focus on studying English, exposure to diverse cultures, life experiences, and retirement (San Jose & Madrigal, 2023). Cognitive characteristics, experiences (Merriam & Baumgartner, 2020), learning tactics, and exposure to real-life situations (Gass et al., 2020; Mitchell et al., 2019;) contribute to their greater ELP. They shared the following:

“... older people don't want to lose. Like we usually want to win. It's like our pride. In a competition, we want to show what we got. We want to show how good we are in what we do. We like the feeling of winning. We don't want to feel defeated. ... Maybe we have enough time to study because we don't work anymore.”

(Participant 1, personal communication, February 3, 2024)

“... For many years, the older students got many experiences. Some experiences can help them to study English. Like some strategies or systems... older students can be creative because they know how they learn and they know what learning techniques work for them. I think it's more on being able to manage their own schedule, their own style of learning, their own pacing of learning.”

(Participant 5, personal communication, February 17, 2024)

“Older students can check their own progress in learning English. They can monitor if they are improving or not. ... because older students, maybe because of their experiences, can quickly understand grammar rules or the patterns of sentences and the use of the vocabulary they memorise. They are also aware of what types of strategies work for them to learn faster. And the goals why they study English is clearer than the younger students. ... I'm thinking that older students have more experience.”

(Participant 5, personal communication, February 17, 2024)

## THEME 2.3. DYNAMICS OF EDUCATION AND ELP

Participants believe that enthusiasm (Hussain et al., 2020), passion (San Jose & Madrigal, 2023), and personal engagement (Merriam, 2018) are crucial factors. However, they also argue that formal education is not the only factor (Lardiere, 2017). Exposure to real-world usage scenarios and passion can compensate for a lack of formal schooling. Limited educational options may also influence language proficiency. They shared the following:

“Maybe people who are interested in English will be successful regardless of educational attainment. I don’t need it to be successful in speaking English if I am interested in learning it. Even high school graduates or elementary graduates can be successful. ... The object or the purpose of studying the language is more important than just education or just going to university. If they know the purpose of studying English, it is easy to learn and speak it...”

(Participant 1, personal communication, February 3, 2024)

“I think, education is not very important in English proficiency. Even if a person didn’t finish university or high school, they can become CEO of a company because of their hard work. They can also become very good in English because of their hard work and interest. So, education, I don’t think so. ... I think students should choose the language they like to study because Japan’s international companies go to different countries, not only in the USA or Australia or UK.”

(Participant 2, personal communication, February 8, 2024)

"Yes, it's (education) important. I didn't go to university. I didn't have a lot of opportunities to learn and use English. That's why my English is not very good."

(Participant 5, personal communication, February 17, 2024)

#### THEME 2.4. DYNAMICS OF TIME AND ELP

Participants emphasised the importance of quality time (Al Zoubi, 2018), balancing urgency and enjoyment (Inada, 2022; Singleton & Záborská, 2020), setting clear goals (Ikoma, 2019; Schiller & Dorner, 2022), finding time for constant practice, and balancing other commitments (Merriam, 2018; San Jose & Madrigal, 2023). The complexities of the relationship between time and ELP are highlighted, emphasising the need for a comprehensive approach that considers the amount, quality, and context of study time.

"The quality time, the short time but focus on studying. If I study speaking for 1 hour, but only once a month, it's not good for me. I will not learn fast. So, it should be how many times a month. It's how many 1 hour I spend speaking English."

(Participant 1, personal communication, February 3, 2024)

"... If someone needs to learn English immediately, I think that person needs to spend a lot of time in learning English. ... It depends on the purpose or goal of learning English. But enjoy, I mean they don't enjoy it if they are in a hurry like my son. For me, I want to enjoy it whether short time or a longer time studying. ..."

(Participant 2, personal communication, February 8, 2024)

"Having a goal is very very important. ... My other goals were to learn to use English in traveling, to pass Eiken or English test, and then just communicate with my international friends. So, if a person has a goal. ... Time is very important."

(Participant 3, personal communication, February 8, 2024)

"... the more time we study, the more chances of learning it and being able to use it. ... But I don't have enough time. I only practice English or use English when I go to our English class on Saturday. ..."

(Participant 4, personal communication, February 10, 2024)

"The reason why my English is so basic despite my age is because I did not spend much time studying English... because I did not need it."

(Participant 5, personal communication, February 17, 2024)

#### SYNTHESIS AND IMPLICATIONS

Putting the pieces together, the findings shed light on the complex nature of Japanese third-age English language learning, emphasising the interplay between personal interest, social engagement, personal enrichment, and other socioeconomic aspects. The findings elucidate questions that emerged from the results of the quantitative data. The findings explicate the complex web of factors that influence language learning journeys, emphasising the interdependence of psychological, social, and intellectual aspects in the pursuit of English proficiency.

The qualitative findings suggest that EFL programs in Japan can be significantly improved by aligning with learners' specific motivations and needs. Programs should incorporate elements that tap into personal interests to enhance engagement and create social opportunities to motivate learners and build community. Addressing the unique needs of different age groups and sexes, as well as offering flexible, real-world learning experiences, can further enhance language proficiency. Additionally, programs should emphasise consistent practice, effective time management, and personal development to foster a holistic learning experience.



#### MIXED METHOD DATA

Below are the meta-inferences generated by bringing together quantitative and qualitative findings. The researchers offer a brief theoretical explanation for the study's consistent results.

##### THE ELP LEVELS OF JAPANESE THIRD-AGE LEARNERS ARE INFLUENCED BY THEIR PURPOSE-DRIVEN MOTIVATIONS AND COMMITMENT

Japanese third-age learners' ELP levels are influenced by their purpose-driven motivations and commitment (Eguz, 2019; San Jose & Madrigal, 2023; Singleton & Záborská, 2020) to language learning. These motivations, such as professional advancement or personal interests, influence their dedication and determination in language learning. Understanding these motivations can help design tailored programs (Eguz, 2019; Hejazi et al., 2019;) that cater to the specific needs and preferences of these learners.

##### THERE IS AN INTRICATE INTERPLAY OF ELP, SEX DYNAMICS, AND CULTURAL NORMS IN THE CONTEXT OF THIRD-AGE EFL LEARNING IN JAPAN

Learning English in Japan is influenced by sex and cultural norms (Brinton, 2023; Holbrow, 2022; Nemoto, 2016; Papp & Umemura, 2021), which affect access to resources, practice opportunities, and attitudes. Sex dynamics and cultural values influence language learning habits and attitudes, affecting learners' motivation and perceived value of proficiency. Understanding these factors helps create inclusive, culturally sensitive language learning initiatives.

##### AN INTERRELATIONSHIP OF AGE, MOTIVATION, EXPERIENCES, AND LEARNING MECHANISMS FOSTERS ELP

Language competency is influenced by multiple factors, including age, motivation, experiences, and learning mechanisms (Ellis, 2015; San Jose & Madrigal, 2023; Singleton & Záborská, 2020). Motivation is a key factor, impacting learners' willingness to learn. Experiences (Gabryś-Barker, 2017; Gass et al., 2020), such as cultural exchange or authentic communication, also contribute to ELP. Learning mechanisms (Gabryś-Barker, 2017; Mitchell et al., 2019;), such as goal setting and metacognitive awareness, can improve learning efficiency.

##### A HIGHER LEVEL OF ELP CAN BE ACHIEVED THROUGH EDUCATION, PASSION, INTRINSIC MOTIVATIONS, AND REAL-WORLD EXPERIENCES

Language proficiency can be achieved through passion, intrinsic drives, and real-world experiences, not just formal schooling (Lardiere, 2017; Singleton & Záborská, 2020). Real-world experiences (Kacatl & Klímová, 2021), exposure to authentic English language contexts, and interaction with native speakers promote deeper comprehension and development (Merriam, 2018), leading to more holistic language learning approaches.

##### A COMPREHENSIVE APPROACH TO ACQUIRING ELP CONSIDERS THE AMOUNT, QUALITY, AND CONTEXT OF STUDY TIME

A comprehensive approach to ELP involves a combination of quality and context-specific activities (Domingo, 2019), such as interactive exercises and communicative practice, to enhance language proficiency. This holistic approach emphasises active participation and contextualisation

(Kacetyl & Klímová, 2021; Merriam, 2018) in various settings, fostering a deeper understanding of language use and communication.

#### SYNTHESIS

The meta-inferences reveal a complex relationship between ELP acquisition, highlighting the importance of purpose, commitment, sex dynamics, cultural norms, age, motivation, experiences, and learning mechanisms. They emphasise the need for a comprehensive approach considering both quantity and quality of study time.

#### EMERGING FRAMEWORK

The study proposes an emerging framework for understanding English language learning among Japanese third-age learners. Figure 3 shows the third-age learner at the centre of the language program initiative who demonstrates purpose-driven motivations and whose ELP is influenced by the complex interplay of sex, age, education, and time. By considering and leveraging those elements, teachers may be able to produce culturally sensitive and effectively tailored instructional materials, which may serve the purpose of improving the third-age learners' ELP.

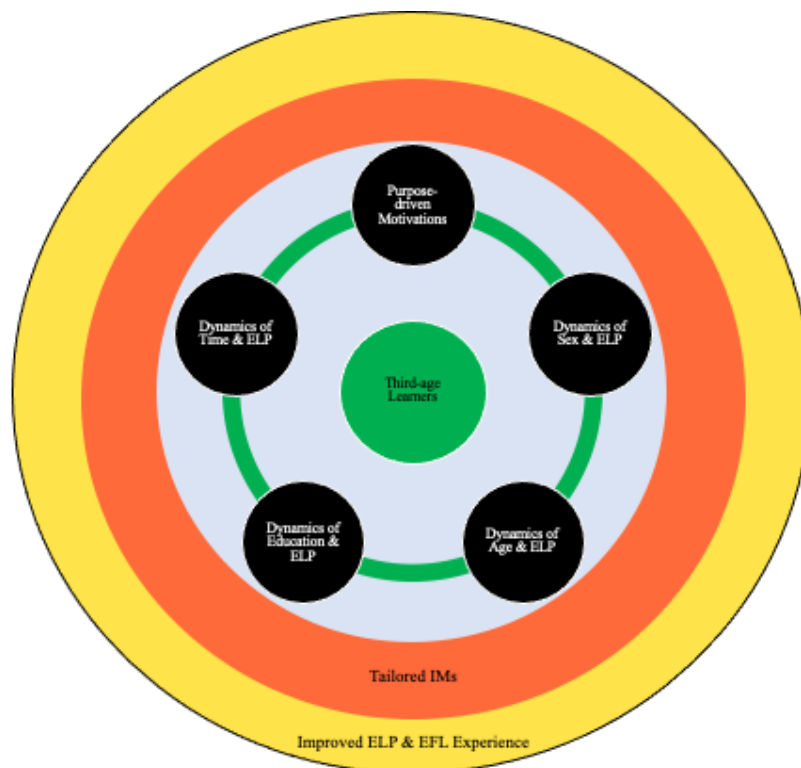


FIGURE 2. Emerging Framework

## CONCLUSION

This study contributes to the field by offering evidence-based insights and practical recommendations for designing EFL programs that cater to the unique needs of Japanese third-age learners. It sheds light on the ELP levels of Japanese third-age learners and various factors that affect their language learning journey. It affirms that demographics like sex, age, educational background, and study affect third-age learners' ELP. Qualitative data corroborated these findings, pointing out how crucial it is to have purpose-driven motivations and commitment in learning a language, as well as the effect of sex dynamics, cultural norms, age, and learning experiences. The development of English language proficiency among third-age learners in Japan is multifaceted. Motivational and demographic factors critically influence ELP levels, highlighting the interplay of purpose-driven motivations, sex dynamics, age, education, commitment, cultural norms, and learning mechanisms. It is also necessary to align language learning goals with the personal interests and aspirations of third-age learners. Acquiring higher ELP levels requires a holistic approach to language learning that considers motivational and demographic factors.

In addition, it is also important to consider that EFL programs for third-age learners are not solely focused on the improvement of ELP. EFL facilitators for third-agers should consider third-agers' motives, such as psychological, social, and intellectual motivations. By understanding the various factors that influence ELP development among third-age learners and adopting an extensive and holistic approach to EFL programs in Japan, stakeholders can develop more inclusive and effective language learning initiatives that address the unique needs and experiences of Japanese third-age learners, enhancing their ELP and enriching their learning experiences.

Lastly, the results of this study served as a foundation for designing instructional materials (IMs) for Japanese third-age learners. Future studies may focus on pilot testing the IMs, developing a structured methodology, data collection instruments, implementation process, iterative feedback loop, revision and refinement procedure, and final evaluation.

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