



TEACHING ENGLISH TO ADULTS

AUTUMN 2024

Informal english teaching to adults in Europe and Baltic countries

Language policy in Europe is becoming extremely important.

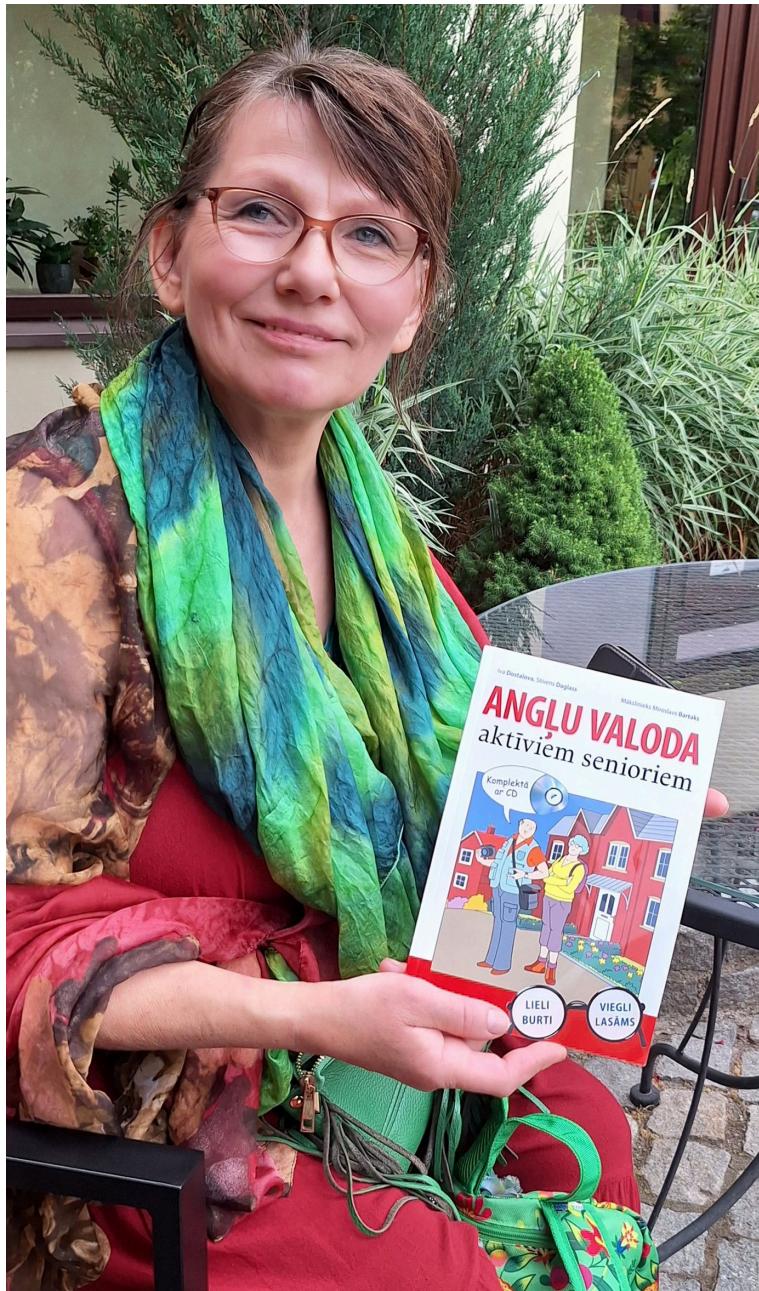
Continuous learning and improvement in today's constantly changing world is one of the priority aspirations of European countries, which are forming a competent society. A special role is played by language education for adults, which encourages people to consciously realize the importance and significance of a foreign language and helps to expand and improve their professional competences. Language learning for adults is also important for having a clear mind and a great memory for as long as possible.



Since 2001, which have been announced in Europe a year of languages, the question of the importance of languages in the EU has been brought up more than once in the context: starting with the Barcelona goal in 2002, when the provision was established that every EU citizen, while preserving their native language, as a sign of their cultural heritage, should learn and use at least two more foreign languages and concluding with the planned PISA 2025 survey in which foreign languages will be assessed for the first time skills.

After the language policy in Europe became extremely important and the EU introduced multilingualism as a separate policy area, it is promoted in Baltic states as well. Foreign language policy documents highlight the importance of language teaching policy in the public education system, emphasizing the social and economic benefits of lifelong language learning.

However, although the language teaching policy of the Baltic countries is formed based on multilingualism policy in the main principles and strategic documents of the European Union, in the context of general European trends, it is rather fragmented and underdeveloped.



The goals set out in the strategic documents regarding language learning are not fully implemented in the general and higher education system, as well as in the context of lifelong learning. For the development of adult linguistic competences, only recommendations are made that in cooperation with state and private educational institutions would look for opportunities to enable adults to learn foreign languages at an affordable price for everyone.

Strategic documents do not give space and attention to the non-formal learning of foreign languages by adults. Scientific discussions about adult continuous learning and motivation have recently been quite intense and multifaceted, although there is still no unified concept of adult learning, and issues of adult learning motivation are not abundant in the scientific discourse. There is a lack of research on the motivation of adults to learn foreign languages in a non-formal education organization. This constitutes the research problem, emphasizing the peculiarities of adult foreign language learning motivation, emphasizing the dominant motives, their connections with some demographic characteristics of adults, when teaching and learning take place in an informal education organization. This area is not sufficiently covered in the media either: articles about adult foreign language learning mostly refer to formal education, such as courses.



As for the non-formal learning of English for adults in Lithuania and Latvia, non-formal adult education institutions such as public libraries, universities of the third age, and non-governmental organizations play an important role here. On the initiative of these institutions, life-long learning enthusiasts come together, for whom informal English language learning is both an opportunity to improve personal competences and an opportunity to spend their free time in a quality way.

This publication presents an international initiative on teaching English to adults in Lithuania and Latvia that was implemented thanks to the Erasmus+ strategic partnerships program. The projects of this program allow international partners not only to learn from each other, but also to spread good practice to other adult educators and learners in Europe.

Innovations in language learning of adults in the partnership project of the Erasmus+ program

The Erasmus+ program project T.E.T.E („Teaching English to Elderly“) was coordinated by the Latvian NGO Vecmājinās.lv and was implemented from January to August, 2024. Panevēžys County Gabrielė Petkevičaitė-Bitė Public Library was the partner.

The main goal of this strategic partnership project was to adopt the good experience of European non-formal education institutions in the field of adult language learning, due to the partnership of the two countries, learning new effective methods of learning English, improving the linguistic and cultural competences of adult learners and promoting international cooperation.

In order to innovate in the field of non-formal language learning for adults, groups of adult learners in Latvia and Lithuania presented to each other the language learning methods they used and applied them in practice. The suggested methods were tested with groups of adult learners in Latvia and Lithuania (twenty persons aged 50+ and older learned in the target group of each country).

In addition to local English language classes for adults in Latvia and Lithuania, the project agenda also included two working group meetings in Lithuania (February and July) and Latvia (March and August). During these meetings, the partners not only participated in the planning sessions of the project activities, but also got acquainted with the possibilities of informal English language learning for adults in the visited country, visited libraries and other cultural institutions.

On the 9th-10th of July a conference took place in Panevēžys, during which learning progress and the effectiveness of tested English language learning methods were evaluated. During this event, groups of learners from both countries had the opportunity to communicate in person informally, and also participated in the practical part of the conference, where they tested their knowledge and improved their spoken English skills.

After the conference, the working groups of the project partners met in Latvia to discuss the content of the project publication and the future project report. Throughout August, until the end of the project, groups of learners in Latvia and Lithuania continued to participate in local sessions, during which they tested new methods of learning English.



Vecmāmiņas.lv (Grannies.lv)

The NGO from LATVIA (non-governmental organisation, association) Grannies.lv ("Vecmāmiņas.lv") was established in 2011 with the aim to unite active seniors and work in the field of adult education, encouraging seniors to become active citizens and engage in lifelong learning activities. The main goals of the association "Grannies.lv" are to educate seniors, exchange knowledge and experience, as well as to actively participate in civic activities, charity campaigns and volunteering.

The objectives of the association are:

- Charity, alternative social care services;
- Protection of human and individual rights;
- Development of civil society;
- Health promotion, social rehabilitation;
- Promoting education,
- Improving the social well-being of the poor and socially vulnerable groups

NGO Grannies.lv offers a wide range of social and physical activity opportunities to its members, provides information and counselling in crisis situations, with a special focus on cases related to domestic violence. The activities of the association contribute to the integration of socially excluded age groups into society and to the promotion of volunteer activities in Latvia.

The members of Grannies.lv are able-bodied physical persons who have reached the age of majority, submitted an application to become a member (approved questionnaire form), undertake to comply with the statutes and work actively in the implementation of its objectives.

NGO "Grannies.lv" together with the association "Talent City" ("Talantu pilsēta") has participated in the project "Wise Coach" ("Viedais treneris") supported by the Riga City Council Welfare Department, where the trainers of the association passed their knowledge accumulated over the years to the visitors of the Day Centres.

The trainers of the NGO "Grannies.lv" regularly update their knowledge and share their experience in the events and trainings organised by the association "Tine", which brings together women active in entrepreneurship. Currently, the association's associate partner is the Day Centre for Children in Ziepniekkalns, "Sirdsgaisma".

International activities started in 2014, and a European Development Plan has been drawn up. The Nordplus Adult project "Senior Motivation to Learn" was implemented, as well as several Erasmus Plus KA1 mobility projects where the trainers of the association learnt new methods in the field of non-formal adult education (2015 - Third Generation - Second Chance, 2017 - Moving Forward, 2018 - Feel and Support, 2019 - Courage to Accept Challenges). 2023 - Innovations in our work. 2024 - Accreditation Erasmus Plus.

Organization's activities in the field of English language teaching

Main focus of NGO Grannies.lv is education and culture activities for seniors. All educators are volunteers. Language teaching is most active in Valmiera where the NGO has started Valmiera Senior School. Each time about 10 seniors attend regular classes. In the project they were the main target group. The participants have learned language long time ago, formally in school, but have had little practice options in English (more in Russian, though).

The language trainers are Evija Dzvinko, Rita Liepiņa from Valmiera, Vija Skuja at Valmiera Pensioners Club, Ināra Pučuka and Diana Svika in Riga. The trainers have attended methodology course in Iceland - STPM - Smart Teachers Play More - use of TPR method, in Porto the trainers in Erasmus Plus KA 1 project attended course In English, please - learning communicative methods. They use all this variety of methods in their daily work.





Panevėžys County Gabrielė Petkevičaitė-Bitė Public Library

Panevėžys County Gabrielė Petkevičaitė-Bitė Public Library is the main library in the northeast region of Lithuania. It has accumulated the biggest collection of publications and develops various cultural activities. The library is a centre of research, coordination, methodological assistance, development of professional competencies of library specialists, interlibrary loan services, bibliography, ethnography and information for all the libraries in the region. It ensures implementation of library development programmes of the state, serves users, provides opportunities to meet their cultural, self-educational and educational needs, cultivates traditions of ethnographic regions, improves the expansion of cultural and art services.

One of the main areas of activities in the library is Adult Education. The programs mainly focus on non-formal education. The library is the place where the lifelong learning is promoted and people can improve their cultural, digital literacy and social competences. In this area, the library provides training services in information, communication and media literacy; promotes the development of cultural and social skills of citizens (organizes cultural and educational events, hobby clubs where people learn languages, crafts, come together according to age groups and interests). The library, acting as a competence centre for regional libraries, provides training for the specialists of municipal libraries. Library collaborates with the local retirement home, employment service and all those who wish to participate in library's activities and offer programmes that enrich the education culture in the community. At the moment the main fields of the organisation's activity in the field of adult education are: programs for citizens and library specialists on ICT, digital literacy and media and information literacy; reading promotion (book clubs) language learning (English conversations club "Let's Talk" and Language Café), hobby clubs (knitting), a club for senior citizens.



Experience in the international projects

In 2023 together with the libraries of Kaunas and Klaipeda counties and partners from Norway, the project "Innovative solutions to promote reading in Lithuanian libraries for the creation of social relations of children and youth with the environment" was completed (Panevezys County Library was the coordinator); Funded by Iceland, Liechtenstein, Norway Grants.

The project "International Storytelling Festival SEKAS 2022" was implemented in 2022; Funded by Lithuanian Council of Culture.

The project "Creating a model of storytelling art and method for Lithuanian libraries" was implemented with Swedish and Norwegian partners in 2020–2022; Funded by Nordic Culture Point.

The project "Storytelling Mastery for Audiences of Lithuanian Libraries" was implemented with Latvian and Swedish partners in 2020–2021. Funded by FEST (Federation of European Storytelling Network).

In 2019–2021 the Library participated as a partner in the project "ZELDA. Green and sustainable library" of the public library of the city of Rijeka, Croatia. (Funded by Erasmus+)

In 2023 the Library was funded from the Baltic-American Freedom Foundation, and organized an international conference "The Power of Story to Inspire Voice: Engaging Educators in Digital Storytelling".

Projects in Erasmus+ program Adult Education field have been implemented since 2014. In 2021 the Library was accredited in Erasmus+ program for the period 2021–2027.



Organization's activities in the field of English language teaching

English conversations club "Let's Talk" for adults (since 2018). It is a space where the English language becomes a living instrument for communication. These classes are for all those who, despite endless efforts - courses, textbooks and grammar tables - still do not dare to talk to a foreigner on the street.

This idea arose from the observation that students who demonstrate excellent knowledge in the classroom are disturbed when they have to speak English in real-life situations, with strangers. The language club brings the language closer to real life. The diversity of people and the lively, ever-changing themes encourage improvisation and build self-confidence.

These are not language lessons, so the meetings are not suitable for those who have never studied English. The purpose of this club is not teaching, but practice. Foreign guests staying in the city are also welcome in the club. The topics of the meetings are aimed at an adult audience.

Language Café (since 2023). In this club people can practice any language they speak (usually English, French, German is chosen) in democratic and informal atmosphere.



The language trainer is Virginija Švedienė, coordinator of adult education activities, philologist, having an experience of teaching English at school for 15 years, at the moment working in adult education field for 8 years. She prepares language learning programs for citizens and conducts them in person and online; moderates English conversations club "Let's Talk" and Language Café. Prepares training programs for library specialists and conducts them both in person and online.

Methods

„Tell Us Your Story”

This method is based on storytelling. Questions are written on the cards, in response to a particular question the participants tell about themselves and their personal experiences, share their point of view about the phenomena they encounter in everyday life or are encouraged to create imaginary situations and tell how they would behave in them.

The set of cards can be divided into several parts and the cards can be arranged according to the level of English proficiency of the participants – the participants can also be divided into groups and given cards corresponding to their level of English.

Some questions for the learners with lower English level: „Tell about your talents”, „Tell about the person who inspires you”, „Tell what you are dreaming about”, etc. For advanced students: „Tell us what you do or could do to make your lifestyle more eco-friendly”, „Tell us what relationship between people will be like in the future”, „Tell us which of your traits you would like to change and why”, etc.

People in one group get several cards with different questions on them. One of the group members is a moderator – they pick one card and read the question and everyone in the group has to answer it. After discussing one question, the moderator picks the next one and again every member of the group answers it. The members are encouraged to not limit their answers to one sentence only but to try to expand their response.

“Tell your story” cards is a great tool for improving English conversational skills and letting people to get to know each other better.

Some feedback from participants:

Daiva: "This method encourages us to refresh our vocabulary speaking on different topics".

Nijolė: "The questions are quite simple and it is fun to talk with groupmates and share our life experience".

Vilma: "While using "Tell Your Story" cards, very often we dive into our childhood memories – this helps us to let our clubmates to get to know us even better".

Rimantas: "All methods are helpful when we talk about improving our speaking skills. And this method also encourages us to talk – that's why we are here, in this club".

“Tell Us Your Story” method was also tried with “Let’s Talk” online groups.

Some feedback from the participants:

Gintaras: "Tell your story" exercise is useful for improving our spoken English and sharing our personal experience with groupmates".



Preparing a set of questions on a particular topic

An effective method to improve not only speaking, but also writing skills and to practice formulating questions.

Participants of the session split into groups and are given separate topics. They have to prepare five questions each based on their specific topic. Afterwards, the groups exchange their prepared questions and discuss them in their team.

In addition to grammar and vocabulary practice, groups have the opportunity to experience the effect of surprise – it is interesting to receive questions prepared by members of another group and discuss them.

The topics can be both simple and complex – imagination and creativity; jobs/occupations; police; science and technologies; gender and sexism; philosophy and meaning; helping other people, etc.

Examples: a topic “Helping other people”, possible questions – “How often do you help people around you?”, “How do you help people around you, such as neighbours, family and friends?”, “How do you feel when you receive help from others?”, “Do you think people are more or less willing to help others nowadays?”, “What role does empathy play in helping others?”, etc.

Some feedback from participants:

“This method encourages teamwork and creativity, makes you to draw on your own experience. From a linguistic perspective, this method helps to repeat the construction of interrogative sentences. A specific topic helps to refresh and expand vocabulary”.





"Agree/disagree/comment"

The method is intended for the development of communication skills, encourages logical thinking and presenting a reasoned opinion on certain issues. For the method, you can choose any topic or make a list of questions from different topics. The moderator, before the group members start the task, emphasizes that it is not enough to answer a question or a statement positively or negatively. Each speaker must justify their answer, explain why they have such an opinion.

In the library meeting "Let's Talk" club had a topic "Guilty pleasures" and discussed such questions like "Do you like ordering delivery food?", "Do you like spending all Sunday in pyjamas?", "Do you often sleep in late?", etc.

"Let's Talk" online groups discussed such statements as "English is a very difficult language to learn"; "Husbands and wives should have the same educational level"; "Friendship is the most important relationship in life"; "Life begins at forty" and probably the most controversial one - "Women are not equal to men in our society".

Some feedback from participants:

Rytis: "This method helps us to learn English language actively, while speaking on different topics, enriching our vocabulary, practicing our listening and speaking skills".

Vida: "This method helps us to improve our language skills and to easier achieve the goal of speaking more fluent English and moving forward".

Method of visual thinking

The essence of this method is to improve your visual thinking and English speaking skills. An art exhibition environment is ideal for this method, and if that is not possible, photographs, cut-outs with images or even drawings can be used.

Participants are divided into two groups. One of the groups goes to the exhibition (or gallery of available photos), chooses one, which the other group will have to guess. Group members discuss the content of the picture (photo) in as much detail as possible. Each member of the group must be involved in this process.

The second group stays in another room and makes a list of possible questions. Questions can be about the age, mood of people, shape, colour of objects, etc. of the people in the picture (photo). Possible questions: "Are there any people in the picture?", "Are there any trees (flowers, animals, cars, et.) in the picture?", "Is it summer (autumn, spring, winter) in the picture?", etc. All group members have to contribute to making this list of questions. When the group of making questions is ready, they call by phone to another group and ask the questions from the list. When all the questions are answered, the group of asking questions comes to the space of the exhibition and tries to find the particular picture (photo). The task of both groups is to formulate the questions and answers as precisely as possible.

Some feedback from participants:

"This method not only helps to repeat the correct structure of English questions, but also makes you notice details, think about your statements before presenting them to another group. This is a great exercise in logical thinking. After all, this is an unconventional way to experience art exhibitions".



Impact and inspirations for the future



Adult learners from both countries evaluate the participation in this project positively and say that they gained useful linguistic and cultural experience. They tried new English learning methods and the particular methods helped them to get to know each other better. They shared their own experience and connected with other English learners internationally.

The used methods encouraged the adult learners to open to their conversation partners and to engage into thought-provoking discussions, helped to reduce the stress and fear of making mistakes, served as an ice-breaker when meeting a newcomer in the club. When using these methods in online sessions, a more diverse community was involved into discussion.

According to the chosen topics, the participants had deep discussions on social, psychological, philosophical issues and this encouraged them to learn some new words and expressions. The participants were brave enough to choose unusual and sometimes even controversial statements for their discussions.

Erasmus+ program is a great opportunity to connect with adult English learners in other European countries. International projects are the best opportunities to share your own experience and to discover your methods to others. The participants of the project found out about new formats and methods of learning English, gained even more confidence in using the language. And they made once more sure that lifelong learning is an engaging and worthwhile process.

Virginija Švedienė, coordinator of adult education activities, in charge of implementing the project "Teaching English to Elderly" in Panevėžys County Gabrielė Petkevičaitė-Bitė Public Library:

"The experience of our library in this project allowed us, adult educators, to learn new methods and formats of English language teaching and encouraged to prepare a program for library specialists working with groups of adult learners. This program will start in the fall of 2024. Collaboration with Latvian colleagues has inspired other international connections, seeking opportunities for adult learners to improve their spoken English skills by communicating with English native speakers. English conversations club "Let's Talk" continues its cooperation with the book club in Missouri (USA) because the self-confidence gained thanks to the project "Teaching English to Elderly" allows our club members to strive for fluency. Thanks to the project, we established contacts with another English language club in Riga. These meetings enrich us both linguistically and culturally".

Rita Liepina, English language trainer for the group of seniors in Latvia, one of the project coordinators:

"Adult learners are excellent students to have in the classroom as they are always happy to talk about their experiences and give their opinions on different topics. Social element was very important in this project as seniors often attend class to mix with their peers, forming very strong friendships and socialising together after the class and even in their free time. Connecting with Lithuanian adult learners was also interesting for our learners in the sense that most of our learners (both Latvian and Lithuanian) are children of the Soviet times who attended school and learned foreign languages at the same time. Therefore, for them, learning English in this period of life was a certain challenge.

During the implementation process of this project, our organization received the Erasmus+ program accreditation. We are sure that the experience of the project "Teaching English to Elderly" has fueled our growth as an institution, strengthened our partnership and teamwork skills, which will be very useful for us in the implementation of other international projects".

Maira Magreca (76 y.o.) English learner from Latvia: "I think anyone can learn languages. People sometimes get stuck in - "I don't know the language", "I won't go to that country", "I am too old to learn" and so on. If you are going to a country, you need to have a minimum knowledge of the language so that you can have a minimum understanding, find your way or find your travel companions. Don't put some kind of a flap on your ears. If you keep your eyes open, your ears open - anyone can learn a language.

There are opportunities to learn a language online, but better with a good teacher you respect and listen to and want to hear from".

ErasmusPlus KA 2 - TETE "Teaching English to Elderly", Nr. 2023-2-LV01-KA210-ADU-000180419

Project partners – NGO Grannies.lv (Latvia), Panevezys county Gabriele Petkevicaite-Bite public library (Lithuania)

Funded by the European Union. Views and opinions expressed are however those of the author(s) only and do not necessarily reflect those of the European Union or the European Education and Culture Executive Agency (EACEA). Neither the European Union nor EACEA can be held responsible for them.



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