

Vocabulary Learning in Senior EFL Learners: Challenges and Opportunities

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Abstract

Against the backdrop of global population aging, English vocabulary learning among senior learners plays a vital role in lifelong education. It supports daily communication, social interaction, and cognitive preservation. This conceptual review paper aims to holistically depict senior EFL learners regarding their challenges and learning advantages by exploring how effectively senior learners can build English vocabulary based on the synthesis of existing research in this field. It suggests that the effectiveness of vocabulary learning by these learners should not be measured solely by the ability to memorize extensive word lists, retrieve words rapidly, or achieve native-like accuracy. Its effectiveness lies in acquiring personally useful words, achieving meaningful retention, and applying them in practical contexts. Senior learners face physical and cognitive challenges, including weakened sensory perception, reduced stamina, slower processing speed, limited working memory, and difficulties in retrieving unfamiliar word forms. However, they still possess significant strengths, such as stable semantic memory, crystallized intelligence, robust long-term memory, metalinguistic awareness, and goal-directed attention. Such strengths enable effective learning via meaningful association, intentional mnemonic techniques, self-directed review, and contextualized practice. Consequently, senior EFL learners ought to prioritize practical vocabulary, learn at a comfortable pace, and link new words to familiar experiences. Meanwhile, instructors can ease time pressure, accommodate sensory limitations, utilize multimodal and story-based

scaffolding, and take learners' well-being as a key indicator of learning outcomes. Overall, effective vocabulary learning in senior learners relies on practical content and meaningful practice, delivered at a reasonable pace and aligned with learners' cognitive strengths and daily needs.

Keywords: vocabulary learning, senior EFL learners, lifelong learning, EFL learning

1. Introduction

Global aging has become a significant demographic trend. As of 2026, people over 60 make up 15.2% of the world's population, and this proportion is predicted to reach 21.8% by 2050 (WHO, 2026). Improving senior adults' well-being via non-pharmacological interventions covering physical, social, and cognitive health has become a priority (Hanna et al., 2022). Learning foreign languages, particularly English, has been shown to support cognitive vitality, facilitate social interaction, and enhance self-worth (Alladi et al., 2013; Bak, 2016; Klimova, 2018). As a global lingua franca, English grants senior learners access to more cultural and informational resources, making it a valuable target for lifelong learning.

A solid vocabulary underpins English proficiency. Limited word knowledge greatly restricts learners' ability to express ideas (Wilkins, 1972). For senior adults, vocabulary is especially critical as their primary goal is practical, daily communication, encompassing travel, reading health information, navigating digital tools, and conversing with younger family members (Yang, 2020; Chen, 2022; Wei et al., 2024).

Learning new words is inherently challenging, requiring the simultaneous mastery of forms, meanings, and uses (Nation, 2013). This challenge is exacerbated in senior adults due to age-related cognitive declines in working memory and processing speed (Li & Wu, 2019). Conventional methods, such as memorization of word lists, often fail to support long-term retention.

On the other hand, vocabulary learning is less demanding for aging brains than mastering complex grammar rules, as words can be acquired as small, meaningful units (Klimova, 2021; Nation, 2013). Vocabulary-focused practice also lowers anxiety, allowing learners to communicate functionally without worrying about perfect grammar (Singleton & Ryan, 2004). This explains why vocabulary-focused approaches fit well with senior learners' cognitive strengths and daily communication needs. A vocabulary based approach is an interesting concept

Despite age-related cognitive declines, senior learners actively compensate by employing diverse strategies, such as associations, mnemonics, repetition, and contextual learning, all helping strengthen retention (Fong et al., 2022). These strengths are often overlooked or underestimated by researchers and EFL instructors, leading to less effective instructional practices. Recognizing both the challenges senior learners encounter and adaptive strategies they use is essential for designing better instruction.

This conceptual review aims to present a holistic picture of senior EFL learners, examining

their challenges and learning advantages. Guided by this perspective, the study synthesizes findings from existing literature on aging, cognition, and second language acquisition to address the following research question: How can senior EFL learners learn English vocabulary effectively?

This review followed a narrative synthesis approach. A literature search was conducted in Web of Science, using keywords including “senior EFL learners, older adults vocabulary learning, aging and foreign language, and third-age language acquisition”. Studies were included if they focused on learners aged 50 years or above, examined English vocabulary learning in EFL contexts, and were published in peer-reviewed journals or books. Relevant sources were identified and synthesized thematically around learning goals, cognitive challenges, and cognitive strengths for senior EFL learners.

2. Conceptualization of English Vocabulary Learning for Senior Learners

Vocabulary forms the basic unit of human language. Early research pointed out that poor grammar may hinder communication, but insufficient vocabulary makes real communication impossible (Wilkins, 1972). Vocabulary knowledge is complex and multi-faceted. Traditional language syllabi regard language as a combination of separate words and grammatical rules (Wilkins, 1976). Modern research holds that true vocabulary knowledge goes far beyond memorizing simple translations. A complete mastery covers three dimensions: form, meaning, and real-life use (Nation, 2013). These dimensions work together to develop learners’ receptive and productive language abilities.

Researchers assess vocabulary competence from breadth (total number of known words) and depth (in-depth knowledge including spelling, collocations, and grammatical use) (Anderson & Freebody, 1981; Nation, 2001; Webb, 2013). Vocabulary knowledge is commonly classified into receptive and productive types. Receptive knowledge enables learners to recognize and comprehend words in reading and listening, whereas productive knowledge entails their accurate use in speaking and writing. Receptive knowledge typically precedes productive knowledge, yet the nature of this order may vary depending on specific vocabulary features (Nation, 2013).

For senior EFL learners, vocabulary learning is driven more by personal needs and practical relevance than formal curriculum requirements. That is, they possess highly specific learning goals (Ashirova & Kosimova, 2025; Murphy et al., 2023). They are rarely driven by professional or academic requirements; instead, their intentions are practical, life-centered, and socially driven (Wei et al., 2024; Chen, 2022; Kacetl & Klímová, 2021). They study foreign vocabulary to achieve specific goals in their daily lives. These goals include communicating with younger family members, traveling abroad safely, reading health information, and confidently navigating digital technology (Chen, 2022; Kacetl & Klímová, 2021; Wei et al., 2024; Yang, 2020).

Clear learning goals help senior learners maintain strong metacognitive control over their study habits. Their vocabulary learning is highly goal-driven and value-oriented (Murphy et al.,

2023). Rather than engaging in blind rote memorization, they selectively devote mental efforts to words they find practically valuable (Murphy et al., 2023). For instance, they actively learn words related to currency, navigation, or safety when preparing for overseas trips (Murphy et al., 2023). They often show strong emotional and intrinsic motivation, viewing vocabulary learning as a path to keep learning throughout life and maintain social interaction (Ashirova & Kosimova, 2025; Kacetl & Klímová, 2021).

Aligning with these intentions redefines effective vocabulary learning for senior adults. Expecting them to reach native-like lexical accuracy or advanced grammar proficiency is unrealistic. Goals must center on functional communication, practical value, and psychological well-being (Kacetl & Klímová, 2021).

Based on such intentions, realistic learning goals for senior learners include:

- Focusing on functional high-priority words for specific and practical use.
- Aligning learning tasks with personal needs such as family interaction, travel, health management, and digital skills.
- Adopting goal-oriented and context-based strategies, including semantic associations, repetition, and episodic cues.
- Controlling the vocabulary load to avoid learning fatigue, prioritizing quality and applicability over quantity.
- Providing enough opportunities for practical use to consolidate memory and enhance communicative fluency.

When guided by these principles, senior learners can sustain engagement, consolidate vocabulary more effectively, and satisfy immediate communicative needs (Ashirova & Kosimova, 2025; Kacetl & Klímová, 2021). Such an approach underscores that vocabulary learning achieves the best results when it is goal-oriented, meaningfully contextualized, and strategically supported, allowing senior learners to leverage their cognitive strengths.

3. Age-Related Physical and Cognitive Changes of Senior EFL Learners

Learning a foreign language in later life is closely linked to age-related physical and cognitive changes brought about by aging. Senior learners are not a homogeneous group; they differ greatly in personal needs, life backgrounds, and health conditions (Kacetl & Klímová, 2021). Normal aging brings specific physical changes that directly influence the daily mechanics of vocabulary learning. For instance, many senior adults suffer from gradual hearing and visual impairment (Kacetl & Klímová, 2021; Ramírez Gómez, 2016). Such sensory decline impairs their ability to distinguish speech sounds, read small print, and recognize spoken words quickly in an unfamiliar language (Cisterna Zenteno et al., 2025). These physical changes such as reduced handgrip strength, frequent sleep problems, and general physical discomfort also lower stamina for long study sessions (Ramírez Gómez, 2016). These physical challenges require a slower learning pace and additional time for basic classroom work, including note-taking and

writing exercises (Cisterna Zenteno et al., 2025).

Cognitive changes also alter how the aging brain processes and stores second-language knowledge. Senior learners commonly experience clear declines in fluid intelligence and working memory capacity (WMC) (Ashirova & Kosimova, 2025; Salthouse, 2010). Reduced WMC makes it difficult to associate a word's form, meaning, and pronunciation during initial learning (Murphy et al., 2023). A slower processing speed means senior adults need more time to receive, parse, and store new lexical information (Cisterna Zenteno et al., 2025). Senior adults also show a natural decline in inhibitory control, making it harder to suppress the first language (L1) during lexical retrieval (Hasher et al., 1991). Notably, the degree of cognitive decline varies widely among individuals (Ramírez Gómez, 2016). While fluid cognitive functions slow down, a senior learner's semantic memory and crystallized intelligence generally remain intact into advanced age (Fong et al., 2022; Salthouse, 2012). Table 1 summarizes the main age-related physical and cognitive changes and their effects on vocabulary learning.

Despite these fluid declines, the biological profile of normal aging encompasses vital cognitive stabilities that safeguard and regulate the word-learning process (see Table 2). Healthy senior adults possess intact semantic memory and stable accumulated knowledge networks, which maintain the overall integrity of conceptual networks and core word meanings throughout the lifespan (Fong et al., 2022). These baseline strengths provide an extensive repository of world knowledge and lexical patterns facilitating the integration of new language concepts (Al Maaytah, 2026). Furthermore, senior learners rely on robust long-term memory systems that ensure the network stability, effectively protecting previously learned information from decay (Cisterna Zenteno et al., 2025). Finally, senior learners exhibit highly developed metalinguistic awareness and abstract logic, which enhance their capacity for analytical reasoning and structured cognitive processing (Ashirova & Kosimova, 2025). These advanced attributes support the efficient comprehension and application of complex grammatical structures and lexical patterns, frequently enabling them to surpass the capabilities of younger learners in these domains (Al Maaytah, 2026).

Senior EFL learners exhibit a distinctive combination of physical limitations and stable cognitive strengths. This dual profile suggests that foreign-language vocabulary learning is not a matter of passive absorption. It requires purposeful mobilization of their cognitive strengths to compensate for physiological constraints. The following section examines how senior learners harness these cognitive strengths to develop effective vocabulary learning strategies and practical means of overcoming age-related challenges.

4. Senior EFL Learners' Cognitive Strengths in Vocabulary Learning

Working memory, processing speed, and inhibitory control naturally decline with age. Nevertheless, previous studies suggest that these changes do not simply impair vocabulary learning ability. Instead, senior adults tend to approach vocabulary learning through markedly different cognitive routes than younger learners. Younger learners often benefit from superior

phonological memory and faster implicit learning abilities and greater biological sensitivity to unfamiliar speech sounds (Berger et al., 2024; Johnson & White, 2025). Senior learners, by contrast, rely more heavily on explicit, meaningful, and strategy-based learning. This shows that vocabulary learning in later age is not necessarily weaker. It is simply more dependent on purposeful cognitive preservation and personally meaningful strategies.

One major strength of senior learners lies in their relatively stable semantic memory, knowledge systems, and metalinguistic awareness. Fong et al. (2022) found that foreign vocabulary learning in senior learners was strongly associated with semantic and episodic memory functions rather than with phonological skills or WMC alone. In practice, senior learners acquire new words more successfully when they can link new words to existing concepts, life experiences, familiar categories, or meaningful contexts.

Research by Al Maaytah (2026) further explains that senior learners can partly compensate for reduced neuroplasticity and slower processing speeds through explicit, deliberate, and analytical learning strategies. Their strong metalinguistic awareness and abstract reasoning also enable them to categorize word forms seamlessly, identify lexical patterns, and organize new vocabulary through logical connections. In this sense, senior learners do not learn vocabulary as isolated sound-form combinations. Instead, they benefit from embedding new words into already established networks of meaning and structure. This suggests that vocabulary instruction for senior learners should tap into what they already know. Instructors should encourage pattern recognition and create rich semantic links rather than relying solely on repetition or rote memorization. Yes

A second important strategy is associative learning. Senior adults may struggle to remember unrelated word pairs. Studies show that this problem can be eased if the pairs share semantic connections and visual features or are linked with intentional memory strategies. Murphy et al. (2023) note that senior adults are generally less accurate than younger adults in associative memory tasks. However, they can still significantly improve their performance when they use explicit strategies to link unrelated words.

Similarly, Gruneberg and Pascoe (1996) found that the keyword method significantly improved both receptive and productive vocabulary learning among senior learners. This strategy is especially effective when learners use a mediator or a mental image to link the target word with its L1 equivalent. These findings suggest that senior learners benefit from strategies that convert unfamiliar lexical items into memorable associative cues. This approach is particularly vital when the word form itself is inherently difficult to retain.

Senior learners also demonstrate strong metacognitive control in vocabulary learning. Compared to younger learners, who may rely more on repeated exposure and faster learning trials (García et al., 2025), senior learners tend to regulate their learning more deliberately. Murphy et al. (2023) found that both younger and senior learners remembered vocabulary items they considered important, but senior learners were especially likely to utilize task experience strategically, such as spending more time studying items they had forgotten. Thus, senior learners are able to prioritize vocabulary based on personal relevance and future use. Such value-oriented remembering is particularly relevant to senior EFL learners, whose vocabulary

goals are often associated with travel, family communication, health information, and social interaction.

Contextualization represents another effective strategy for senior vocabulary learners. Ge's (2015) study with Chinese adult learners demonstrated that embedding L2 target words in L1 stories yielded superior outcomes to rote memorization for both short-term and long-term vocabulary retention. This finding supports the view that stories provide abundant associative links and contextual clues, thereby facilitating the comprehension and retention of novel lexical items. For senior learners, this approach is especially valuable because stories reduce the cognitive load of memorizing isolated word lists while enabling new vocabulary to be integrated with familiar experiences, emotional resonance, and logical sequencing.

Given these strengths, senior learners appear to derive less benefit from passive exposure and greater benefit from deliberate strategy deployment. Their vocabulary learning is enhanced when they can selectively acquire personally relevant words, integrate new items with prior knowledge, employ visual or semantic associations, engage in purposeful repetition, and use vocabulary in meaningful contexts. Kacetyl and Klímová's (2021) reviews similarly suggest that senior language learners profit from student-centered methods, familiar topics, social interaction, self-monitoring, reviewing, goal-setting, and repeated practice. These strategies reflect the broader cognitive pattern of later-life language learning: although senior adults may process new language input more slowly, they can effectively compensate by learning more selectively, reflectively, and meaningfully.

The literature thus indicates that senior adults' vocabulary learning should not be understood solely through the lens of cognitive decline. Their learning effectiveness depends on the extent to which they can mobilize preserved cognitive strengths, particularly semantic memory, long-term knowledge, metacognitive awareness, and goal-directed attention. Effective vocabulary learning among senior EFL learners is therefore not achieved through memorization of word lists or fast-paced exposure, but through meaningful association, personal relevance, strategic repetition, and contextualized use. This provides a foundation for designing vocabulary instruction that more appropriately supports senior learners.

5. Pedagogical Suggestions for Senior EFL Learners' Vocabulary Learning

Previous discussion indicates that vocabulary learning among senior EFL learners should not be designed as a process of memorizing as many words as possible. Instead, it should be organized around realistic, meaningful, and personally useful vocabulary goals. Although senior learners may experience physical and cognitive constraints, they still possess significant strengths, such as stable semantic memory, established knowledge base, metalinguistic awareness, abstract reasoning, and robust goal-directed attention. Accordingly, the following learning strategies are recommended for senior EFL learners to achieve effective vocabulary learning:

- **Goal-oriented selection:** Senior learners should actively prioritize new words according to their practical learning needs, focusing their limited mental energy and study time on words

that align with their personal goals. This includes prioritizing practical terms for foreign travel, family communication, health information, and digital navigation.

- **Active engagement with explicit mnemonic techniques:** Senior EFL learners should avoid rote repetition. Instead, they should purposefully employ mnemonic techniques, for instance, linking the sound of an unfamiliar English word to a familiar L1 equivalent. Through this associative process, senior learners can build mental connections between new words and prior knowledge, making the unfamiliar form easier to encode, retrieve, and subsequently use.
- **Self-regulation and review:** Senior learners should actively regulate their own study schedules and recognize the need for regular review according to their learning pace. For instance, systematically spending additional time reviewing lexical items they previously found difficult helps them regard forgetting as a valuable learning indicator. Through this process, they can identify high-priority words, allocate more attention to weak items, and strengthen retention through repeated, meaningful review. This strategy is particularly suitable for senior learners because it allows them to compensate for slower processing speed and reduced working memory through deliberate monitoring, selective attention, and goal-directed repetition.
- **Meaningful application of new words in personal contexts:** Senior learners' rich life experiences constitute valuable resources for vocabulary learning. Rather than memorizing new words as isolated sound-form units, they can embed target words into personal narratives, daily routines, familiar affairs, or existing conceptual categories. This facilitates the integration of new vocabulary with meaningful life experiences and prior knowledge, thereby enhancing comprehension, retention, and subsequent retrieval. Through this process, vocabulary learning becomes less mechanical and more personally relevant, enabling senior learners to leverage their preserved semantic memory and cognitive resources more effectively.

In addition to learning strategies, teaching English to senior learners requires a shift away from conventional, one-size-fits-all teaching approaches. EFL instructors must carefully adapt their teaching practices to match both the limitations and the strengths of the aging brain. In light of these considerations, the following classroom design principles are proposed to help EFL instructors achieve effective vocabulary teaching for senior EFL learners:

- **Reduction of timed and competitive tasks:** Slower processing speeds render rapid exercises highly stressful for senior learners. Instructors are advised to avoid fast-paced drills, timed quizzes, or competitive games. This approach reduces classroom anxiety and respects the slower learning pace of senior learners.
- **Accommodation of sensory and physical declines:** Instructors must make practical adjustments for visual and auditory changes and should speak clearly and slowly to ease auditory decoding difficulties. They should provide classroom handouts and text slides with large, highly visible fonts. Additionally, instructors should allow additional time for physical tasks such as writing and copying notes.
- **Prioritization of vocabulary breadth and receptive skills:** Instructors should focus on expanding basic vocabulary breadth for functional communication, prioritizing reading and listening comprehension. They should reduce the pressure for rushed oral production and avoid

overemphasizing native-like pronunciation accuracy.

- Utilization of storytelling and multimodal scaffolding: Instructors should employ ready-made visual and narrative tools to support working memory. Specifically, they can adopt a storytelling approach by embedding English target words directly into native-language context narratives. They can also incorporate multimodal resources such as short videos, clear images, and charts to engage multiple senses simultaneously.
- Measurement of success through student well-being: Instructors should redefine what effective learning means for senior learners. Evaluations should therefore emphasize social interaction, personal satisfaction, and mental engagement. For this population, maintaining cognitive vitality and building confidence are far more valuable than achieving perfect scores on formal vocabulary tests. These are some very practical strategies which would be useful for the teachers to implement.

6. Conclusions

To conclude, senior EFL learners can achieve satisfactory vocabulary gains when they abandon rote memorization and adopt tailored learning strategies. Aging brings physical challenges, slower processing speed, and reduced working memory. Meanwhile, healthy senior adults possess valuable cognitive strengths, such as rich semantic knowledge, stable long-term memory, and strong logical ability. With these strengths, they can overcome many age-related challenges by choosing personally relevant words, employing explicit memory strategies, and learning at a comfortable pace. Vocabulary instruction for senior learners should place less emphasis on native-like accuracy and extensive word lists and more on practical communication, personal relevance, and emotional comfort. When EFL lessons are designed around senior learners' actual needs and strengths, vocabulary learning becomes meaningful, achievable, and rewarding. In turn, vocabulary learning helps maintain cognitive vitality and positive social interaction in later life.

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Table Legends
Table 1. Age-related physical and cognitive changes and their effects on vocabulary learning

	Age-related changes	Effects on vocabulary learning
Physical changes	Hearing loss / auditory decline	Reduces sound recognition, making it harder to perceive pronunciation, discriminate phonological contrasts, and remember spoken words.
	Visual decline	Makes it more difficult to read words clearly and quickly, which may slow down word recognition and reduce the efficiency of learning vocabulary from written materials.
	Reduced handgrip strength	Can make writing, note-taking, and interacting with learning tools or digital devices more effortful, which may limit practice opportunities for vocabulary learning.
	Sleep disorders & ailments	May weaken concentration, attention, and memory consolidation, making it more difficult to retain newly learned vocabulary over time.
	General health problems	May reduce energy, consistency, and sustained engagement in vocabulary learning, which can interrupt learning routines and retention.
Cognitive changes	Reduced WMC	Limits the ability to hold and process multiple pieces of lexical information at once, making it harder to learn word form, meaning, and pronunciation simultaneously.
	Decreased processing speed	Slows down the encoding, recognition, and retrieval of vocabulary, so learners may need more time to understand, store, and recall new words.
	Decline in inhibitory control	Increases cross-linguistic interference, making it harder to suppress the L1 when retrieving target words.
	Cognitive decline variability	Means that senior learners do not experience aging in the same way; some may retain vocabulary-learning abilities relatively well, while others may face greater difficulty in retention and recall.

Table 2. Senior EFL learners' cognitive features and their effects on vocabulary learning

Cognitive (stabilities)	features	Effects on vocabulary learning
Intact	semantic	Maintain the integrity of conceptual networks and core word meanings throughout the lifespan. Provide an extensive repository of world knowledge and lexical patterns facilitating the integration of new language concepts.
Robust	long-term	Maintain lexical network stability in healthy senior learners, protecting previously learned information from decay. Enhance their capacity for analytical reasoning and structured cognitive processing.
Metalinguistic	awareness & abstract	Support the efficient comprehension and application of complex grammatical structures and lexical patterns, frequently enabling them to surpass the capabilities of younger learners in these domains.
logic		

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