Teacher-student Communication in Taiwan Senior Education Contexts:
A Focus on Older Learners' Views

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Abstract
Senior education has received increasing attention in Taiwan, as an active response to the dramatically ageing population. However, the existing literature has largely ignored the centrality of teacher-student communication to older learners' teaching and learning processes, and the potential improvement of those processes. This survey-based study of 231 older learners therefore focuses on their views of teacher-student communication in senior education, including the extent to which they endorse the various communication strategies employed by their teachers (identified in the author's previous project, see Chen, 2019) and the rationales for those strategies having been chosen. The findings reveal some interesting differences between teachers' views about appropriate teacher-student communication (captured in Chen, 2019) and older learners' parallel views. Older learners' demographic features also appeared to impact how they preferred to be communicated with in class by their teachers. Teachers of senior education can use these findings to better accommodate their teaching to older learners from homogeneous backgrounds.

Keywords: Senior Education, Teacher-student Communication, Communication Accommodation, Older Learners, Gerontological Sociolinguistics

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Introduction

The present study extends a previous project by the author, on teacher-student communication in senior-education contexts (Chen 2019), by eliciting older learners' views of teachers' self-reported strategies for communicating with them. Senior-education programmes have been heavily promoted in Taiwan as a response to the needs of its rapidly ageing population. Specifically, this is linked to a widespread belief that active participation in lifelong-learning activities into later life is a key to successful ageing: for example, by improving people's capacity to keep up with societal changes (Escuder-Mollon, 2012). The delivery of high-quality senior education generally relies on how teachers communicate with older learners (Chen 2019). A number of studies have addressed the importance of language and communication to students' learning behaviours (Goodboy & Myers, 2008; Lin, et al., 2017; Mazer & Hunt, 2008; Myers, 2002; Myers, et al., 2014; Rocca, 2004; Roorda, et al., 2011; Witt, et al., 2004). However, these studies have overlooked older learners' perspectives, a gap that the present study will help to fill.

Literature Review

Unusually, Chen (2019) made a case for systematically explaining the nature of teacher-student communication in senior-education contexts. However, that interview- and survey-based study only captured data about Taiwanese teachers' communication-accommodation strategies when teaching older learners. It categorised these self-reported strategies into four main types – secondary baby talk, mitigation, politeness, and code selection – and found that teachers' choices from among these four approaches could be governed either by teacher-level considerations, e.g., communicative aims, or student characteristics: e.g., physical decrement in relation to language production and reception; social status; place of origin; age range; and conversational needs. That study's detailed findings can be summarised as follows.

1.   Taiwanese teachers of older adults adjust their communication styles to include secondary baby talk (repetition, simplification and slow-paced speech) because of the former's perceptions that the latter, especially those aged over 75, have low language-reception and language-expression abilities.
2.   Mitigating strategies, characterised by avoidance or humour, are employed by these teachers to accommodate their students' painful self-disclosures, as well as what the teachers see as special communication/conversational needs arising from the fear of death.
3.   Teachers use encouragement and compliments as politeness strategies to accommodate to older adult students' conversational need for strong face maintenance.
4.   Loose control of turn-taking in class is used to accommodate older adult students' desire for a relaxing environment for both learning and friendship development.
5.   Showing modesty and reverence is employed as a communication strategy particularly to accommodate older learners who have a high social status or come from urban areas. One expression of this strategy is the avoidance of direct correction of mistakes in class.
6.   Telling jokes or showing playfulness while teaching is a communication strategy adopted to accommodate older students' need to learn in a relaxing atmosphere, and is seen as especially necessary or useful when students are from the countryside.
7.   Teachers choose various forms of address to reflect their own choices of role positions in relation to their older students, or to demonstrate their politeness, reverence, or closeness.
8.   When teachers are much younger than their students, it is more difficult for the former

to activate their professional identities, and this leads them to rely instead on age identity during teacher-student communication. The aim of the corresponding communication-accommodation behaviour is to emphasise politeness.

9.   Taiwanese senior-education teachers often see themselves as service providers, which triggers their use of an encouraging, positive and playful tone in their teaching language, as part of providing a pleasant and satisfying learning environment for their students.

10.   Code-switching is used by teachers of older students to demarcate between their teaching and social communication.

In addition to teacher interviews, Chen (2019) surveyed a wider pool of teachers about the degree to which they endorsed the four main types of communication strategy highlighted by the interviewees. Analysis of the survey data focused on the associations between the teacher respondents' age ranges and their use, or non-use, of each strategy. The findings arising from that survey are summarised below.

First, regarding communication-strategy choice:

1.   The most frequently chosen forms of address for older students were 'grandpa/grandma' or 'older brother/older sister', rather than 'student'.

2.   The use of patronising communication styles was prevalent among the majority of teachers of older students, especially 'slower pace of speaking' and 'repetition'.

3.   The use of politeness strategies was commonplace among the respondent teachers, especially 'giving encouragement and compliments' and 'telling jokes and being humorous to please older students'.

4.   Death-related topics were avoided in communication with older students by two-fifths of the respondents.

5.   Choosing the language code preferred by older students in class was considered appropriate by most of the respondents.

Second, the associations between teachers' ages and their use of various communication strategies can be summed up as follows:

1.   The two younger groups of teachers (<39 and 40-60) tended to address older students in class in ways that reflected intergenerational identities. The very youngest teachers (<39), meanwhile, were the least likely of the three teacher groups to adopt a professional identity in the classroom.

2.   Teachers in the middle age group (40-60) were the most likely to use patronising communication styles, while the oldest teachers (61+) were the least likely to do so.

3.   No significant association was found between teachers' ages and their use of politeness strategies.

4.   No significant association was found between teachers' ages and their avoidance of death-related topics in communication with older students.

5.   The middle age group of teachers was the most likely to use code-switching for communication with older students, while the oldest teacher group was the least likely to do so.

Research Gaps

As briefly noted above, Chen's (2019) data only represent one side of the teacher-student communication process. Teachers' accounts of the communication-accommodation behaviours they regard as appropriate may not accurately reflect older students' expectations or needs, whether because they are over- or under-accommodative. Thus, to enhance the

practical value of teacher-student communication in senior-education contexts, older learners' perspectives cannot be overlooked. The present study accordingly explores the level of consistency between teachers' and older students' views on how they should communicate with one another during the teaching and learning process. Specifically, it transformed Chen's prior findings on (1) the communication strategies, and (2) the perceptions/factors considered relevant to teachers' choices of such strategies, into questions for a survey of older learners. This survey aimed to ascertain which teacher communication strategies these learners endorsed, and what learner demographic features were linked to such endorsement and other relevant attitudes. The present study was guided by the following two research questions.

RQ1: To what extent do older learners endorse the classroom communication strategies self-reported to Chen (2019) by teachers of older learners?
RQ2: How do older learners' demographic characteristics relate to the extent of their endorsement of such strategies?

Methodology

The survey's questionnaire was divided into two main sections. The first elicited the participant's age range (55-65, 66-75, 76-85, or 86+) and health status (very unhealthy, unhealthy, moderately healthy, healthy, very healthy). The second section consisted of 12 items about the respondents' level of endorsement of teachers' various communication-accommodation strategies. These items, translated from Mandarin into English for the purposes of the present paper, were: (1) avoiding using jargon and difficult theories; (2) speaking slowly in class; (3) repeating previous teaching content; (4) avoiding referring to death or ailments in class; (5) using a playful tone for chatting or teaching; (6) avoiding correcting older learners' mistakes; (7) not controlling older learners' talking in class; (8) using an encouraging and complimentary tone when teaching; (9) occasionally using the dialects older learners prefer in class, rather than just speaking Mandarin; (10) maintaining a humble attitude when communicating with older learners; (11) using various forms of address (i.e., not just 'Students') when talking to older learners; and (12) using Mandarin when introducing difficult concepts or theories. All were rated on the same five-point Likert scale, ranging from 1='very unlikely to agree' to 5='highly agree'.

The associations between demographic factors and degrees of endorsement were examined statistically. Means were computed to assess the extent of the respondents' endorsement of the 12 accommodation strategies. To identify the impact of older learners' age ranges and health statuses on such endorsement, analyses of variance (ANOVAs) were employed.

Results

As indicated in Table 1, the survey subjects tended to endorse all 12 teacher communication strategies, with all means being above the middle of the scale (M>3). The three most-endorsed strategies were (5), a playful tone, M=4.17; (8), an encouraging and complimentary tone, M=4.16; and (12), the use of Mandarin for difficult material, M=4.08. The three least-strongly endorsed communication strategies were (4), avoidance of references to death or ailments, M=3.13; (10), a humble attitude, M=3.55; and (6), avoidance of error correction, M=3.62.

Table 1. Older Learners' Mean Agreement with Communication Strategies

Strategies	Mean
(1) Avoiding using jargon and difficult theories	3.96
(2) Speaking slowly in class	3.86
(3) Repeating previous teaching content	3.75
(4) Avoiding referring to death or ailments in class	3.13
(5) Using a playful tone for chatting or teaching	4.17
(6) Avoiding correcting older learners' mistakes	3.62
(7) Not controlling older learners' talking in class	3.65
(8) Using an encouraging and complimentary tone when teaching	4.16
(9) Occasionally using the dialects older learners prefer in class, rather than just speaking Mandarin	3.93
(10) Maintaining a humble attitude when communicating with older learners	3.55
(11) Using various forms of address (i.e., not just 'Students') to talk to older learners	3.97
(12) Using Mandarin when introducing difficult concepts or theories	4.08

Relation of Learners' Age Ranges to their Levels of Strategy Endorsement

As shown in Table 2, ANOVAs indicated that the participants' levels of endorsement of six communication strategies varied significantly by age group. These six strategies were (3) ($p<.01$), (4) ($p<.05$), (6) ($p<.05$), (7) ($p=.01$), (10) ($p=.00$), and (11) ($p<.05$).

Table 2. Variation in Learners' Endorsement of Communication Strategies by Age

Communication strategies	Older learners' age ranges								Pearson correlation	Sig.
	55-65		66-75		76-85		total			
	Mean	N	Mean	N	Mean	N	Mean	N		
(1) Avoiding using jargon and difficult theories	4.08	106	3.81	83	3.90	39	3.95	228	-.078	.121
(2) Speaking slowly in class	3.80	106	3.83	83	4.03	39	3.85	228	.063	.173
(3) Repeating previous teaching content	3.66	106	3.70	83	4.08	39	3.75	228	.110*	.049
(4) Avoiding referring to death or ailments in class	2.87	106	3.22	83	3.62	39	3.12	228	.197***	.001
(5) Using a playful tone for chatting or teaching	4.18	106	4.07	83	4.33	39	4.17	228	.026	.346
(6) Avoiding correcting older learners' mistakes	3.45	106	3.61	83	4.08	39	3.62	228	.173**	.004
(7) Not controlling older learners' talking in class	3.50	106	3.63	83	4.08	39	3.64	228	.155**	.010
(8) Using an encouraging and complimentary tone when teaching	4.20	106	4.02	83	4.31	39	4.15	228	.006	.461
(9) Occasionally using the dialects older learners prefer in class, rather than just speaking Mandarin	3.92	106	3.81	83	4.23	39	3.93	228	.069	.149
(10) Maintaining a humble attitude when communicating with olde	3.25	106	3.61	83	4.15	39	3.54	228	.251***	.000
(11) Using various forms of address (i.e., not just 'Students') to talk to older learners	3.90	106	3.83	83	4.46	39	3.97	228	.132*	.024
(12) Using Mandarin when introducing difficult concepts or theories	4.07	106	3.98	83	4.33	39	4.08	228	.058	.190

Specifically, post-hoc tests indicated that the main age difference in endorsement of the strategy of avoiding talking about death or ailments was between the 55-65 age group and the 76+ group, with the latter endorsing it significantly more strongly. Similarly, such tests established that the eldest learners endorsed teachers' avoidance of correcting their mistakes significantly more strongly than either the youngest ones ($p<.01$) or the 66-75 year olds ($p<.05$), perhaps indicating that the eldest learners had the strongest face-maintenance needs

of these three groups. Such an idea would also appear to be confirmed by the post-hoc tests' suggestion that the eldest learners endorsed (1) teachers' avoidance of controlling older students' chatting in class significantly more than those in the youngest group did ($p<.05$), and (2) teachers' exhibition of modest attitudes in class significantly more than the 55-65 ($p<.001$) and 66-75 year olds ($p<.05$). However, significant differences were also observed between the means of the 66-75 and the 55-65 year olds ($p<.05$), with the former being higher. The eldest learners also endorsed teachers' use of varied forms of address significantly more strongly than either their 55- to 65-year-old ($p<.05$) or 66- to 75-year-old counterparts ($p<.01$). In short, the older the sampled learners were, the greater their self-reported need to be accorded respect by their teachers.

The post hoc tests also suggested that the eldest learners endorsed teachers' use of students' preferred dialects to chat with them, to a significantly greater extent than either the 55-65 ($p=.001$) or 66-75 age groups ($p<.01$). This, too, could have been because such code-switching was seen as polite or even deferential.

Relation of Learners' Health Statuses to their Levels of Strategy Endorsement

As shown in Table 3, ANOVAs were conducted to investigate the relationships between older learners' health statuses – which they self-rated into one of five categories ranging from very unhealthy to very healthy – and the extent of their endorsement of the various communication strategies adopted by senior-education teachers. The strategies for which significant health-related differences appeared were (1) ($p<.01$), (2) ($p<.001$), (7) ($p<.01$), (8) ($p<.01$), (9) ($p<.01$), (10) ($p<.05$), (11) ($p<.05$), and (12) ($p<.01$).

Table 3. Variation in Learners' Endorsement of Communication Strategies by Health Status

Communication strategies	Older learners' health status												Pearson correlation	Sig.
	Very unhealthy		Unhealthy		Moderatley healthy		Healthy		Very healthy		Total			
	Mean	N	Mean	N	Mean	N	Mean	N	Mean	N	Mean	N		
(1) Avoiding using jargon and difficult theories	3.75	8	3.56	9	3.72	75	4.00	80	4.30	57	3.96	229	.177**	.007
(2) Speaking slowly in class	3.75	8	4.11	9	3.47	75	3.89	80	4.30	57	3.86	229	.204**	.002
(3) Repeating previous teaching content	4.25	8	3.56	9	3.47	75	3.74	80	4.11	57	3.75	229	.124	.062
(4) Avoiding referring to death or ailments in class	3.50	8	3.56	9	2.87	75	3.01	80	3.53	57	3.13	229	.082	.216
(5) Using a playful tone for chatting or teaching	4.13	8	4.00	9	3.96	75	4.26	80	4.35	57	4.17	229	.115	.082
(6) Avoiding correcting older learners' mistakes	3.50	8	3.67	9	3.45	75	3.62	80	3.86	57	3.62	229	.104	.117
(7) Not controlling older learners' talking in class	4.13	8	3.56	9	3.17	75	3.69	80	4.18	57	3.65	229	.201**	.002
(8) Using an encouraging and complimentary tone	3.88	8	3.67	9	3.99	75	4.18	80	4.47	57	4.16	229	.174**	.008
(9) Occasionally using the dialects older learners prefer in class, rather than just speaking Mandarin	4.25	8	3.78	9	3.55	75	3.98	80	4.37	57	3.93	229	.190**	.004
(10) Maintaining a humble attitude when communicating with older learners	4.00	8	3.67	9	3.01	75	3.79	80	3.82	57	3.55	229	.148*	.025
(11) Using various forms of address (i.e., not just 'Students') to talk to older learners	4.00	8	4.00	9	3.63	75	4.06	80	4.30	57	3.97	229	.158*	.017
(12) Using Mandarin when introducing difficult concepts or theories	4.00	8	3.67	9	3.83	75	4.13	80	4.44	57	4.08	229	.189**	.004

Post-hoc tests indicated that very healthy learners agreed that teachers should speak slowly in class significantly more than those whose health was good ($p<.05$) or moderate ($p<.001$). Healthy learners also showed the same pattern, as compared to those whose health was moderate ($p<.05$). Endorsement of teachers' repetition of previously discussed teaching content was also significantly stronger among very healthy learners than among their moderately healthy counterparts ($p<.01$). This seems to imply that healthier the sampled learners were, the more likely they were to endorse their teachers' use of secondary baby talk and patronising communication styles.

The post-hoc tests for the item on teachers' loose class management indicated that the main differences were between (1) very unhealthy students and those whose health was moderate ($p<.05$, with the very unhealthy ones endorsing this style more strongly); (2) healthy ones and those whose health was moderate ($p<.01$, with the healthy ones agreeing more); (3) between the very healthy ones and those whose health was moderate ($p<.001$, with the very healthy ones agreeing more); and (4) between the very unhealthy ones and those who were very healthy ($p<.05$, with the very healthy ones agreeing more). Generally speaking, in other words, older learners who were in better health were more likely to endorse teachers' flexible class management, but those in the worst health also strongly demanded flexible learning environments from their teachers.

The post-hoc tests for the item on code-switching suggested that very healthy learners endorsed this practice significantly more than healthy ones ($p<.05$) or moderately healthy ones did ($p<.001$). Learners whose health was above average also endorsed code-switching significantly more strongly than those whose health was moderate ($p<.05$). That is, learners with better health were more likely to demand more flexible codes from their teachers in class.

The post-hoc tests for the item on teacher humility suggested that very healthy learners ($p<.001$), healthy ones ($p<.001$) and very unhealthy ones ($p<.05$) all endorsed teacher's showing modesty in class significantly more than those whose health was moderate did.

Learners who were healthy ($p<.05$) and very healthy ($p<.01$) exhibited significantly greater agreement with teachers' use of various forms of address in class, as compared to their moderately healthy counterparts.

As to the main difference involving to the use of Mandarin for difficult concepts or theories, very healthy older learners endorsed this communicative approach significantly more strongly than those whose health was moderate ($p<.01$).

Discussion and Conclusion

On the whole, the sampled older learners strongly endorsed the communication strategies senior-education teachers told Chen (2019) they adopted. However, these learners did not appear to consider teachers' showing respect to them, or avoiding references to death and ailments, as critical to fostering pleasant learning or communicative processes characterised by humour, fun and relaxation (see the strategy of using playful tone to chat or teach in the survey).

Age was previously found to be a significant predictor of teachers' communication accommodations when teaching older people (Chen, 2019). The present study's results reveal that teachers particularly need to communicatively accommodate learners aged above 75, who appear to have the strongest face and politeness needs. Such accommodation could take various forms, including avoiding death-related taboo topics; attending to politeness and respect, as defined by not correcting them; maintaining relatively loose classroom control; choosing appropriate forms of address; demonstrating humility; and using their preferred language codes when interacting with them socially (but perhaps not when teaching). This echoes Chen's (2019) findings regarding the opinions of teachers of senior education, who further ascribed the need for communicative accommodation to learners 75+ to physical decline, and therefore regarded patronising communication styles to be appropriate. However, the present study did not find that strategies such as slower teaching or repetition of taught information were significantly more strongly endorsed by learners 75+ than by those aged 55-74.

Among the learners in this study, health status also seemed to have an impact on how teachers' communication-accommodation behaviours were viewed. First, contrary to the researcher's expectations, teachers' employment of patronising communication styles was strongly endorsed by learners whose health was below the average, perhaps because their health conditions negatively affected their reception and/or comprehension of information. However, learners who self-reported the worst health did *not* endorse such communication styles to a greater extent than those whose health status was better than the average. Indeed, those learners who reported good health endorsed these patronising styles the most clearly. This may have reflected the healthy learners' generally more demanding attitude toward teachers' communication accommodations: e.g., they also agreed that teachers should give them more autonomy of talking in class, use code-switching to facilitate their learning as well as social purposes, show them respect via being humble, and address them in appropriate ways.

The above results confirm the diversity of older learners' perspectives, as well as some slippages between students' and teachers' views of the latter's stereotypical or patronising communication-accommodation strategies (cf. Chen, 2019). Teacher-student communication processes in senior education in Taiwan would therefore appear to be more complex than teachers of older learners tend to imagine. And such learners' demographic characteristics, notably age and health status, should add additional nuance to teachers' calculations of how they should communicate in senior-education classes. Future research comparing teachers' and older learners' perceptions of what communication strategies are appropriate in such settings should take account of further demographic factors.

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