



Lingo Flamingo and Open University Challenge Us! research project outline

Lingo Flamingo is an award-winning and innovative community-focused charity offering tailored language lessons to older adults and people living with dementia. Since 2015 we have taught approximately 4500 students.

Increasingly, the potential of language learning to enhance cognitive reserve is attracting attention, notably as a non-medical intervention to delay neurodegenerative diseases (see for example Bialystok, Craik, and Luk 2012; Bak 2016). Increase in life expectancy and sociodemographic changes have led to an ageing population, and there is a growing awareness of the need for developing cost-effective and powerful strategies within this context to reduce cognitive decline and promote healthy ageing. But despite positive outcomes regarding the impact of non-pharmaceutical interventions on the health and wellbeing of older adults and people living with dementia, there is a lack of knowledge about how best to consistently deliver effective practice (Dugmore et al., 2015; Osman et al., 2016; Meyer & O'Keefe, 2020). Dugmore et al., (2015) found a lack of studies discussing more than one component of non-pharmaceutical interventions (implementation, process or outcome) which has led to disjointed research and theoretical silos.

A holistic and creative approach is needed to generate new knowledge about approaches to, and the impact of, language learning on wellbeing in older age. Our suggested project sets out to achieve this through the involvement of multiple stakeholders including senior learners themselves, their families and/or friends, management of care homes, care professionals, Lingo Flamingo staff and volunteers, NHS-NES, and other charities. Together we will investigate the impact of language learning interventions on senior learners with a view to tackling inequalities of an often-marginalised population, widening participation for them, and promoting healthy ageing.

We are in a unique position to address this knowledge gap through our existing research; our network of stakeholders; our understanding of setting the right conditions and teaching methodologies; and our long-standing collaboration with The Open University in Scotland. We are also experienced in creating research which is participatory, co-designed, community-based, multimodal, multisensory, and multi-vocal to measure impact. As this research project may involve older adults living with cognitive impairment, significant ethical considerations have been discussed to ensure that the research is as non-invasive and as inclusive as possible.

We want to understand the value that engagement with languages and cultures has in this area and thereby create care homes as multi-lingual and multi-cultural spaces to build on for delivering interventions. Furthermore, we need to examine what 'quality of language learning provision' means in this context for learners and 'teachers' and how to deliver that.

This would be our first study with multiple stakeholders, and our aim is to access and combine our shared knowledge, provide pathways to deliver practical and sustainable solutions for learning in care environments, and to provide a toolkit for similar organisations as a low-threshold opportunity to get started. Pump priming would allow our study to be a steppingstone into a bigger research project focusing on how non-pharmaceutical interventions can transform the health and social care sector and influence policymaking.

The proposed research aligns seamlessly with the mission and strengths of Lingo Flamingo. This partnership can help us to grow, progress, and generate new knowledge in a considerably under-researched area and to create wide-ranging social impact.

Firstly, the charity's aim is to enhance older adults' mental health and wellbeing through innovative, accessible and inclusive language learning opportunities in a multitude of care settings. Building on research highlighting the positive role of multilingualism for brain health, we have developed materials and teaching approaches to support adults in later life. Although we made significant progress in applying these with care partners, gaps in our knowledge remain, including a comprehensive understanding of effective language learning pedagogies in older age, or the impact of our work on stakeholders like care home staff and the families of our participants. The OU's expertise will allow us to better conceptualise our wider stakeholder experiences and their implications for our service delivery.

Secondly, there is an organisational need to discover more about our participants' learning journeys, including their motivation to learn a new language and their engagement with the taught topics. Support from the OU will allow us to develop our understanding of this, to enhance the level and delivery of quality services going forward.

Thirdly, we are eager to build our capacity. Currently, we are delivering languages interventions within Scotland. However, we have the potential to deliver similar services across the UK and internationally, where interest in our work and calls for extending our reach are fast-increasing.

This project tackles issues of our ageing society through non-pharmaceutical options for older adults, thus supporting their healthy ageing. Besides boosting cognitive benefits, this work improves the mental health, quality of life, visibility of and opportunities for seniors in care. The collaborative research enables us to enhance our operations and create more positive social change for stakeholders nationally and internationally.

Furthermore, this work tackles a real discrepancy in the quality of and provisions for non-pharmaceutical support in care homes. Nine years of internal research found that around 30% of care homes we work with have no activity budget and very limited in-house activities compared to their wealthy counterparts, with the gap between opportunities for the richest and poorest in care homes widening. Collaborating with policy makers during a period of significant social care reforms enables us to directly inform new strategies for person-centred care and their implementation through affordable upskilling opportunities.

OU scholarship highlights significant potential impact of languages interventions for service users *and* care home staff. Collaborating with NHS Education Scotland will inform our understanding of non-pharmacological languages interventions as a pathway to positive mindsets, that can transform lives, and improve practice and workplace culture in care home contexts - for example by enabling overseas staff to draw on their multilingual repertoire or build social cohesion through intercultural literacy. Moreover, we seek to tackle inequalities within the NHS workforce using our Scottish Government collaboration to inform professional upskilling policies enhancing employability opportunities, leadership progression routes, job satisfaction and retention.

The following deliverables are designed to enhance the impact of and capacity for the non-pharmacological intervention of language learning in older age in care settings.

1. Digital multimedia starter toolkit for practitioners and employers
2. Formal partnership with NHS Education Scotland
3. Publication of research findings
4. Stakeholder network and online hub
5. Two dissemination events

References

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Bialystok, E., Craik, F.I.M., and G. Luk. 2012 "Bilingualism: Consequences for Mind and Brain". Trends in Cognitive Sciences 16 (4): 240-250. Doi: <https://doi.org/10.1016/j.tics.2012.03.001>.