Adults learning additional languages in their later years: The pain, the profit, and the pleasure

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Abstract
This article will explore the experience—challenges, benefits, and satisfactions—that awaits older adults who embark on the adventure of learning additional languages, either as ‘true’ or ‘false’ beginners, or in some cases as resilient lifelong (foreign language) learners (to be distinguished from polyglots). Drawing on the increasing number of studies focusing on third-age language learning, the article will address the self-doubt afflicting many third-age language learners and the difficulties claimed to be imposed on them by the effects of an age-related decline in language-learning capacity. It will go on to discuss the benefits that are said to accrue for older learners of languages other than their first. Finally, it will address and exemplify from our own data the intense enjoyment which many older adults derive from language learning.

Keywords: third-age; language learning; challenges; benefits; enjoyment; savouring.

1. Introduction

The learning of additional languages in late adulthood calls for research attention on a number of grounds. We live in an ageing world. In less than
a decade the proportion of the world’s population aged 60 or over is set to increase by 56% (United Nations, 2015).

By 2050, the global population of people older than 60 is expected to jump to two billion. In the United States, the number of Americans over the age of 65 is expected to double from roughly 50 million today to nearly 100 million by 2060. (Hasaltine, 2018)

Furthermore, international migration is a very prominent feature of the modern world for a variety of reasons—often leading to situations where grandparents do not speak the language of their grandchildren. International migration also includes refugees and immigrants who age in their host country or who arrive as older adults and in either case experience the necessity to learn the country’s language. Moreover, amidst today’s widespread mobility, it is important for all travellers (and not just migrants) to communicate comfortably in languages not well known to them—for which older people are often ill-equipped (Gabrys-Barker, 2018). Despite the relevance and importance of these issues, research into the capacity and experience of older adult language learners is not plentiful—although it is very definitely on the increase (see Pfenninger and Singleton, 2019).

In this article we shall begin by addressing the self-doubt and difficulties which language-learners in the third age (generally thought of as the age-span between retirement and serious physical decline) are widely assumed to face when attempting to learn additional languages. Some researchers cast doubt on the age-induction of such problems. We shall then move on to examine with a critical eye the benefits claimed to proceed from additional language learning for older adults. We shall conclude by looking at the emotional pleasure which many third-age language learners seem to gain from their language-learning experience, illustrating this discussion from our own data.

2. Pain

More than three decades ago the adult educator Max Brändle (1986) wrote of the problems he had noted in his older foreign language learners. As well as mentioning difficulties with auditory imitation, responding orally, and memory work, he also reported his observation of problems of apprehension in relation to the learning conditions—which were often vastly different from the schoolrooms and campuses of their youth. We shall return to oral-aural and memory issues later, but let us begin by discussing the problem of apprehension, which Brändle links to the strangeness of the learning environment but which others have discussed in more general terms.
There has been much attention in the literature on third-age learning to the psychology of age-related defeatism, the internalised ageism, so to speak, which has been seen to afflict many third-age learners (Andrew, 2012; Roumani, 1978; Schleppegrell, 1987). Knowles (1980) was of the view that amongst senior adults, it is psychological factors of affectivity that determine how they approach their educational needs. Older learners sometimes appear to believe that the ageing process they are experiencing is bound to have a negative impact on their second language learning capacity and progress. What this means is that, even before commencing a learning activity, such learners may assume that, despite their best efforts, the outcome will be poor. This inevitably has consequences for the depth of their commitment to engagement in the activity in question (Ramírez Gómez, 2015, 2016).

With regard to aural-oral problems, we certainly have to recognise that there is an age-related decline in auditory acuity starting quite early, one claim being that such acuity peaks between ages 10 and 14 (see Singleton and Ryan, 2004:119) and that its subsequent decline may be to an extent disabling in senior adulthood (Singleton and Ryan, 2004:214ff). Although the degree of the decline in question varies enormously, it is indisputable that in many older learners it has an impact on the oral-aural dimensions of additional language learning.

In relation to memory, we are all aware of the cliché that as we get older our memory is one of the dimensions of our day-to-day abilities that especially worsens. In the case of people with dementia, this is of course certainly true and it may be that folk-wisdom in this matter is influenced by such cases. Furthermore, older people’s own judgements about their memory tend to be neither kind (attributing all memory lapses to age) nor especially reliable (cf. Hertzog and Dunlosky, 1996). In the population at large too, memory delays and failures are very frequently judged more harshly in the older-age groups than in the younger (cf. Erber, Szuchman, and Rothberg, 1990).

The key to the relationship between ageing and memory is widely taken to lie in one particular kind of memory, working memory, which is conceived of as a mechanism responsible for the temporary manipulation and maintenance of relevant information during cognitive operations such as comprehension. It seems that performance on comfortably-paced tests of working memory capacity does not decline much with age, but that more demanding tasks do show a marked effect for age (Salthouse and Babcock, 1991; Wingfield et al., 1988). The explanation sometimes offered is that ageing is associated not with a cognitive deficit as such, but rather with a slowing down of processing speed. It has to be said, though, that the issue of working memory, speed of processing, and ageing is still very much under debate; for example, it is argued that ageing is in fact not associated with a decline in working memory capacity.
as such but that the slowing down of processing has to do with various kinds of ‘retrieval interference’ (McElree and Dyer, 2013). Also noteworthy is that recent research is suggesting that the level of working memory capacity can be raised by training and experience (cf. Singleton, 2017). The implications of this for the active third-ager have still to be explored, especially in the light of the unclarity surrounding the precise role of working memory in second language processing in later life (see Wright, 2015).

Another point to be borne in mind regarding memory is that there may be no neurobiological evidence for any declines in the processing capacities of healthy older adults ‘except…where there is evidence of pathology’ (Ramscar et al., 2014:34). Ramscar et al. (2014, 2017), for instance, showed in computational simulations that the patterns of response change in lexical decision tasks, which are typically taken as evidence for (and measures of) cognitive decline, have to do simply with basic principles of learning and emerge inevitably as more knowledge is acquired. Experience extends the overall range of knowledge possessed by an individual, increasing the amount (and complexity) of information in that individual’s cognitive systems, and inevitably has a cost. Ramscar et al. (2014) explain difficulty with lexical recognition in terms of growth of information in the lexicon with increasing experience; information processing gets harder as the information-load increases. This raises the question as to whether it is simply the amount of learning done that accounts for age-related memory differences. In Ramscar et al.’s 2017 computer simulations, performance declined despite the fact that learning capacities remained constant, with cumulative linguistic experience making word-pairings ever harder to learn (Ramscar et al., 2017).

3. Profit

Besides Brändle’s earlier-cited somewhat negative remarks about his older adult students’ performances as language learners, we also need to refer to his comments about such students appearing to excel in some domains. For example, he had good things to say about their general command of reading skills, their understanding of grammatical principles, and their lexical learning. Concerning his portrayal of them as apprehensive, this needs to set against what other adult educators have had to say about many older students—whatever their subject matter of choice—returning to additional language learning with excitement and very high motivation levels (cf. Edlinger, 2016; Hillage et al., 2000; Matsumoto, 2019).

As well as the question of how good older adults are at additional language learning, we would do well to consider how good additional language learning is for them. A not uncommon perception and indeed motivating factor spoken
of by older language learners themselves is that language learning is an ‘anti-aging activity’ (Ryan and Dörnyei, 2013:93). There is indeed some evidence suggesting that challenging mental activities help older people maintain their cognitive functions and also reduce the incidence of negative psychological states such as depression (cf. Lövdén et al., 2013). Language learning is frequently referred to in this context. For instance, some research seems to show that second language learning delays age-related cognitive decline and fosters brain plasticity (Hakuta, 1987; Bak et al., 2014; Bialystok and Craik, 2010; Bialystok et al., 2004), as well as enhancing memory skills (Lapkin, Swain, and Shapson, 1990; Ratté, 1968).

According to Bialystok, Craik, and Luk (2012), ‘cognitive reserve’—or brain reserve—is a crucial research area in the context of an ageing population prey to Alzheimer’s disease/dementia. It has been suggested that bi-/multilingualism may be a factor that contributes to the maintenance of cognitive functioning amongst those who are ageing and that it may even postpone the onset of symptoms in those suffering from dementia. Other factors include education and the continuing involvement generally in intellectual and social (as well as physical) activities (e.g., Bennett et al., 2003; Stern et al., 1994). It has to be said, though, that the whole issue of the operation of a neurocognitive bi-/multilingual advantage is highly controversial (see Pfenninger and Singleton 2019:§ 3.2).

The suggestion has been made that research looking at cognitive preservation in the bi-/multilingual context might investigate the role of social activities and social engagement—both promoted through bi-/multilingual learning and use—which have been shown to promote the preservation of cognitive capacities (Ballesteros et al., 2015). It could be that any effects observed in bi-/multilingual conditions are in fact effects of increased social participation, a feeling of belonging and meaning, which may be facilitated through learning and using additional languages, but might also be facilitated through other types of meaningful activity (see García-Pentón et al., 2016). Additional language learning and use in the third age needs to be regarded not just as a goal in itself but as a means of promoting social interaction and integration, and since it is at least partly through the stimulation of social wellbeing that bi-/multilingual cognitive effects may potentially be observed.

### 4. Pleasure

Following on from this last point, we can note there is a fast-growing population of language learners in their later stages of life who do not study a foreign language out of any obvious practical necessity. Instead, one of their strongest sources of motivation is simply the intense pleasure that the learning
experiences of an additional language bring to their everyday lives. To illustrate this point, in this last part of our article we reflect upon some of the findings from the currently ongoing qualitative research of the second author conducted in Japan. We want to mention that how much the actual learning is progressing is not the focus in this project, nor is any certain clear level of acquisition the goal of the learners themselves. This kind of goal seems to be set by the learners rather ambiguously, or, should we say, in a way freed from the pressures a young language learner usually has, at least time-wise.

The average life expectancy in Japan is 81.25 years for men and 87.32 years for women (Nippon.com, 2018). Moreover, in the super-ageing Japanese society there are 42 million people over 60, which is about 33% of the whole population, the highest national proportion of older people in the world; healthy life expectancy at 60 in Japan is a further period of 20.3 years (AgeWatch report card, Global AgeWatch Index 2015). In the context of the fact that lifelong learning, in general, is deeply rooted in Japanese culture, many people in the later stages of their life pursue further learning activities, among which is the (very often long-lasting and enthusiastic) learning of one or more foreign languages. One of the reasons for this interest in foreign language learning is its perceived positive impact on the overall wellbeing of the third-agers, who very often pay great attention to healthy lifestyles. The biogerontologist Suresh Rattan (2018) summarises his thoughts on health as follows:

Food, physical activity, and social and mental engagement are the three pillars of health. Sociological, psychological and biological research shows that a wise use of the three pillars of health can maintain and strengthen them further. The wisdom of health is built upon in the principles of pleasure, moderation and variety applied to the three pillars. Having pleasure in what one eats, what one does, and with whom one socialises is the first crucial requirement. Doing these things in moderation and with variety are the two other fundamental requirements for pillars of health. (Rattan, 2018)

This method of staying healthy has been widely practised by many Japanese people, and, although there are other factors, it seems to make a significant contribution to their remarkable longevity.

For some, language learning is a hobby. Kubota (2011), for example, carried out a small qualitative study of people learning English conversation in an informal setting in rural Japan, where she spent one year. She interviewed a number of second-age Japanese adults and explored the leisure and consumption aspects of foreign language learning. Many participants in her study, although not yet in the third-age, did not have a concrete goal in terms of attaining a given proficiency, and reported that they enjoyed ‘the activity [learning English conversation] through socialising with like-minded
people and being exposed to an exotic English-speaking space removed from daily work or family life’ (Kubota, 2011:481). Kubota attributed this choice to engage in learning English to these particular learners’ desire to belong to an imagined English-speaking community, arguing that English conversation provided them with ‘personal benefits of enjoyment, fantasy, and socialising, which might be vital to them at a certain point of their life trajectory’ (Kubota, 2011:487)

How are the motivations of the third-age learners discussed here similar to or different from those of Kubota’s learners?

Out of the 12 third-age foreign language learners (age range of 63 to 76) interviewed so far in the ongoing research project, who all live in Japan and have been learning various foreign languages (English, French, Italian, Russian), the scope of this article allows us to reflect on just two. Let us call them Mary (69-year-old female) and Joe (71-year-old male). There follow abridged versions of their re-constructed narratives based on semi-structured interviews with these two learners.

Mary
Mary’s first contact with a foreign language, English, was in junior high school. She hated it, as she had to devote to English ten times the effort she put into other subjects. English was nothing more than a sort of code for her, which she had to struggle with. Nevertheless, at university, she followed her friend and joined an ESS (English Speaking Society) club, where she ‘realised’ that English could be used for communication, not only as an asset for examinations. However, her love of French movies and novels brought her, at the age of 26, to a language class in French. Prompted by a classmate’s recommendation, Mary went for a short, six month-long language study-abroad stay, where meeting people from different countries influenced her deeply. Although she could hardly make herself understood in French at first, by the end of her stay, she was enjoying everything and everyone immensely. Ever since, for more than 40 years, Mary has been trying to find different opportunities to stay in contact with French, whether through books or movies, or through studying the language on her own and in conversation classes. Engaging in exchanges of different ideas on various topics is what she seems to enjoy the most. Here is how Mary expresses her motivation:

‘Speaking [a foreign language] is a pure joy for me. When it comes to feelings, we are similar...we are human beings after all...but ways of thinking...coming across new and different ways of thinking...noticing different perspectives...joy...and it is fun...’

Joe
When Joe was six years old, the circumstances of his parents’ life brought him to China, where he stayed for several years. In junior high school, he started learning Russian. He loved his charming teacher, and followed whatever advice or instruction she would give her students. He had excellent grades and was intending to study
Russian at a prestigious university, when the Cultural Revolution took place, and he was forced to go back to Japan and abandon his dream of becoming a Russian teacher. However, he has never stopped studying the language on his own, combining it with another passion of his, playing the harmonica and singing Russian songs. His studying of Russian, however, has had another goal. Joe envisages himself as someone who can help bridge the two cultures, bringing Russian and Japanese people closer to each other. Here is how Joe expresses his motivation:

‘I just can’t stop. Learning a foreign language for me is a perfect fusion of my hobby and exciting studies. I do it for myself, for my health, but also for others, as a volunteer, so I can contribute to bridging two cultures.’

The interviews also provide us with information about the strategies that these learners employ. Besides repetitive routine tasks, such as spending a certain fixed time studying on a regular basis, keeping vocabulary notebooks, referring to a small grammar book or a dictionary, or having a novel at hand at all times, these learners also seek novelty and interest by, for example, watching movies or short videos on YouTube, and coming back to them repeatedly in order to understand the content better. What these third-age learners share is the constancy of their effort, their persistent resilience against popular beliefs regarding whether particular categories of people have or have not a talent for learning languages, and their rejection of ageist ideas—including self-ageism—about learning new languages in later stages of life.

There is, however, another element to be mentioned regarding what these third-age learners seem to share, and that is their ability to savour their foreign language learning experience. When talking to the researcher about their motivations, learning experiences, and routines, these third-age learners actually exuded joy, as if they were re-living particular moments. Savouring is a concept in positive psychology that refers to the ‘capacities to attend to, appreciate, and enhance the positive experiences in one’s life’ (Bryant and Veroff, 2007). It has three temporal dimensions. Besides paying attention to the positive feelings that are occurring in the present, we can savour through reminiscence when we remember the positive feelings from the past, or alternatively through imagining the positive feelings we will have in the future. According to Bryant and Veroff (2007), to be able to savour, there are three important preconditions, which third-agers very often fulfil. They are: 1) a sense of immediacy in the here and now, 2) freedom from social and esteem needs as motivations, and 3) focused mindful attention to positive experience.

Pitts (2018) collected detailed narratives about a communication moment that sixty-eight university students savoured, and, on the basis of an analysis of the data, conceptualised savouring as a positive language and psychology construct. She proposed a typology of communication savouring model with
seven specific types of savouring that she was able to observe in experiences the young adults in her study reported. They are as follows:

1. aesthetic communication, i.e. an appreciation of the beauty and playfulness of language as demonstrated in colourful language, strategic use of timing, surprising elements, and delight in the ability for language to move people,
2. communication presence, i.e. pleasure derived from mutually, genuinely, and wholly attending to the communicative moment, often resulting in the lack of awareness of time, pressures, or the presence of others, and feelings of intense connectivity,
3. nonverbal communication, i.e. taking delight in messages that are communicated through means other than talk, including intimate touch, vocal warmth, smiling and eye gaze, and the environmental context in which communication occurs,
4. recognition and acknowledgement, i.e. deriving pleasure from sending or receiving praise or recognition that acknowledges and honours an individual or group,
5. relational communication, i.e. finding pleasure in communication that moved a relationship toward greater intimacy or better understanding, often through interpersonal disclosure,
6. extraordinary communication, i.e. and recognising and appreciating ‘landmark’ communication events or moments that are unique, special, or novel,
7. implicitly shared communication, i.e. the perception that one is having the same pleasurable experience as another and deriving pleasure from the unspoken mutual agreement. (Pitts, 2019: 38(2), Communication Savoring Typology Table with working definitions)

So, whether it is a case of the third-age learners savouring the foreign language learning process itself, or a case of their savouring that extra layer which a foreign language adds to inter-personal communication, we assume (and firmly believe) that the immense pleasure they experience keeps them motivated to continue their learning activity and adds to their overall wellbeing.

5. Envoi

We have briefly explored in the above discussion what research has to tell us about the various dimensions—both negative and positive—of the experience of learning additional languages in later life. We have mentioned that the intensity of research in this area, after a long period of paucity, is now increasing to
the point where the whole domain is becoming a very ‘hot topic.’ One of the reasons for this, of course, is that the circumstances of the world are rapidly changing, in the sense that older adults now constitute an increasingly large proportion of the world population and of the population of additional language learners. Another reason is that close scrutiny of many of the negative clichés concerning language learning—indeed learning in general—in the autumn years has called such notions into question. Our strong sense, indeed, is that the profit and pleasure aspects of third-age language learning are ever more revealing themselves to be in the ascendant!

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