



Language Learning Never Gets Old: Investigating the cognitive and psychosocial effects of third-age language learning

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Symposium format:

- **Symposium Multimodal**

Symposium mode:

- **Hybrid**

Sub-themes (multiple choices - delete the others):

- ☐ **LANGUAGE IN THE MIND/BRAIN:** psycholinguistics, bilingualism, multilingualism, processing, cognitive advantage, individual factors or differences, cross-linguistic factors, disorders
- ☐ **LANGUAGE TEACHING AND LEARNING:** teacher education, curricula and education, classrooms, instruction, task-based learning, EAP, study abroad, (virtual) exchanges, materials and methods
- ☐ **LEARNER CHARACTERISTICS:** autonomy, strategies, young, old, non-instructed, individual factors or differences, emotion
- ☐ **RESEARCH:** methods, approaches and (collaborative) practices

Summary:

The proportion of older adults in the world population is growing rapidly, which presents several health challenges, such as cognitive decline and psychosocial complexities. Luckily, healthy aging is a process we have some agency over. As a mentally-stimulating leisure activity, late-life language learning has been proposed as an intervention that may positively influence the level of cognitive functioning in older adults, although there is great inter- and intra-individual variation. Specifically, some studies report significant and lasting changes after a language course; others find that a language course halts cognitive decline but does not lead to improvements, while yet others report no benefits, except in those adults with lower cognition at baseline. Furthermore, language learning is an inherently social activity that arguably improves well-being. For this symposium, we invite contributions that investigate language learning as a health-promoting activity through intervention studies, qualitative methods, case studies, and other approaches so as to study the cognitive and socio-affective effects of late-life language learning. We invite contributions across the entire spectrum of third age learning research, rooted in various disciplines, including - but not limited to - (applied) linguistics, cognitive psychology, educational sciences, and neuroscience.



Argument (2 pages maximum, i.e. about 500 words or 3000 characters including bibliography):

The proportion of older adults in the world population is growing rapidly. While currently 9% of people worldwide are aged 65 and over, this number is projected to grow to 16% by 2050 (United Nations, 2020). This unprecedented increase in the number of older adults brings with it a host of societal challenges. For example, age is the biggest risk factor for neurodegenerative illnesses such as Alzheimer's disease (AD), which poses a great impact on public health (Alzheimer's Association, 2020). Further, a number of psychosocial challenges, like loneliness and depression, increasingly reduce ageing people's quality of life (Blazer, 2009; Yang & Victor, 2011). These findings are a stark reminder that living longer does not equal healthy ageing.

However, healthy ageing is a process that we have a degree of agency over. Several modifiable factors contribute to cognitive reserve, which is the brain's resilience against age-related or pathological brain atrophy (Stern, 2009). These include lifestyle factors as well as socially and mentally stimulating leisure activities and social integration (e.g. sports, music and education), but, interestingly, also bilingual experiences. Several studies reported that older adults who speak more than one language displayed AD symptoms several years later than their monolingual peers (for a meta-analysis, see Anderson et al., 2020). Researchers (e.g. Kroll & Bialystok, 2013) have postulated that these positive effects are caused by the 'mental juggling' of all available languages: when one language is used, the other needs to be inhibited. These patterns of activation, deactivation, and switching are said to have positive neurocognitive consequences that last throughout the lifespan (Kroll et al., 2015).

This does not mean that bilingual experiences must be lifelong to be beneficial for older adults. Late-life language learning has been proposed as an intervention that could boost cognitive functioning and reduce the risk for late-life memory disorders (e.g., Antoniou et al., 2013). In theory, language training later in life activates similar mechanisms of switching and suppression that are involved in lifelong bilingual experiences. In fact, several studies have found beneficial effects of late-life language courses on executive functioning (Pfenninger & Polz, 2018; Bak et al., 2016; Wong et al., 2019), although the opposite has also been found (e.g. Kliesch et al. 2021). Additionally, learning to speak a language is an inherently social activity, and the process of learning itself might bring joy to older adults and increase their overall well-being (Singleton & Záborská, 2020; Pikhart & Klimova, 2020). Lastly, the study of late-life language learning has also shown that older adults have unique learning styles that deserve further investigation (Van der Ploeg et al., 2022).

The field of late-life language learning is evolving rapidly through the work of several research groups. Ongoing projects, for instance, focus on cognitive effects of language learning interventions, individual learner trajectories, best teaching practices, potential effects of language learning on well-being, and effects of retirement on language use/acquisition patterns. We invite contributions that utilise intervention studies, qualitative methods, case studies, and other methods that may be used to study the cognitive and psychosocial effects of third-age language learning. The goal of this multimodal symposium is to discuss the latest developments in the discipline, as well as to explore future research avenues.



References

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