

Successful Language Learning in Midlife

Many adults are facing the challenge of learning a second language as they embark upon second careers or short-term service overseas in midlife, defined as between the ages of 40 and 65. Despite the generally positive attitude toward this new corps of highly motivated, enthusiastic, willing-to-serve volunteers, there are lingering doubts about their potential for effectiveness, especially for those who intend to serve long term. For example, will they really be able to learn a second language? Language acquisition for this group is an issue which should be explored as agencies rethink policies for recruitment, personnel placement, and member care. Recent research indicates that an older adult can successfully learn another language despite the conventional wisdom that after some ill-defined point in early adulthood it is too late to learn a second language. That is not to say that the task is an easy one, and there are significant differences in the older learner which must be addressed.

Agencies sometimes do not require that their older members do language study, assuming that it is an impossible task, but nearly all individuals who are given the opportunity to study the language can acquire at least an everyday, survival level of proficiency, and some can achieve a high level of competence. On the other hand, those who do not learn the language will probably feel frustrated by their limitations in communicating with nationals and they may be marginalized by their co-workers as well as by the nationals.

H. Douglas Brown asserts that "A fifty-year-old can be as successful as an eighteen-year-old if all other factors are equal. Remind your students, especially if your students are older, that the younger, the better is a myth" (Brown 2001, pp. 90-91). If this is true, the key phrase to examine more closely is "if all other factors are equal." In the case of middle-aged adults learning a new language, it is obvious that all other factors are *not* equal. Brown also states that "if an adult does not acquire a second language successfully, it is probably because of intervening cognitive or affective variables and not the absence of innate capacities" (Brown, 2000, p.71). Some of the variables related to age are physical factors, cognition and memory, and affective factors such as self-efficacy and motivation.

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Physical Factors

Any adult attempting to learn a second language should have a thorough physical checkup to screen for vision problems and hearing loss. Hearing loss is a common problem among adults as they age. Language learners of any age with a hearing impairment understandably struggle with language study. They may be able to compensate somewhat for the reduced perceptual input, but language learning is often a very difficult, emotionally painful process for them. Ideally, background noise should be eliminated for these learners, but it is not always possible to do so in some environments. Another common physical problem, one which is significant since it has been shown to affect the memory, is the sleep deficit and fatigue that often affect women in midlife (Willis & Reid). This and any other treatable physical condition should be addressed before beginning the task of language study.

Cognition and Memory

It is important not to underestimate the complexity and difficulty of learning a foreign language for an adult of any age. As Judith Strozer stated, "...to come to know a foreign language is an extraordinary intellectual achievement for a brain not especially designed for post-pubescent language acquisition" (Strozer, p.188). Cognition and memory in adults have been studied extensively, particularly in the elderly, although some recent studies have focused on the midlife period. According to one researcher, physical and cognitive changes are gradual and middle-aged adults can compensate for the decline in cognitive functioning (Lachman).

In general, middle-aged adults are fully capable of learning a second language, although it is well known that there is a decline in the short-term memory and in the speed of processing. It has been said that “adults are able to learn as well in their forties and fifties as in their twenties and thirties, when and if they can control the pace of learning” (Brookfield, p.28). Recent research has led to a better understanding of intellectual functioning in midlife.

The Seattle Longitudinal Study started with 500 adults ages 26 to 67 who were tested for adult cognitive functioning at seven-year intervals from 1956 to 1998. They were studied for changes in performance in six basic mental abilities: vocabulary, verbal memory, number, spatial orientation, inductive reasoning, and perceptual speed. Four of these abilities reached their peak in middle age. In other words, according to this study, middle-aged adults function at a higher level than young adults in vocabulary, spatial orientation, verbal memory, and inductive reasoning. By the time adults are 53-60 years old, all abilities are either stable or beginning to decline slightly (Willis & Reid). It seems reasonable to suggest that a high level functioning in verbal memory is a positive indication that adults in midlife should be able to succeed in language learning. However, the decline in perceptual speed may have a negative effect on language learning. This study clearly shows that most basic mental abilities continue to operate very well in middle age and that the brain has the ability to compensate for age-related declines in efficiency. Although it indicates that verbal memory peaks in midlife, adults in midlife often express concern for the apparent decline in short term memory and its effect on learning a second language.

A better understanding of the various types of memory suggests certain implications for language learning in older adults. The issue of short term memory loss is often mentioned as a concern for middle-aged people, but there are other types of memory which are also significant. These are *episodic memory*, *semantic memory* and *working memory*.

One system of memory is known as *episodic memory*. Episodic memory has to do with remembering information or events one has experienced. Episodic memory includes things like remembering an appointment or remembering where you put your glasses. One study found that older adults had more problems remembering names, routines and objects, especially when tired or under stress (Poon, et al, p.425). But does forgetting where you left your glasses mean that you can never learn a second language? Probably not. Other memory systems are also involved.

with proper training in second language acquisition, age-appropriate language instruction, and adequate on-field member care, most middle-aged adults are equipped to learn the language

Semantic memory is defined as “...the acquisition and retention of generic facts, knowledge, and beliefs” (Lachman, p.255). For second language learners, it includes the learning of vocabulary, concepts and facts. This type of memory increases over life and older adults test as well as younger adults. This is an important advantage for language learning. However, even though research suggests that semantic memory remains intact and even increases over time, older adults have problems in the retrieval of previously learned material.

Older adults often report the experience of coming up blank when trying to remember a word. Everyone who has learned a second language has experienced this, but older adults usually experience it more often in everyday life and are understandably more anxious about the effect this will have on their language

learning ability. Studies have found that older adults do have more retrieval failures than younger adults and are slower to retrieve words from the semantic memory (Poon, et al). In addition, most researchers agree that “nearly every mental operation requires more time with increased age” (Craik & Salthouse, p.152).

Adults, especially older adults, tend to rely on their long term memory system which includes both episodic and semantic memory for language learning as they integrate new learning into their overall framework or schemata. But before new knowledge can be stored in the long term memory, it must first be processed in the short term memory, often referred to as *working memory*, which is known to decline somewhat in older adults.

Working memory is a system in which information is stored temporarily and manipulated or processed before being committed to long term memory. According to Alan Baddeley, “working memory stands at the crossroads between memory, attention, and perception” (Baddeley, p.559). Working memory is involved in language comprehension, vocabulary acquisition, retrieval of previously learned information, and other cognitive processes (Baddeley, Service & Craik, Stevick). It is involved not only in input but also in the output of language (Skehan, 1998). Working memory is limited in everyone, but capacity declines slightly with age (Scott). In older adults “when there are too many operations required in too short a time, then the limited capacity of working memory becomes

overloaded” (Craik & Salthouse, p. 187). However, older adults seem to be able to compensate for this slight loss of memory capacity and should benefit from language learning methods that are designed to not overload the working memory.

Although middle-aged adults tend to experience some short-term memory loss, some decline in the ability to retrieve items from the long term memory, and a slowing of processing speed, these losses are gradual and are not severe enough to rule out second language learning. Adults in midlife have the cognitive abilities for learning a second language, although progress will generally be slower than for the same individuals when they were younger adults. But cognition and memory are not the only significant factors in successful language learning. Affective factors are also important.

Affective Factors: Self-Efficacy and Motivation

Many negative stereotypes of older adults persist. Middle-aged and older adults sometimes feel compelled to apologize for being old, as though it were some kind of moral issue over which they had some control! However illogical that may be, sometimes older adults can lose the self-confidence that is essential for effective learning. Language learning in particular requires a certain amount of risk-taking. Affective factors play an especially important role in successful language learning for older adults. Self-efficacy and motivation are two of the most important affective factors to consider.

Self-efficacy is “the belief that one can cope and succeed” (Ehrman, p. 143). Low self-efficacy leads to lack of self-esteem, dependency, and self-fulfilling prophecies. “Students who perceive their own ability as low and who believe that ability is fixed also tend to limit their own achievements” (Ehrman, p. 147). People with high self-efficacy put more effort into tasks than people with low self-efficacy. In order to build high self-efficacy, negative stereotypes must be overcome. Personal control is an important issue for adults in mid-life. One of the main principles of adult learning in general is that “adults tend to be self-directing” (Imel, p. 1). Self-direction is important for any adult language learner and gives the learner a sense of confidence and control. Self-efficacy is closely related to motivation.

Adults in midlife learning a second language usually do so out of instrumental motivation, that is, they need to learn the language to do their job or to survive in a foreign context. Additionally, adults who commence a second career serving overseas are motivated by integrative reasons—they want to fit into their new culture and develop relationships with nationals. Initially they are excited and have good intentions, but may soon get discouraged if they do not quickly experience success in language learning. They may give up, particularly if they did not really expect to succeed, having internalized the negative stereotype of the older person as a poor language learner. Research is not conclusive whether motivation is a consequence of success or the cause of success (Skehan, 1989, p. 49). Probably both are valid to some extent. Two main factors affecting motivation in language learning are the communicative needs of the learner and the learner’s attitude toward the community of speakers of the target language (Lightbown & Spada). Effective language learning programs are designed with the communicative needs of the learners in mind. Language learners should be given a careful and thorough orientation to the culture. They should make every effort possible to integrate into the local community. As they develop close relationships with nationals, their motivation to communicate better will grow.

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Research shows that “older adults. . . are capable of much greater success than may have initially been assumed, especially when programs are tailored to meet their needs” (Scott, p. 3). Middle-aged adults volunteering for a second career overseas should go with the intention of learning a second language. Realistically, some may not be as successful as they had hoped, even as some younger adults are not highly successful in learning a second language. But with proper training in procedures for second language acquisition, age-appropriate language instruction, and adequate on-field member care, most of them will be equipped to learn the language and thus increase their effectiveness. They should initially have time set aside for full-time language study and then continue to study part-time or informally as long as they are on the field. Agencies should exercise good stewardship of their human resources by making provision for all of their workers to spend some time in language study. Here are some practical suggestions which should help older adults to succeed in language and culture learning.

Suggestions for Language Learners in Midlife

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- **Get pre-field training.** While all language learners will benefit considerably from pre-field training in phonetics and language learning techniques, it is especially important for middle-aged and older adults. Good pre-field training equips you with the tools you need to be a successful on-field learner.
- **Remember, age is only one of many learner variables.** Gathering information about your learning style and other individual learner variables will help in identifying your learning needs as well as strengths and weaknesses. This information can contribute to making more appropriate decisions about your learning procedures, including your choice of learning strategies and activities.
- **Individualize your language learning as much as the program allows.** You will feel more in control and will learn more successfully if your program is geared to your rate of learning, learning style and communicative needs.
- **Include intensive training in the phonology of the target language as part of early language learning.** This is important, not only for pronunciation and comprehension, but also for acquiring new vocabulary (Baddeley, Service & Craik).
- **Learn how to use effective language learning strategies.** Identify strategies that suit your individual learning style and personality, especially memory strategies and affective strategies. Being equipped with effective strategies will help you focus your energy on the most useful learning procedures and will build confidence.
- **Keep in mind that you *can* improve your memory, so look for ways to strengthen both short-term and long-term memory.** Memory can be influenced by factors under the individual's control such as motivation, strategies, and routines. In addition, physical exercise and social activities have been shown to lead to better memory function (Jennings & Darwin).
- **Be open to trying various kinds of language learning techniques and activities.** Do not resist some activities just because they seem childish or require physical activity. Some language learning techniques such as Total Physical Response (TPR) are so valuable that you should use them even if you are uncomfortable with them at first.
- **Be flexible and cooperative** unless you want to perpetuate those negative stereotypes about older people.
- **Go at your own pace whenever possible.** Very often your pace will need to be slower than for younger learners since your overall cognitive processing and physical responses may be slower. You may also become frustrated with a fast-paced classroom that cannot accommodate individual differences and you should, therefore, seek out learning situations that are more appropriate for your needs.
- **Limit the amount of material in each lesson** because working memory in older adults often has slightly less capacity than in younger adults.
- **Use a multisensory approach.** Using both visual and auditory modes is easier on the working memory and helps in the retrieval of information (Van Gerven, Oxford).
- **Be aware that it will probably take you longer to reach the required proficiency level than it would have taken you 20 years ago.** Give yourself extra time so that you can get all the practice you need as well as frequent review, so that the amount of new material does not become overwhelming.
- **Be encouraged that you can make satisfactory progress, even if it is at a slower rate than you would like.** You may find that journals and checklists will help you stay on track and also be good reminders that you are gaining in proficiency.
- **Find a quiet, comfortable place for working with language helpers, listening to audio materials and doing individual study.** This will reduce stress and contribute to more positive learning experiences.
- **Develop meaningful cross-cultural friendships, especially those that require you to use your new language.** This can contribute significantly to successful language and culture learning and it will make the time you live overseas more personally rewarding.
- **Be aware of the effects of fatigue, culture stress and role deprivation.** Make sure you get adequate rest, and within the framework of your agency's policies, work towards having a fulfilling role in the community such as giving hospitality or a limited amount of teaching of some kind.

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