Mind, body and spirit: an exploration of some of the many benefits to older adults of learning a foreign language for leisure purposes

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Introduction: the leisure language learning paradox

Understanding the ‘benefits’ of learning throughout the lifespan necessitates looking beyond the general premise that learning is ‘good for you’. It involves exploring the specific nature of the impact of lifelong learning upon individual adults. As such, this paper considers ‘well-being’ as associated with one particular and under-researched educational context: that of older British adults learning a foreign language of their own volition in England through formal adult and community education (ACE), at so-called ‘evening classes’.

At the same time this paper aims to challenge the assumption that language learning for leisure purposes, e.g. with unaccredited language programmes, is essentially frivolous and of little value.

Evidence is growing to support the clear benefits of adult learning in general for well-being and self-enrichment (e.g. the ‘Foresight Mental Capital and Wellbeing Project’, 2008; Schuller & Watson, 2009).

Nevertheless the paradox of older British adults choosing to learn a foreign language, based in England and out of choice, is compounded by several puzzling contradictions.

The estimated number of second language speakers of English (470 million – 1 billion people according to varying definitions of mastery and literacy) combined with its first language speakers (approximately 375 million) make English the most widely-spoken (and formally learnt) language in the world.

The reality of learning a foreign language (apart from English) remotely in this context often entails: only 2 hours of lessons per week; having a non-native teacher and little opportunity of either travelling to the target country or encountering native-speakers of one’s chosen language. This in turn affords little chance to practise or use acquired skills.
Additionally the seminal works of the sixties (e.g. Lenneberg, 1967) initiated the ongoing debate regarding the biological constraints of learning a language beyond puberty, particularly regarding successful attainment or native-like fluency. All of this raises the question of why older British adults should bother in terms of expending precious leisure time and effort at language classes. To learn a language remotely, e.g. Italian, whilst living in England, when one’s own language, English, is dominant globally, involves personal choice, agency and strong intrinsic motivation. As there are no tangible rewards, such as qualifications, it is reasonable to surmise that this type of ‘leisure language learning’ must benefit individuals somehow.

Identifiable benefits

Several studies outline different benefits derived from learning an additional language. Research from Phipps (2007) features the issue of escaping from the limitations imposed by one’s own first language. Phipps asserts that using a second language in interaction, i.e. ‘languaging’, has the ‘ability to bring change, adventure, new perspectives and renewal [to] wearisome lives’ (op. cit. p.29).

A British reporting upon young adults in post-compulsory education (Gallagher-Brett, 2004) identifies 700 official ‘reasons’ for studying a language. Some reasons for studying another language respond largely to instrumentality and market forces, e.g. ‘employability’ or ‘intercultural competence’. Nevertheless this research finds that some of the strongest reasons to study languages concern the personal benefits and enjoyment that people gain from language learning.

Aldridge’s and Tuckett’s 2009 report on general adult participation in ACE shows the two most prevalent benefits identified for learners of foreign languages involve improving communication skills and making new friends.

Traditionally the literature relating ageing and language to the workings of the brain has tended to portray the potential for successful adult language learning rather negatively. However scientific research over the last two decades has taken a more positive stance. Research from Canada (Bialystok et al, 2007) reinforces the central premise that exposure to another language has cognitive benefits, with the suggestion that the delayed onset of dementia is over 4 years later for some bilinguals compared to monolinguals. Mechelli et al (2004) suggest that learning a second language stimulates and alters the grey matter in the left interior parietal
cortex of the brain, an area believed to process information in the same way exercise builds muscles. An Australian government report on education (Fernandez, 2007) also highlights the benefits of learning another language for cognitive processing, as well as for general literacy and linguistic development.

Phipps’s anthropological research (2007) concerns ‘tourist language learners,’ i.e. people learning a language mainly for tourism purposes. These ‘tourist language learners’ may also learn formally at ‘evening classes’ in the UK. Phipps identifies many of the benefits derived from learning another language in this context, especially when ‘languaging’ and travelling, which include:

- Minimising risk in communication;
- Relating to other human beings;
- Becoming virtuous, courteous guests when travelling;
- The social benefits of the ‘communitas’ and ‘social-bondedness’ of the actual class.

Other researchers have found that being in a group helps learners by providing both emotional and psychological support, with learners referring to their classmates as: a ‘family’; a ‘band of warriors’ or ‘fellow strugglers’ (Kegan et al, 2001). The benefits may also be somewhat indefinable. In his novel, ‘Night Train to Lisbon’ (2004) Mercier describes his main character’s wonder at first using Portuguese words in the real world along with the fact that they ‘worked’. Mercier compares this to being ‘like magic’.

**Methodological considerations**

However, the question of what type of impact learning may have upon people raises concerns for researchers. Empirical evidence is required to avoid being merely anecdotal.

Furthermore how is ‘well-being’ relating to education to be measured? This depends largely upon interpretations of the term ‘well-being’, concerning whether well-being is perceived in a physical, spiritual, mental, psychological or communal sense. Another question is whether well-being is viewed as a: continuous process or a state of attainment. It may also be seen as a conceptual commodity such as social capital, human capital or identity capital (Schuller & Watson, op. cit.) or as a part of the
constructivist process proposed by Delors and his colleagues’ (1996) four pillars of education: *learning to know* (e.g. mastering learning tools or skills); *learning to do* (e.g. personal competence and performance); *learning to live together* (e.g. understanding diversity and other cultures) and *learning to be* (the development of mind and body, intelligence, sensitivity, aesthetic appreciation and spirituality).

Rarely do educationalists and educational researchers have the instruments to hand for measuring or observing the well-being achieved through learning. This precludes scientific, instrumental or cause-and-effect methodologies questing after medical, physical or biological truths. One way of measuring the personal benefits from education is to investigate the impact of learning by listening to individuals’ own accounts of their learning history. This type of research seems to encourage a qualitative and interdisciplinary approach (West, 2010). Knowledge and expertise can be merged from diverse and allied fields, such as neurology, sociology, psychology, linguistics, discourse analysis and anthropology. Considering language teaching as an applied and interdisciplinary service like healthcare can change human experience and outcomes. Equally, following West (op. cit), psychological understanding of why people respond differently in apparently similar ‘objective’ social situations can lead to revelations about personal transformations, the meaning for inner life and the human self. For credibility such research needs to: balance macro/ micro level dynamics; embrace inter-disciplinarity: the historical, socio-cultural and the psychological, as well as be mindful of the quest for detachment, along with the affective and relational processes of research.

This paper reports upon an empirical study (Hooker, 2011) which attempts to do this. The research project was influenced by the type of ‘hermeneutic phenomenology’ proposed by van Manen (1997). A deeply philosophical approach embraces the ‘hermeneutic’ processes of: i) *conversation* (Gadamer, 2001) with both people and texts; ii) iterative *interpretation* and iii) ‘empathic’ *understanding*. This is coupled with the ‘phenomenological’ processes of i) *reflection* upon and ii) *description* of conscious lived experience, as well as the iii) *textual objectification* e.g. through writing, of the emergent phenomenon, i.e. ‘leisure language learning’.

This study proceeds through various consciousnesses of the benefits of learning an additional language: from the perspectives of the scientific and scholarly literature; through to learner opinion and even from fictional texts.
Everyone’s limited subjective ‘horizon’, whereby meaning is made from lived experience, and the traditions and cultures in which it is embedded, is broadened with encounters with other ‘horizons’. Through a ‘fusion of horizons’ (Gadamer, op. cit.) an agreed understanding of some-thing, i.e. the emergent phenomenon of ‘leisure language learning’ may be reached.

The 15 participants (8 women and 7 men) in this localised and context-sensitive study come from a wide range of social and educational backgrounds, but all share the characteristics of: being between 45-75 years old; living in a seaside area in south-west England; being retired or not working full-time; having attended ‘evening’ language classes within the past five years with English as their first language.

Empirical data were collected by means of in-depth, conversational interviews, exploring participants’ personal histories of encounters with/learning foreign languages. Units of meaning from participants’ accounts were gathered together with a summary of any perceived benefits in a pen-portrait, i.e. a textual sketch giving an outline of the key interview data, together with a sense of the interview process itself. The pen-portraits were re-submitted to the participants for comment.

The general bio data giving brief personal details and introducing the participants (Hooker, 2011) reflects the general diversity in the individuals’ backgrounds. For example it highlights the fact that even amongst this small group of 15 learners, collectively the participants have had contact with over 20 different languages, including more unusual ones like Hausa and Tagalog.

The following represent just a few examples from the findings of the specific benefits of leisure language learning as related to well-being.

**Mental and psychological benefits**

There is evidence of the positive psychological effects of learning a foreign language upon self-esteem. As Angela (aged 66) has discovered, she is now able to talk to her German friends, without her husband’s help.

“All round it gives me a buzz to think that I can….understand….a sense of achievement”

Lyla (63) explains that learning different languages has given her more confidence to practise speaking, in the class and when travelling.
“Then I got two occasions to go to Spain, and I found I actually spoke Spanish when…there….not very fluently but I could get by….I felt brilliant!

Learning another language not only helps to make learners feel better about what they can do, but it also gives them a purposeful leisure activity.

Bea (53) remarks that by going to German classes, she distinguishes herself from others, who do nothing at all.

“You’re out doing something with your life….constructive….at least you can say, ‘I’m…out learning a language”

Many of the participants talked about the perceived effects of learning a language upon their brain and mental activity.

Amanda (66) had originally come to the author’s beginner Italian classes together with her husband, Trevor (70) six months after suffering from a stroke.

Learning new Italian words and talking about Italian culture for their fore-planned trip to Italy created, according to Trevor, “new dialogue” between him and Amanda. This resulted in them: not dwelling upon Amanda’s illness; being prepared for travel to Italy, and staying active.

Amanda liked the challenge of learning new Italian words. Just thinking of something as “alien” as the Italian words, meant that this was not “competing with anything else” in her mind (i.e. re-building her recall of English) as she recovered.

Max (45) also refers to the positive effect of language learning upon the brain. He explains that his late father’s severe dementia has made him very aware of dementia-related issues and the potential of learning another language for keeping his mind active.

Several participants comment on the effects of language learning on their mind, for example Della (63) states that one of the benefits she has observed has been that,

“It does exercise your brain; there’s no doubt about it. I do feel….it keeps your brain cells alive.”

Participants have been motivated to learn a language in adulthood for a variety of reasons: by a desire for educational ‘catch-up’; and having the time, inclination and opportunity to do things in retirement.

In the interviews it is clear that there are instrumental reasons for joining a class, e.g. Dan (72) joined his French class to sail vintage tall ships into French ports and Neil (46) planned to re-visit Germany with his partner. Neil cannot understand why people would want to come to classes without a specific “reason” to use the language.
Even so there are adults who attend an evening class because they have an aesthetic or intellectual interest in a language, for example Max, with no interest in travel, wants to read German and Russian literature. There is often the desire to maintain or acquire specific skills when attending classes: e.g. pronouncing Italian artists’ names correctly (Danielle, 60+) or practising listening to different voices (Jackie, 72, & Max).

As well as learning the language for specific communicative needs, many of the participants appreciate their chosen language in a visceral and aesthetic way, with language being appealing in its own right. For example Della describes French as being, “beautifully elegant….something very refined….distilled”.

It is not just about the language, but also about learning for learning’s sake. Danielle, Trevor and Victor all express their pleasure in simply learning and acquiring knowledge about various languages.

Some learners are more comfortable with concentrating on grammar rather than on verbal communication. Lyla says that the structure of Latin makes her feel “safe” because she knows what she is supposed to do.

There are also distinctions between reactions to ‘grand culture’, embracing the best a country has to offer in terms of knowledge, art and learning, or to ‘everyday culture’, e.g. features of daily life, such as catching the bus.

Hilary (53) describes her pleasure in exploring German culture as well as the language, associating it with learnedness and a rich, musical heritage.

Roger (75), Angela, Trevor and Amanda all emphasise liking the food and the people of a foreign country, creating good associations for learning its language.

There are three areas where the social benefits from learning and using a language are apparent: a) the influence of significant others; b) the interplay with others in the wider world and c) the interaction and dynamics with others in the learning environment itself.

The close ones in learners’ lives, such as family and friends, can affect learner motivation. There is evidence in the data of: joint endeavour; supporting one another; sharing an interest or forming an intimate relationship with someone.

Several of the participants have attended a language class with a ‘significant other’; Jackie enrolled in her German class partly to keep her husband company.

Lyla started to learn German, before her son married an Austrian woman, and Hilary’s son had a German girlfriend.
At least three of the male participants: Victor, Roger & Trevor talk of significant personal encounters with foreign women when younger. The participants’ descriptions of applying their language learning echo Phipps’s (op. cit.) ‘tourist language learners’, with common themes of a) human relatedness; b) politeness and courtesy; c) making the connection and d) broadening horizons.

Hilary describes previous holidays to Greece, walking around in the countryside, able to say “good morning” and “thank you” in Greek. She says that this means that “you are no longer a detached observer”, appearing as “someone who wants to make a connection”.

The importance of politeness, courtesy and respect for the host country and the language are also highlighted by Danielle and Lyla. Additionally Victor says,

“It’s almost rude to ask in English all the time. If one goes to another country, you should try to speak….at least some basic words.”

There are clear social benefits to be derived from the class itself. For example: a) the broadening of horizons; b) opportunities to practise and c) interacting with others.

Despite admitting to being “naturally anti-social”, through attending German classes Della has met a “completely different….mix of people”, beyond the “narrow” academic and musical circles where she normally socialises. She also describes the group support for a class member who was seriously ill.

Lyla also likes learning socially in an “unobtrusive” way, because after the death of her husband, she would otherwise be at home alone.

In true hermeneutic tradition the possible interpretations of the findings are infinite. However it is reasonable to state that the processes of conversation and dialogue have had a transformative power, leading to better insights, for the participants, for the researcher herself, and potentially for other teachers, researchers and policy-makers.

This study presents one qualitative interpretation of how the phenomenon of ‘leisure language learning’ is perceived in one particular context. Other language learning contexts could benefit from a more qualitative and interdisciplinary approach to research. Language pedagogy research has been dominated for too long by ‘discourses of performance and competency and skills’ (Phipps, ibid.), often separating learners’ minds, bodies, and social behaviours into separate domains of
enquiry, and practice, rather than considering the actual human beings doing the learning.

It appears that learning a language allows for multiple selves. The data illustrate the possibilities for the construction and re-positioning of one’s identity afforded by learning another language. Some of the identities adopted by participants have included ‘the saviour’ of the communicative situation (Bea & John, 61) and the ‘classroom show-off’ (Danielle & Dan). The modality and means of identity negotiation and realignment depends largely on the context. Due to their often remote locus and having little chance of encountering the foreign language on an everyday basis, these adult learners tend instead to identify with the imagined and cerebral dimensions of learning their desired language, e.g. reading the literature. The findings suggest that learning a foreign language later in life for leisure purposes has real and significant value for older adults. The skills and qualifications or ‘human capital’ (Schuller & Watson, op. cit) acquired are not always used in the same way as by younger learners. Nevertheless these older learners appear to take pride and pleasure in maintaining and improving their language skills: ‘learning to know’ (Delors et al, op. cit.). This is turn leads to improved self-esteem and a sense of purpose in life, defined by Schuller & Watson as ‘identity capital’. This is coupled with a mature understanding of their own learning and their own competence i.e. ‘learning to do’ (Delors et al, ibid.) and according to their own success criteria. Furthermore this is often happening at a transitional time of life, i.e. in retirement, when the status and purpose provided by either full-time work or caring for a dependent family, is becoming less central to people’s lives.

Far from reflecting the commonplaces of a deficit model of learning later in life, the study defines multiple benefits experienced by older language learners. At the same time a deeper appreciation of the adult ‘leisure language learning’ experience is more likely to engender a ‘tactful’ and ‘action-sensitive pedagogy’ (van Manen, op. cit.): responsive to learners’ expectations and motivation, and taking their backgrounds and routes to learning into account.

References
