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Exploring Third-Age Foreign Language Learning from the Well-being Perspective: Work in Progress

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Abstract

The third age in the life of many people in developed countries is considered to be a culmination; time for personal achievement and fulfilment after retirement. While much discussion is focused on the challenges of an ageing society, there are also opportunities. Popularity of language courses among third-agers, who do not seek further career advancement nor wish to live abroad, indicates that there are other aspects of learning a foreign language than attaining linguistic proficiency. This qualitative study will investigate third-agers' perceptions, behaviours and emotions experienced when learning a foreign language, and how such experience contributes to their well-being. Through the lens of positive psychology, especially by exploring the concept of *savouring*, this study will aim to gain insights into how third-agers conceptualize their learning experience, what their savouring capacities are, and what impact these have on their overall well-being. First, an in-depth interview was conducted with a senior lifelong language learner. In the study that will follow, more data will be collected in a snowball fashion through personal connections.

Keywords: third-age, FL learning, well-being, savouring, positive psychology

This short paper represents a summary of a newly begun work-in-progress study, exploring the impact that foreign language learning in the third age has on the learner's well-being. There are three main sets of overarching questions this research aims to answer. The first set or group of questions is about the names, labels, and general understanding of the concept of third age. The second set addresses third-age foreign language learners' perspectives and experiences, as well as their motivations and visions. And finally, the third group of questions focuses on the savouring capacities the third-agers have, and how their appreciation of the enjoyment of language learning contributes to their overall well-being.

What's in a Name? or Terminology and Concepts

Conventionally, one's life has been seen as a three-stage endeavour; with the first stage characterized by dependency, immaturity and learning, the second stage by responsibilities, contribution to society and career, and the third stage when one retires. With expanded life expectancy, the number of healthy retirees, so-called third-agers, has been growing exponentially. The terms *third age* and *third-agers* were introduced in 1980s by

Peter Laslett, who divided the life of a person in a developed country into four ages with the third age being a culmination: an era for personal achievement and fulfilment after retirement. The philosophical underpinnings however go back to ancient India, where a harmonious life, which was believed to be lived for 100 years, was divided into four stages, so-called Ashrams: Studentship, Householder, Forest Dweller, and Ascetic (Tiwari & Pandey, 2013). From Hinduism to Buddhism, and through Buddhism, these terms were brought to Japan. The third stage, the period in which I am interested, is known as *rinjuki*. As at this stage the research is being conducted in Japan and the interviewees are mostly Japanese from the large cohort of the first baby boomers, it is crucial to understand the underlying way of thinking. This hyphenated word, third-ager, however, is still rather a term that is used out of convenience. Generally, it is not instantly understood yet, so what should be used remains an intriguing question. I suspect that third-ager will eventually become one word, *thirdager*, as the term teen-ager became teenager in the first half of the 20th century.

Who are These Third-age Language Learners?

In this age of longevity, and of significant demographic changes in society, there is an urgent need to re-conceptualize life as a multi-staged endeavour as opposed to the widely accepted three stages mentioned earlier: learning, career, retirement, with an additional fourth stage, marked by deterioration and death. In the popular and academic literature, the opinion has already been often voiced that the shift to a multi-stage life will emerge (Gratton & Scott, 2017). Nowadays, we not only live longer, we stay healthier for longer. While much discussion is focused on the challenges and threats of an ageing society, there are also opportunities. According to the Hartford Aging index (Research Network on an Aging Society, 2017), which measures the health and well-being of ageing populations in 30 countries, the super-ageing society of Japan ranks first in well-being and second in productivity and engagement. Japan's baby boomers comprise a significant portion of the retirement generation. It is a generation that experienced the post-war recovery and the economic boom, as well as its collapse and recession. Many of them are financially secure and remain active. The popularity of language courses among third-agers, who do not seek further career advancement nor wish to live abroad, indicates that there are other aspects to learning a foreign language than attaining linguistic proficiency. This qualitative study will investigate third-agers' perceptions, behaviours and emotions experienced when learning a foreign language, and how such experience contributes to their well-being. Through the lens of positive psychology, especially by exploring the concept of *savouring* posited by Bryant

and Veroff (2006), this study will aim to gain insights into how third-agers conceptualize their learning experience, what their savouring capacities are, and what impact learning a foreign language, including savouring their learning experience, has on their overall well-being.

Theoretical Underpinnings

At this point, regarding the theoretical and conceptual framework, this is indeed work in progress. I am still a theoretical agnostic. By this I mean that I do not think there is only one theoretical framework that I should apply. However, having said that, I do want to examine my research questions through the lens of positive psychology. I am especially intrigued by the concept of savouring. Bryant and Veroff (2012) posited that “people have capacities to attend to, appreciate, and enhance the positive experiences in their lives” (p. 2). This deliberate attending to positive feelings and experiences that are making them feel good they call savouring. Time plays an extremely important role in savouring. Although Bryant and Veroff stress that savouring is an experience or a phenomenon of the here and now, besides savouring the present experience, we can enjoy reminiscing, as well as anticipating. Assuming that learning a FL triggers savouring, I am interested in whether the third-age FL learners prefer certain types of savouring, and whether and how those types positively influence their well-being.

There are, of course, other dimensions related to the third-age language learning, *per se*, that call for attention such as motivating factors: social and recreational (Singleton & Ryan, 2004), or “anti-aging” (Ryan & Dörnyei, 2013). These will also be highly connected with the psychological aspects of the whole language learning endeavour in later stages of life.

What Do the Third-age Language Learners Savour?

Well-being is multi-dimensional and pursued in many different ways. However, it is well established that having a certain level of meaning in one’s life is crucial. Language learning is clearly rewarding for third-agers, adding to their sense of meaning in their life. “Why and how is that so?”, together with “What do third-agers savour, when learning a foreign language?” and “How do the savouring capacities and appreciating the enjoyment of language learning contribute to their overall well-being?” are the further questions to be explored in this research. To start answering them, first, an in-depth interview was conducted with a senior lifelong language learner. Later, more data were and are to be collected in

interviews with other third-age foreign language learners in a snowball fashion through personal connections.

Pilot Interview

So far, I have conducted seven semi-structured interviews with third-age foreign language learners, four females and three males, age 76, 68, 62, 69, 56, 73 and 70, learning one or two of the following languages: Chinese, English, French, Italian, and Russian. Regarding the 56-year old interviewee, he seems relatively young to be called a third-ager. However, the third age here is bound to a life stage rather than to an actual chronological age. I interviewed him also because his motivation to learn a foreign language was not connected to his career or other pragmatic necessity. Due to limited space in this article, I focus on the first interview with a 76-year-old female, who still works as a part-time English language instructor at a private university for several hours a week. Her first foreign language, which she studied and acquired to a high proficiency level, was English, which she eventually went on to teach. The interview was about 40 minutes long. We talked about her language learning history and initial language-learning motivation. With several questions I explored her self-concepts and motivating/demotivating factors in studying the languages of her passion, French and recently Italian. And in the last part of the interview, I also aimed to capture her behaviours and practices with a focus on her savouring beliefs and capacities. The recorded interview was transcribed verbatim, translated from Japanese into English, and now I am in the process of analysing the raw data by intense open coding, i.e. I am applying conceptual labels, at this point with the aim of grouping them together in meaningful categories and subcategories.

The first stage of analysis is already revealing several interesting points. Eve's (pseudonym) motivation to study English, her first foreign language, developed from a simple admiration of Western culture in her youth. Born into a middle-class family with a solid lifestyle, as she puts it, at the end of World War II, Eve received her education in private schools, from primary and middle school to university, and her first contact with English was via her teacher, a missionary from the United States. Eve remembers the joy she experienced when she could understand English or make herself understood in English, or when she was praised by her English teacher. At university, Eve encountered the French language, fell in love with it, and apart from a break of several years, when she started a family and prioritized rearing her children, studied the language for more than 40 years. Fast forward to the present, she enjoys French on an almost daily basis, whether it is in the class

she attends once a week, or while reading, listening to, or watching something in French on her own. As mentioned earlier, the temporal dimension is an important aspect of savouring. Whether it is being fully aware of the present, when she actively enjoys her French classes with other long-time classmates

“I definitely go! I go. Yes, yes, even if I’m going to be late, I go. (laughter)...Everyone is quite late, but comes...the teacher understands...just says Bon Jour (laughter)... I’m quite a forward person, right? So, in the French class, when the teacher asks who wants to read [out loud], I’m the first one to raise my hand. (laughter)”

or remembering the past, when she recalls her learning successes

“...I’m good at pronunciation... when I took it [French] as a second language in university, the teacher would always praise me, and thanks to that I loved pronouncing... it might have been just vain of me, I’m not sure...”

or anticipating the future, when she imagines herself encountering different ways of thinking

“...exploring world that is different from your own, that is very enjoyable...in a foreign language. Being surprised by things that for me as a Japanese would be unthinkable...you know?”,

Eve seems to have a great capacity to engage in all three types of savouring.

Singleton, among others, points out the need of more research on third-age learning in general, and more research focusing on older adults’ capacity for and benefits from additional language learning (Singleton, 2018, p. 27). One way to contribute to our understanding of what it means to learn a FL in later stages of life is to examine the impact of such endeavour through the lens of positive psychology. I want to close this short paper with a beautiful quote from Eve’s interview. While talking about her foreign language learning, when asked to describe her immersion in moments of appreciation while in contact with a foreign language, Eve eloquently replies:

“Ah...when I watch a play, or a movie [in a foreign language] ... [Hmm] ...I think about how much I understood, and from there I imagine...I fly to the world of imagination...It’s the same with music, isn’t it? You listen to a piece of music, and when you think it’s nice, you listen to it again and again...” [Yes] ...You’re immersed...at such moments. So, when I’m moved by a story, I think to myself, wow... (laughter) [Yes, yes] I absorb it, and enjoy it.”

Notes on the Contributor

Dorota Matsumoto is an assistant professor at Heian Jogakuin University in Kyoto, and currently a PhD candidate at Waseda University. She has been teaching English at the primary, secondary, and tertiary levels for over 16 years. Her main research theme is psychology of language learning, motivation, and learning foreign languages in the third age.

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