

# Teaching Older Learners

Grognet (1997, p. 2), 'The greatest obstacle to older adults learning a language is the doubt in the mind of the learner that older adults can learn a language'.

# Schema-building questions

- Have you had "third age" learners in your own classes? What did they add to your classes?
- What do you think "third age" learners would say about their experiences at Middlebury Language Schools – both positive and negative?

# Reports from the Lifelong Learner program in Hebrew



Our 3-week Program at the School of Hebrew is designed for learners who want to fully immerse themselves in Hebrew through Middlebury's intensive language environment for three weeks instead of seven.

- **No SLA research** carried out in the instructed foreign language teaching context that unequivocally **demonstrates advantage** of younger over older learners (Murphy & Evangelou, 2016; Singleton 2017)
- Gomez-Bedoya (2008) – 251 L1 Jap, L2 Spanish. Only half felt age had any negative effect on attainment
- Jaroszewska (2013) – L1 Polish, L2 German. Stave off intellectual decline, travel, connections. 2 sections - Co-created syllabus, no point-based tests. Section with intentional task-based learning more successful
- Ramirez-Gomez (2016) – Teachers' (ageist?) beliefs that 3<sup>rd</sup> age only want leisure/socialization → undemanding performance goals
- Internalized ageism/defeatism (Andrew 2012, Ramirez-Gomez 2015, 2016) psychological effect greater than the neurological effect (Singleton, 2017)
  - Develop strategies based on what they are actually capable of rather than what they believe they are capable of

# Cognitive decline, cortical thinning

- **Age is not the main determinant**

- **Lifestyle & genetics** can explain more of the variance in cognitive ability than age
- **Depression & loneliness** over time decrease cognitive performance more than age

- **The brain does change though**

- Singleton (2017) – Learn better via focused exposure than rule teaching and practice (socialized preference for deduction; cognitive predilection to induction)
- Rule-learning and application; older learners require more cognitive control (recruitment of frontal lobe), cannot rely on auditory functions and plasticity
- Activities involving working and short-term memory, which often undergo the most severe loss with age, can be very challenging (De Bot and Makoni, 2006).
- Ware et al (2017) found vocabulary memorization to be most affected skill
- Retrieving a long-ago-learned language easier than starting from scratch (Van de Hoeven & DeBot 2012)
- More difficulty in suppressing L1 activation while intending to speak the L2 (Green 2017) - keeping to the Target Language is harder
- Increased challenge can lead brain to increase supply of resources BUT must be adequately framed, and repeated over time (Schroeder & Marian, 2018)

# Teach older learners separately?

... it is particularly important in the case of older adult learners, given their loss of sensory acuity, that lighting be bright, all visual materials easily legible, and all aural input, including the teacher's own speech, loud and clear. (Singleton & Ryan, 2004: 222)

- Differentiation of format, consistent content
  - Low-tech and high-tech versions for product/collaboration: Paper + GoogleDoc; Printouts of AI + Searching within AI
  - Low-mobility options (a handout vs. info on posters around the room)
- Differentiation of content
  - Empower older learners to share their expertise, and skills gained over life (Boulton- Lewis et al., 2006).