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Positive Language Education in Later Life: Towards a Holistic Framework

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Abstract

Through their focus on cognitive, psychological, and social dimensions of wellbeing, Positive Psychology and Positive Language Education theories offer significant potential to enhance learning experiences and outcomes for senior learners. Yet, the literature still presents a substantial gap in connecting these theoretical frameworks to practical instructional design for this specific target of learners. This paper aims to contribute to this gap by analysing the interplay between Positive Language Education (PLE) and Later-Life Language Learning (LLLL).

Drawing from foundational theories in Positive Psychology, this paper establishes a theoretical ground focused on wellbeing and related positive emotional and physical states to contextualise Positive Language Education, an emerging pedagogical approach that applies Positive Psychology principles to language teaching and learning processes. Although suitable for any type of student, this approach appears particularly appropriate for senior students, due to the neurological, cognitive, and psychological characteristics that distinguish them, as it fosters engaging and fulfilling learning experiences through a collaborative, stress-free environment. Through a reflective exploration of the relationship between Positive Language Education and Language Learning in Later Life, this paper highlights key

dimensions that are essential to understanding this interplay, and maps out relevant conceptual areas to inform the development of future research and meaningful educational strategies.

Keywords: Positive language education, Wellbeing, Emotions, Language learning in later life, Senior language learners

1. Introduction

With the number of older adults increasing dramatically, cognitive decline poses a significant social and public health challenge. While waiting for medication treatments development, non-drug therapeutic approaches represent the most feasible strategy for preventing or postponing the onset of neurodegenerative conditions (Ware et al., 2021). Different fields of research have intensified their studies to better understand what protective factors and optimal interventions may contribute to building cognitive reserve in older adults. Recent results in language education highlight that cognitively stimulating activities, such as foreign language learning, seem to influence cognitive reserve, helping counterbalance the impact of neurological degeneration (Klimova, 2021). Senior learners who decide to attend a language course hope to reach intellectual enjoyment, connections, and personal growth. In fact, in language courses they find opportunities for socialisation, build new networks, and combat isolation and all this positively affects their sense of satisfaction and wellbeing (Słowik-Krogulec, 2023). For these reasons, learning an additional language seems to considerably contribute to the overall wellbeing of older people (Pot et al., 2017 cited in Klimova, 2021).

This is the result of specific pedagogical practices focused on meaningful content and collaborative learning, integrated into a personalised and stress-free positive learning environment where psychological components are highly considered. It is in fact widely acknowledged that affective factors, such as attitude, motivation, anxiety and personality, play a key role in the second/foreign language learning process and significantly affect results. If acquiring an additional language can be felt at times as a “long and often tedious learning process” (Dörnyei, 2005, p. 65), favourable conditions should therefore be created to cultivate positive emotions to balance negative ones, so allowing students to build longer-term resiliency and hardiness.

Although many principles underpinning the foundational theories of Positive Psychology and Positive Language Education may intentionally support encouraging learning experiences and outcomes in senior learners, research connecting such theories and practices is still limited. The aim of this paper is to contribute to filling this gap. After introducing the key traits of Positive Language Education (PLE) and the core features of Language Learning in Later Life (LLLL), the interplay between the two will be discussed. Finally, some line of research will be suggested to come up with critical understanding on effective instructional design for older adults’ language learning.

2. Positive Psychology Foundations

Positive Psychology (PP) is a relatively new branch of psychology that emerged around the

2000s. Based on three founding pillars – positive subjective experience, positive individual traits, and positive social institutions – PP explores how people can build strengths, nurture positive emotions, and flourish so as to live more fulfilling, meaningful, and worth lives (Seligman & Csikszentmihalyi, 2000). From the very beginning, its emphasis on positive emotions and on wellbeing has attracted attention from many related disciplines. To better understand wellbeing within the framework of PP, it is important to clarify that this concept incorporates more than merely the absence of negative emotions, such as mental illness or insecurity; on the contrary, it encompasses the presence of positive emotions, such as happiness, trust, social relationships, and opportunities for growth. Another key point to define wellbeing within PP has to do with two distinct philosophical views of what it means to live a good life: the hedonic and the eudaimonic approach. While hedonic wellbeing is about experiencing pleasure and happiness, eudaimonic wellbeing occurs when living in an authentical way, fulfilling one's potential, and having a purpose or meaning in life. While hedonic conceptualisation prioritises subjective emotional states, eudaimonic tradition emphasises behavioural manifestations, decision-making processes, and purposeful action (Keyes & Annas, 2009). These approaches, which historically have been examined independently in empirical research, have been more recently recognised as two complementary perspectives of the same construct, leading to their convergence in optimal models of wellbeing (cf. Giuntoli et al., 2017). Wellbeing is now regarded as a multi-dimensional construct, and a high level of wellbeing is referred to as 'flourishing' (Seligman, 2011). Although measuring wellbeing is a complex task (see Hone et al., 2014), comparing and contrasting the most influential theoretical frameworks of modern PP can help navigate this complexity.

2.1 Broaden-and-Build Theory

The Broaden-and-Build theory was introduced between the late 1990s and the early 2000s by Fredrickson (1998). This theory describes the form and functions of a subset of ten positive emotions: joy, gratitude, pride, serenity, interest, amusement, hope, inspiration, awe, and love. Traditionally, such positive emotions were usually seen as end states, that is, temporary feelings that individuals experienced when something good happened. In contrast, in Fredrickson's view, positive emotions are not considered anymore just as merely pleasant experiences but rather as adaptive mechanisms that enhance human potential and resilience. Fredrickson's theory offered empirical grounding for PP by shifting focus from correcting weaknesses to fostering strengths and resilience. This reframed conceptualisation of positive emotions opened the door for subsequent formulations such as flourishing and wellbeing models, emphasizing the role of positive affect in long-term growth.

2.2 Flourishing

The construct of flourishing was expanded in the early 2000s as an evolution of the idea of optimal human functioning, in line with Fredrickson's proposal. Keyes framed the first systematic theory of flourishing in PP, defining it as the combination of feeling good and functioning effectively, both individually and socially (Keyes, 2002; Huppert & So, 2013). Much attention has been given to this construct and to find effective ways to measure it.

According to recent scoping review by Rule et al. (2024), the most frequently examined flourishing scales in research are Keyes et al. (2008)'s Mental Health Continuum—Short Form (MHC-SF) and Mental Health Continuum—Long Form (MHC-LF), Diener et al. (2010)'s Flourishing scale, and Butler and Kern (2016)'s PERMA-profiler (see Rule et al., 2024 for references). While these models share some core ideas, they each emphasise different aspects of wellbeing based on their underlying theories and measurement goals, which makes it difficult to compare results across studies. Rule et al. (2024) conclude their review by stressing the need for broader, culturally sensitive validation of flourishing scales, across different stages of life. Notably, some more recent scales have evolved from purely psychological constructs into broader frameworks, incorporating additional dimensions such as physical health (e.g., the PERMA(H) model described in 1.3).

2.3 PERMA and PERMA(H)

Seligman proposed the PERMA model as an operational framework for achieving flourishing. This model aligns with both Fredrickson's and Keyes' contributions in their multidimensional approach but differs in emphasis, as PERMA clearly distinguishes five core components (Positive Emotion, Engagement, Relationships, Meaning, Accomplishment) that contribute to overall wellbeing and allows for their independent measurement (Seligman, 2011). Seligman's model was later extended to PERMA(H), explicitly incorporating physical health as a sixth component of flourishing. From an objective point of view, health refers to one's capacity to perform everyday tasks, the presence or diagnosis of physical conditions such as heart disease, cancer, or flu, and any disabilities that restrict functioning, as well as measurable physical fitness and strength. From a subjective point of view, health is determined by how individuals perceive their own state of wellbeing, if they feel physically healthy, experience vitality, and possess enough strength and energy to manage daily activities (Kern, 2022).

As said above, PERMA and PERMA(H) have been tested in different contexts, across multiple populations and languages. If, on the one hand, results seem to suggest that, because of their close relation and interconnection, the five or six components of Seligman's flourishing models cannot be investigated as separated and independent (Goodman et al., 2018), on the other hand, it is widely accepted that both PERMA and PERMA(H) offer concrete strategies for educators for building wellbeing (Kern et al., 2014, McQuaid & Kern, 2017, as cited in Kern, 2022) among students, teachers, and the other stakeholders within the educational community (for an example of applied framework, see Norrish et al., 2013).

To conclude this overview of the models, while acknowledging that concepts such as wellbeing and flourishing are complex – being abstract, shaped by personal and cultural values, and less easily quantifiable than academic outcomes – the frameworks discussed above nonetheless provide a robust theoretical foundation for understanding how they can be applied to language education. Building on this foundation, Section 2 explores how these positive constructs inform the concept and practice of Positive Language Education.

3. Positive Language Education (PLE)

For a long time, wellbeing and mental health have been neglected by educational systems, being their primary focus set on achievements and measurable outcomes. This has brought students to often experience high levels of stress, anxiety, and burnout, while struggling to meet increasingly demanding academic standards. Additional language learning was no exception; in fact, by its very nature, it heightened these negative emotions. Not surprisingly, the first systematic attention to emotions in the field of Second Language Acquisition (SLA) was characterised by a distinctly negative focus. Research concentrated on language anxiety, first with Krashen's (1985) Affective Filter Hypothesis, and then with relevant works by scholars such as Horwitz, Oxford, and Young, among the others. With the emergence of Dörnyei's studies on motivation, Gardner's conceptualisation of emotional intelligence, Ryan and Deci's theory of self-determination, Zimmerman's idea of self-regulation, and Bandura's construct of self-efficacy, the literature in the field began to incorporate positive emotions as well, thus preparing the ground for that "emotional turn" (White, 2018 cited in Dewaele et al., 2019, p. 5) that opened a new phase in the evolution of emotion research in SLA. This phase emerged with the introduction of Positive Psychology principles into language education.

Contemporary scholars and stakeholders in education have begun to acknowledge the importance of integrating the power of positive emotions with teaching practices to promote both academic success and student wellbeing simultaneously. This approach is called Positive Education (Seligman, 2011). Supporting Positive Education does not mean denying the existence of negative emotions, but rather thinking that educators first, and learners afterwards, should work to find a balance between negative and positive emotions (see Norrish, 2015). This approach is particularly important in sustaining such a complex cognitive and social process as additional language learning, which demands persistence, motivation, and emotional resilience. The development of a more holistic view that includes both positive and negative emotions and their complex interactions with cognitive and contextual factors was put forward in the study by Dewaele and MacIntyre (2014). Their work on Foreign Language Enjoyment (FLE) has shifted attention from their previous preoccupation with negative constructs, such as anxiety, to positive emotion constructs, generating a series of recent studies on FLE in different contexts (for references see Shao et al., 2020). Together with other seminal works (e.g., MacIntyre et al., 2016; Gabrys´-Barker & Gałajda, 2016), this marked the beginning of a new phase of research aimed at developing comprehensive frameworks that purposefully integrate positive and negative emotions into the learning process – a direction later conceptualised as Positive Language Education (PLE) by Mercer et al. (2018).

3.1 Defining PLE

Positive Language Education combines Positive Education and Language Education in an innovative educational approach to promote both linguistic competence and wellbeing (Mercer et al., 2018). As a critical 21st-century life skill essential for academic and personal success, wellbeing should be considered not only a core educational goal but also a means to enhance learning. When students experience positive emotional states, they demonstrate

improved additional language acquisition and can effectively counterbalance the persistent impact of negative emotions. Furthermore, positive emotions foster students' long-term resilience and psychological strength, enabling them to better overcome future challenges (Dewaele et al., 2019). Language education is regarded as an ideal context for pursuing individual, social, and collective wellbeing, encompassing identity formation, social interaction, and emotional engagement (Mercer et al., 2018).

3.2 Models for Language Learner Wellbeing

Drawing from Positive Psychology principles, a few models and frameworks have been recently developed or adapted for language learning contexts. Their aim is to propose holistic approaches that recognise the interconnected nature of emotional, motivational, social, and cognitive factors in language learning success and learner wellbeing.

3.2.1 EMPATHICS

The EMPATHICS model, developed by Oxford in 2016, emerged from her observation of several limitations in Seligman's PERMA model. She noted, for instance, that PERMA focused exclusively on positive emotions, neglecting the role of negative emotions and that it did not consider contextual factors along with personal ones (Oxford, 2016). With the EMPATHICS model, she sought to provide a framework better suited to fostering the wellbeing of additional language learners. The acronym represents nine dimensions with 21 interrelated components: Emotions (pleasant and painful) and Empathy; Meaning and Motivation; Perseverance (hope, optimism, resilience); Agency and Autonomy; Time; Hardiness and Habits of mind; Intelligences, Identity, Investment, Imagination; Character strengths; and Self-components (self-efficacy, self-concept, self-esteem, self-regulation).

Situated within the theory of Complex Dynamic Systems, Oxford's framework emphasises that the involved dimensions are nonlinear, interdependent, and influenced by multiple factors such as culture, socioeconomic context, politics, and personal history. Some scholars have tried to apply Oxford's model to second and foreign language classrooms. For example, Byrd and Abrams (2022) propose a series of task design strategies aimed at creating personalised writing workflows that enhance learner enjoyment, stimulate curiosity about the target language and its cultural dimensions, foster resilience and empathy, encourage persistent learning approaches, and activate multiple intelligence resources throughout different stages of the writing process. Despite such attempts to operationalise the components of EMPHATICS, the model has never been tested. This gap between theoretical propositions and empirical evidence has generated critiques regarding the scientific credibility of the framework and its practical execution (Alrabai & Dewaele, 2023).

3.2.2 E4MC

The E4MC model is a refined theoretical framework developed by Alrabai and Dewaele (2023) as a more operationalisable alternative to Oxford's EMPATHICS model. The acronym represents six core dimensions of language learner wellbeing: Empathy, Emotions, Emotional intelligence, Engagement; Motivation; and Character strengths.

Alrabai and Dewaele's intention was to streamline the broad and sometimes overlapping components of previous models into six clear, measurable dimensions, which could be isolated, observed, and assessed through specific items and scales, or pursued through classroom activities, making it practical for both research and pedagogical application. Although, as EMPHATICS, the E4MC model has not been tested yet, it has been included in recent studies as a theoretical framework (for example, Oladrostam et al., 2025; Zhang & Gao, 2024).

3.2.3 Transformative Positive Psychology

Unlike PERMA/PERMA(H), EMPATHICS and E4MC approaches to wellbeing that view wellbeing mainly as an individual concern "often as if detached from social and cultural contexts, with the exception of the inclusion of social relationships" (Mercer & Murillo-Miranda, 2025, p. 379), Mercer and Gregersen (2023)'s model of transformative positive psychology in language education integrate individual wellbeing with social wellbeing and with the even broader concept of 'collective' wellbeing. Inspired by ecological approaches such as transformative learning, socio-emotional learning, global citizen education, culturally responsive teaching, and culturally sustaining pedagogies (for references see Mercer & Gregersen, 2023), this transformative model acknowledges the active, powerful influence of social contexts such as schools, educational policies, and community norms on individuals, and views wellbeing not just as an individual responsibility, but as a collective affair too. In their vision of transformative positive psychology, the two authors combine the three pillars of PP – positive subjective experiences, positive individual traits, and positive social institutions, see Section 1 – with a critical social lens to highlight how psychological wellbeing and social justice intersect in the context of additional language acquisition.

3.2.4 Positive Language Teaching Approach

An attempt to combine Positive Psychology principles with established language teaching practices to enhance both linguistic competence and learner wellbeing is Aydin's (2025) Positive Language Teaching (PLT) approach. Inspired by Seligman's work, the PLT integrates PERMA's five components with two additional dimensions which especially pertain to the field of language learning. The first is Holistic Integration, which addresses the linguistic, cognitive, social, and emotional needs of learners, rather than focusing on any single aspect in isolation. The second is Cultural Sensitivity, which means developing an informed, empathetic understanding of the cultural dynamics associated with the target language, thus enabling learners to go beyond language skills, cultivating respectful, tolerant, and competent engagement with people from diverse backgrounds. Aydin proposed a series of aspects to privilege for a successful implementation of his approach, offering a clear framework to design teacher and learner roles, syllabus contents, classroom activities, and assessment strategies.

While promising, all the models and approaches presented above need to be further investigated through empirical research to determine their effectiveness compared to current language teaching approaches. However, the task remains substantially complex due to the lack of standardised tools for measuring cognitive, emotional, and linguistic outcomes, as

well as a misalignment with traditional testing frameworks. These are among the issues that Positive Language Education must address.

3.3 Challenges in PLE

While Positive Language Education was initially mainly conceived with individual wellbeing as its primary focus, we saw how the framework has evolved to encompass key components from other global skills models (see Babic et al., 2022). This expansion now includes global citizenship and sustainable living, which represent collective expressions of wellbeing. Such educational objectives need to be urgently and deeply embedded in educational systems through substantial changes in second and foreign language classrooms curricula (see Menegale, 2024). Yet, the point is that, even when appropriate curricula exist to address this reform, teacher education programmes, the majority of coursebooks, and research agendas in the field still struggle to align with these developments (Babic et al., 2022). This is partly due to unclear role expectations and imprecise competences to reach, which is why research on how to effectively integrate wellbeing and other global skill objectives with language teaching and learning without compromising either is imperative (Mercer, 2021).

Another challenge regarding PLE is connected to those critiques to the Positive Psychology perspective about its tendency to overemphasise positive emotions and experiences while neglecting the significant role of negative feelings and challenging life events in shaping wellbeing. As Pikhart and Klimova (2020) noticed, conceptual and methodological limitations in the field have led to calls for a more balanced approach, often referred to as 'Positive Psychology 2.0' (Wong et al., 2017 cited in Pikhart & Klimova, 2020), which would integrate both positive and negative aspects of life when studying their impact on health and flourishing. The authors argue that future research should address all facets of human experience, taking into consideration all aspects of human life, not only the positive ones.

Once again, developing a holistic and comprehensive framework for understanding flourishing, or its absence, and for practically supporting the development of wellbeing proves to be a highly complex and demanding task. For instance, further reflection deserves interpretation of positive emotions as well as wellbeing and flourishing constructs across different cultures and languages to avoid oversimplification and bias. Therefore, both empirical and theoretical research are needed to investigate if definitions of such concepts should be modified or re-thought for diverse populations (Mercer & Murillo-Miranda, 2025). This is crucial for empowering language education and ensuring that wellbeing interventions effectively encourage both personal growth and individual coping strategies, while also fostering broader systemic changes and structural support (Mercer, 2021).

All the wellbeing models for PLE presented above have offered pioneering and integrative frameworks for applying the principles of PP to additional language learning and teaching. What is needed now is extending the research that can empirically validate and further develop these frameworks, so that they may well serve the establishment of PLE. This would also provide pedagogical tips for practical implementation in different cultural and linguistic contexts "without prescriptivism and in sustainable ways" (Mercer et al., 2018, p. 24). Putting the lens on underexplored contexts, such as senior language learning classrooms, is therefore

both necessary and valuable both in research and in pedagogy.

4. Later Life Language Learning (LLLL)

The global population is ageing rapidly due to relevant factors such as healthcare systems improvements, wider access to education, and lower birth rates. This demographic trend represents a challenge, but also a great opportunity, since it means that, in the future, people will be able to live longer and healthier lives. In order to "improve the lives of older people, their families, and the communities in which they live" (WHO, 2020, p. 2), the United Nations (UN) in collaboration with the World Health Organization (WHO) designated 2021-2030 as the Decade of Healthy Aging, whose action focuses on four main areas: creating age-friendly environments, combatting ageism, ensuring integrated care, and providing access to long-term care. In this perspective, education can play a pivotal role especially in the first two areas to promote active and healthy ageing and to create an age-friendly society. Since healthy ageing is "the process of developing and maintaining the functional ability that enables wellbeing in older age" (WHO, 2020, p. 8), lifelong learning represents a way to improve older people's skills, to promote their wellbeing (Formosa, 2014), and the quality of life, which "is therefore the main aim to be achieved through education" (Escuder-Mollon et al., 2014, p. 511).

Nowadays, we have been witnessing the phenomenon of language learning in mature adulthood almost worldwide thanks to a wide range of language courses organised and offered by public and private institutions, such as the Universities of the Third Age, senior associations and language schools. However, according to recent studies, in order to increase the benefits of learning an additional language later in life, it is necessary to design an inclusive language learning methodology. This should include activities, materials, and techniques that focus on senior learners' strengths, meet their needs, interests, and expectations, and help them to overcome their barriers by creating a senior-friendly learning environment that stimulates learners both cognitively and emotionally.

4.1 The Senior Language Learner

Senior learners are older adults aged 60+ relatively in good health, still active, free from job and main family responsibilities (Findsen & Formosa, 2011) who decide to invest their time in a constructive and pleasant way in order to maintain their position in society or to play a meaningful role in their communities. For this purpose, they often enrol in lifelong learning educational programmes or attend different kinds of courses some of which are specific for the over 60s, so that they can keep up with technology, get informed, be independent, and feel part of this world in continuous transformation. In this ever-changing, deeply interconnected and globalised world, languages are seen as important tools to interact, to communicate, and to understand the world's dynamics. As a consequence, language learning has become increasingly important for this group of learners as well. Notably, senior language learners represent the most heterogeneous group of learners for their individual differences due to their vast and long-life experiences – including their various educational, cultural, and social backgrounds (Ramírez Gómez, 2016; Cardona & Luise, 2018; Derenowski, 2021) – but also due to their individual cognitive and psychological characteristics (Grotek, 2018). Generally,

senior language learners are intrinsically motivated to attend a language course and, in addition to L1 skills and extra-linguistic competences, they have life skills and learning strategies acquired throughout the lifespan, which they can adopt while learning an additional language and which can help them compensate for some impairments due to the natural process of ageing.

4.2 Effects of Ageing on Additional Language Learning

It has been demonstrated that there are some effects of ageing on learning an additional language, mainly due to some natural barriers which are typical of ageing, and which can affect the learning process.

Aged-related hearing, vision, and memory issues are quite common over 60+, but they vary from individual to individual. As regards visual impairments, senior learners may be affected by the decrease of visual acuity, macular degeneration, retinopathy, and cataracts, which can limit or impede reading the material and what is written on the blackboard or on a screen. Auditory impairments may be caused mainly by presbycusis or be related to factors such as selective attention, as in the case of the so-called 'cocktail party' problem – the decrease of auditory discrimination and the auditory masking effect – which can reduce the ability to hear because of the background noise. These auditory problems can make it difficult to understand an audio or a video with background noise, which is typical of authentic listening material, the teacher speaking or giving instructions during the lesson and the other learners during interactive activities in the classroom. Regarding memory, in addition to normal age-related short-term memory loss, a decline in the inhibitory process – the ability to eliminate irrelevant information – can negatively impact working memory, since irrelevant information from a previous activity still interferes in the following task by preventing the learner from concentrating on the new activity. Furthermore, senior learners may experience problems related to lower information-processing speed, reduced attention, lowered concentration and alertness, a decline in cognitive flexibility and executive functions (MacPherson et al., 2019), and mild cognitive impairment. Finally, it is relevant to emphasise that, during the ageing process, "declarative learning" – which relies on declarative memory – "tends to show large age effects. In contrast, procedural learning" – which is related to procedural memory – "shows lesser, and sometimes no, age effects" (Cox, 2013, p. 94).

Besides the above mentioned age-related issues, it is important to mention more specifically psychological barriers that can influence senior learners' additional language learning such as fear of showing incompetence, low self-esteem, lack of support from family, anxiety for going back to school after a long time or for previous negative educational experiences, lack of belief in final success, and the "stereotype threat" (Derenowski, 2021), which is directly connected to ageism. The term ageism was coined and introduced by the American physician and gerontologist Robert Butler in 1969 and it "refers to the stereotypes (how we think), prejudice (how we feel), and discrimination (how we act) directed towards others or oneself based on age" (WHO, 2021, p. 2). All forms of ageism – whether implicit or explicit, other-directed or self-directed – have been demonstrated to have a negative impact on people's physical health, mental health, social and psychological wellbeing, as they can lead

to loneliness, depression, stress, and anxiety; reduce cognitive performance and quality of life (Officer et al., 2020; Kang & Kim, 2022; Barber et al., 2024); increase cognitive decline (Chang et al., 2020); and even shorten lifespan by up to 7.5 years (Levy, 2002). As regards learning, Derenowski (2021, p. 80) declared that "negative stereotypes are often related to the potential losses in skill, knowledge, memory" to the point that "seniors may even avoid activities such learning, since they do not believe they are competent enough to master the knowledge ('I will never learn it')". As a result, ageism can influence senior learners negatively, since, especially when seniors internalise it, they risk convincing themselves that they are slow to understand, forgetful, and unable to concentrate and to make plans for the future, thus developing a negative attitude towards cognitive activities and learning experiences (Cardona et al., 2023).

Nevertheless, there are also some positive aspects mainly connected to seniors' life experience, prior knowledge, life skills, L1 language mastering, and learning strategies. For example, older adults can leverage some strengths to learn a new language, such as high intrinsic motivation and a great sense of responsibility, which allow them to continue attending a course in spite of facing some difficulties and to do it not for external rewards or punishment, but for themselves. Moreover, they can adopt language learning strategies, which Oxford (1990) defines as "specific actions taken by the learner to make learning easier, faster, more enjoyable, more self-directed, more effective, and more transferable to new situations" (p. 8). According to two studies (Monticelli Garcia, 2017; Mora et al., 2018), metacognitive strategies, like reflecting, planning, monitoring, and evaluating, are the most used by senior learners while learning an additional language. Furthermore, thanks to their long and vast life experiences and their various educational and working backgrounds, senior learners have gained a lot of life skills, such as problem-solving, decision-making, negotiating, not to mention cognitive skills like the ability to use abstraction, logical and critical thinking, on which they can rely during the additional language learning process. Finally, semantic memory, which appears to remain intact and even to increase in late adulthood (Baltes et al., 1999; Reuter-Lorenz et al., 2000), and seniors' extensive knowledge of L1 or of other additional languages can help older adult learners contextualise new words and acquire and memorise new vocabulary in the additional language.

4.3 Effects of Additional Language Learning on Ageing

According to recent studies, learning a new language in mature adulthood can have positive effects on the cognitive, psychological and social aspects of the process of ageing.

Neuropsychological research has recently shown that learning can occur throughout life and that our brain is able to activate important cognitive compensation phenomena thanks to neurogenesis and neuroplasticity. Recent studies have demonstrated that learning an additional language in mature adulthood can increase cognitive reserve, help avoid or slow cognitive decline, and contrast neurodegenerative diseases (Antoniou, 2013; Antoniou & Wright, 2017; Del Maschio et al., 2018; Bubbico et al., 2019; Ware et al., 2021). It can represent a neurodegenerative protective factor (Bubbico et al., 2025), since it is related to improvement in attentional switching, inhibition, working memory, executive function

(Pfenninger & Polz, 2018), and increased functional connectivity (Ware et al., 2021). In fact, it has been established that engaging in new learning experiences can have a positive impact on experience-dependent neuroplasticity, defined as the ability of the brain to modify itself, its structure and its functions by creating new neural connections in response to specific learning experiences in stimulating environments throughout the lifespan (Del Maschio et al., 2018; Chen & Goodwill, 2022).

These results suggest that a second language learning programme, even when started late in life, can be considered a non-pharmacological treatment able to counteract cognitive ageing along with the onset of dementia. Existing literature maintains that language training, as a behavioural and psychosocial intervention, generally carries far fewer risks compared to currently available pharmaceutical treatments. Still, it is important to carefully consider any possible negative effects. For instance, introducing foreign terms can sometimes interfere with retrieval of native language words, and this type of competition has even been observed after short-term immersion in an additional language. Despite these considerations, language training remains highly recommended, as its substantial benefits greatly outweigh these minimal risks (Antoniou et al., 2013).

Nevertheless, as several researchers recommend, more longitudinal studies should be conducted to demonstrate if additional language learning at the age of 65+ has a real impact on cognitive functions (Cheng et al., 2015). Furthermore, future research should examine the impact of language learning in later life within a broader framework, investigating and analysing the correlation between its cognitive and socio-affective benefits (Pfenninger & Singleton, 2019)

From a psychological point of view, learning in a positive and pleasant atmosphere are strong motivating factors for older adults, as fully in line with positive psychology (Niewczas, 2023). By reducing anxiety and stress, and by contributing to personal growth, it can enhance enjoyment of life, positively affect both mental and physical health, and increase subjective happiness and wellbeing, thus improving quality of life (Pfenninger & Polz, 2018; Klimova & Pikhart, 2020; van der Ploeg et al., 2023; Klimova & de Paula Nascimento e Silva, 2024). Learning a new language later in life may, therefore, bring benefits in terms of self-esteem, self-efficacy, and autonomy.

Finally, as regards the socio-affective dimension, learning a new language can reduce feelings of isolation and loneliness, develop a sense of belonging, increase seniors' engagement in the community and, as a result, their sense of purpose in life, which is a key component of wellbeing.

For all these reasons, it is necessary to design a LLLL methodology into a PLE theoretical framework based on PP, which can promote quality of life, thus realising the main aim of active ageing, which, according to the World Health Organization (WHO, 2002) "is the process of optimizing opportunities for health, participation and security in order to enhance quality of life as people age" (p. 12).

5. Mapping a Conceptual Framework of PLE for LLLL

The interplay existing between Positive Language Education and Language Learning in Later Life should therefore be regarded as a mutually reinforcing relationship that addresses both the psychological and pedagogical needs of older learners. To further understand this paradigm, we will start by revisiting the three major arguments for incorporating wellbeing into language education practices, as articulated by Mercer et al. (2018), and relate them directly to older learners. Then, we will try to put forward the foundations for a holistic conceptual framework of a senior-friendly positive language education.

5.1 The Interplay Between PLE and LLLL

According to Mercer et al. (2018), language education should foster wellbeing for three major reasons.

First, wellbeing is an essential educational outcome for helping learners of all ages to manage the complexities of contemporary life (Mercer at al., 2018). For older people (,) who encounter life transitions such as retirement, changing social roles, or facing health issues, isolation, loneliness, and depression can be risk factors for cognitive decline and dementia (Ware, 2017). In such contexts, involvement in social leisure activities and engagement in lifelong learning can serve as protective factors against neurodegenerative diseases. Furthermore, social participation in later adulthood can promote healthy and active ageing, since it is directly associated with wellbeing, life satisfaction and quality of life (Park & Kang, 2023; Liang, 2024; Wagner−Gutiérrez et al., 2025) and, even, with health-related quality of life (Park et al., 2015; Geigl et al., 2023). Language learning can serve as a valuable tool to foster adaptability, social engagement, and active participation in society and specifically wellbeing-focused language programs may help older learners maintain cognitive vitality, emotional balance, and resilience to cope with these life challenges.

Second, education itself should naturally foster positive experiences and emotional development throughout the learning process (Mercer at al., 2018). This is crucial for older learners, whose motivation often depends on enjoyment, emotional satisfaction, and a sense of purpose. There is evidence in research that learning an additional language in mature adulthood can have a positive impact on feeling of subjective satisfaction (Klimova & de Paula Nascimento e Silva, 2024), wellbeing, and quality of life (Klimova & Pikhart, 2020; van der Ploeg 2023), to the point that it may be considered as a possible "psychosocial rehabilitation method" (Pikhart et al., 2021, p. 1181). It has been stressed that learning an additional language positively affects senior learners' emotional and social wellbeing thanks to the teacher's role and a friendly, stress-free and cooperative classroom environment, which allows interaction and socialisation (Słowik-Krogulec, 2023; Ivashko, 2018; Słowik-Krogulec, 2020; Borkowska, 2022; Koutska, 2024). These positive effects on individual and social wellbeing have also been found in third-age low-literate migrant L2 language learners (Pot & de Bot, 2018).

Third, wellbeing-based approaches enhance both academic performance and learning outcomes (Mercer at al., 2018). Considering the relevant literature on older learners (see

Section 3), empirical research shows that they can achieve significant linguistic gains when their emotional and psychological needs are met. In particular, in light of the role of positive emotions during the process of ageing, their strong impact on experience-dependent neuroplasticity and the "positivity effect" in cognition – according to which "older adults perform better in tasks which include positive stimuli" (Gerhardsson et al., 2019, p. 1), "remember more positive than negative information" (Reed & Carstensen, 2012, p. 1), and "people aged over 75 remember negative stimuli as happened earlier, and positive stimuli as happened more recently" (Ceccato et al., 2022, p. 991) – wellbeing-informed approaches of language education seem to be the most suitable for this group of learners.

5.2 Toward a Holistic Conceptual Framework

Very few senior-focused pedagogical approaches have appeared in literature so far. An interesting example is the Cognitive-Emotional Scaffolding proposed by Cardona and Luise (2018). This model encompasses three main characteristics: it is "ecological", as the environment in which the individual lives and learns affects both their internal capacity to develop personal learning paths and their potential for further growth in later life; "humanistic", as it considers the learner in their cognitive, psychological, psycho-affective, emotional, and biographical dimensions, focusing on how these aspects influence their linguistic competence; and "holistic", as it takes into account the overall framework of resources and strategies that older adults are able to mobilise in order to cope with the challenges of language learning in later life (Cardona & Luise, 2018, p. 389). The scaffolding processes at the core of this model involve both teacher-led and learner-activated strategies, which compensate for age-related changes by drawing on prior experiences, metacognitive training, and emotional support. Informed by this approach, which is both theoretical and practical, as well as by the other wellbeing models discussed earlier in this paper, we aim to outline a possible framework that, through a few fundamental domains directly recalling Positive Language Education, integrates the principles of PLE and LLLL.

To this point, it is clear that effectively supporting lifelong language learning and healthy ageing in older adults requires a holistic framework that explicitly connects the multidimensional nature of wellbeing to the distinct needs, strengths, and life experiences of seniors. This means integrating those pedagogical-related domains that address cognitive stimulation, social engagement, emotional balance, meaningful purpose, contextual relevance, cultural orientation, personal achievement, and health, all tailored to older adults. Specifically, the interconnected domains that should be considered in the construct are: Meaning and Motivation (M), the learner's Own self (O), Social relationships (S), Achievements (A), the Inner life of emotions (I), and the surrounding Context and Culture (C), with Health (H) serving as a transversal and sustaining dimension. Together, these domains provide a holistic framework for integrating Positive Language Education into senior language learning and teaching (see Figure 1).

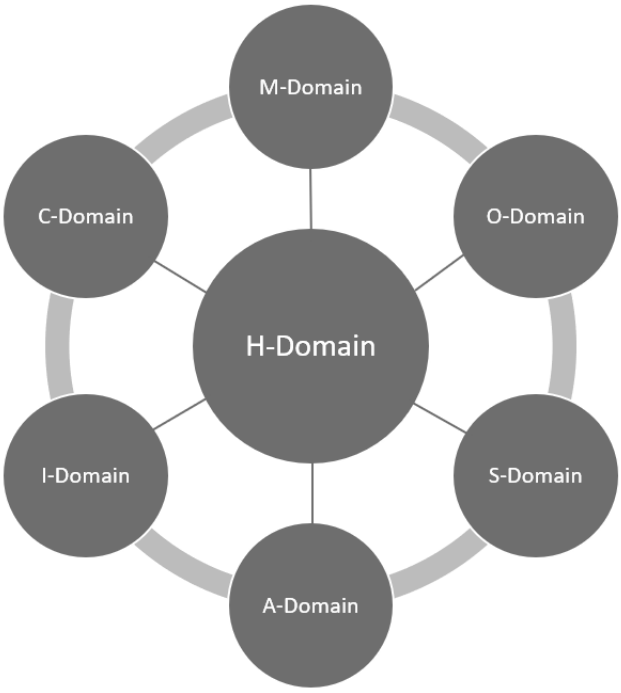

Figure 1. MOSAIC-H framework for wellbeing in Later Life Language Learning

The metaphor of a mosaic conveys the idea that wellbeing is not a single concept but rather the result of distinct yet interconnected domains, with one domain assuming particular centrality in the context of later life language learning, namely, health. What follows is a brief description of each domain, offered as part of an ongoing reflection that remains provisional and awaits empirical studies to substantiate it:

"Meaning & Motivation" (engagement, flow): Engagement can make senior learners achieve the flow state, which is an optimal psychological state that contributes to optimal performance and learning (Csikszentmihalyi, 1990). Being immersed in a stimulating language activity to the point of reaching the task-induced flow state can lead to optimal language learning (Egbert, 2003) by improving foreign language enjoyment, feelings of happiness, life satisfaction, and wellbeing in addition to increasing cognitive functions such as concentration and attention. In fact, flow state can cause changes in motivation, skills, and performance. In their study on task-flow among older adult language learners, Słowik-Krogulec and Mystkowska-Wiertelak (2024) examined both dimensions of flow: the flow state – characterized by optimal immersion and engagement – and the anti-flow state – which is primarily associated with age-related barriers to learning. Recently, studies have shown that the state of flow is connected to mindfulness, as "mindfulness training can enhance the flow experience" (Hang et al., 2024, p. 1).

"Own self" (personal domain including self-components, identity, and character strengths): Senior language learners represent a group of learners that is characterised by a marked heterogeneity. Therefore, when designing courses for seniors, it is important to be aware of

aspects they have in common and they differ from. In addition to their individual cognitive and psychological traits, they have developed life skills and strategies, thanks to their various and extensive experiences of life. However, realising that it is possible to learn a new language later in life and to overcome certain age-related barriers can enhance the O-domain. As a result, older adults may feel more self-confident and satisfied with themselves, reduce self-directed ageist attitudes, and experience increases in self-esteem, self-efficacy, and subjective wellbeing. Thanks to this feeling of self-achievement and by nurturing a growth mindset, they become more inclined to take active part in social life, thus avoiding isolation and loneliness. Unlike younger students, seniors are typically voluntary learners with diverse personal, social and educational backgrounds. Starting from there to tailor curricula, set achievable goals, and provide appropriate support will increase the relevance of the learning experience.

Social (relationships): As regards senior learners, the social domain can be considered highly relevant, since it is thought that it can also contribute to the beneficial effects of language learning on cognition. By interacting and socialising during language courses older adult learners can develop a sense of belonging and improve cognitive empathy, an important aspect of social cognition. Cognitive empathy typically reaches its highest peak in middle age and declines as individuals grow older, especially after the age of sixty. As a consequence, they can avoid isolation and depression by having the opportunity to expand their social networks and be more socially involved. Seniors can find a new reason to get ready and leave home or a way to overcome partners' or friends' loss, which is frequent in later adulthood. This is why, according to Derenowski (2021) "senior education is not only methodology, but also socially oriented" (p. 154).

Achievements (cognitive achievements): Positive psychology interventions in the language classroom, including mindfulness practices, may reduce older adults' stress, anxiety, depression, chronic pain and inflammation and positively impact on the brain, since they provide beneficial effects on attention, memory, concentration, executive function, and cognitive flexibility (Geiger et al., 2015; Fountain-Zaragoza & Prakash, 2017; Derenowski 2021; Foo et al., 2024). Finally, achievement enables senior learners to reach their goals and demonstrate their accomplishments, which increases their self-esteem, self-fulfilment, and satisfaction, while also improving their language competence.

Inner life (emotions, both positive and negative): It is known that older adults are not only able to regulate emotions more effectively than younger individuals (Cardona, 2021), but they can also benefit from the aforementioned "positivity effect". Furthermore, a stress-free learning environment rich in positive emotions and novelty can stimulate senior learners' experience-dependent neuroplasticity, reduce anxiety and have a positive impact on senior learners' foreign language enjoyment. Moreover, senior language learners could cultivate resilience against possible adversities, such as bereavement or severe disease, by creating social connections and having a meaningful purpose in life. The reason for approaching a new language often stems from these factors and helps them maintain motivation, increase engagement, and improve their physical health and wellbeing (AshaRani et al., 2022).

Context & Culture: Context can make seniors' language learning experience more relevant if it allows them to bring their life knowledge into the classroom and build on their motivations for learning a new language, such as connecting with family, travelling, or participating in community activities. Language programmes that recognise and build upon these elements can be more engaging and meaningful. Furthermore, lifelong learning aims at helping seniors develop global skills to keep up with and interpret the ever-changing and globalised world, to feel an active part of the global community, to feel citizens of the world able to positively influence future generations by giving them the instruments to understand global issues (UN Agenda 2030), thus including the ecological dimension. In this educational context, language learning plays a pivotal role since, through learning an additional language, seniors can develop or improve their intercultural and cross-cultural competences, such as adaptability and openness, which promote diversity, acceptance and social cohesion. This intellectual stimulation is an important motivator for lifelong learners, providing positive emotional reward and a sense of accomplishment.

Health (physical and psychological): "Health is a state of complete physical, mental and social well-being and not merely the absence of disease or infirmity" (UN, 1946, p. 186), therefore, in order to enhance the beneficial effects of LLLL on seniors' health, we should take into consideration the individual's mental, psychological health, physical health, and social health. These three main health key-components, which synergically contribute to the whole wellbeing, are closely interconnected with each other and, at the same time, interrelated with the above-mentioned six domains. As regards learning an additional language in mature adulthood, thanks to this circular and transversal interdependence, the other six domains of MOSAIC-H, which are directly influenced by the H-domain, can foster seniors' health. While designing a language course for this target group of learners, senior learners' health characteristics, including age-related impairments, should be considered in these six domains, to provide seniors with the necessary instruments to succeed and ensure that language learning can positively affect their wellbeing, thus promoting active and healthy ageing.

6. Conclusion and Research Directions

This paper has discussed to what extent, when learning occurs in supportive environments, seniors tend not just to learn additional languages but also to flourish cognitively, socially, and personally. In later life, educational experiences that nurture belonging, self-efficacy, and positive affect can counteract risks of isolation and depression. Language classes designed with wellbeing in mind may thus sustain lifelong learning enthusiasm among older learners. In fact, a senior-friendly approach to positive language learning can strengthen older adults' potential while reducing negative affective factors that may hinder their enjoyment of language learning, such as low-self-esteem, feeling of insecurity, anxiety from previous educational experiences, self-ageism, and fears related to losing face or not being able to hear or see well.

Though acknowledging the shortage of research on wellbeing in SLA, some key considerations can be drawn from the current literature on Positive Language Education and

that on Language Learning in Later Life. This paper presents a preliminary framework, MOSAIC-H – currently under development – that includes domains such as meaning and motivation, the learner's own self, social relationships, achievements, the inner life of emotions, and the surrounding context and culture, with health serving as a transversal and sustaining dimension. These dimensions recognise learners as "individuals situated in a multitude of social contexts [who] experience their lives as a whole comprised of diverse multiple experiences (Pentón Herrera et al., 2023 cited in Mercer & Murillo-Miranda, 2025, p. 380), whose complex needs extend far beyond linguistic competence. This is why an ecological, holistic perspective is required to conceptualise a framework specifically tailored on senior learners, which considers those positive psychological dimensions of language learning that can inform the creation of more stimulating classroom environments and foster experience-dependent neuroplasticity.

Like other similar models, MOSAIC-H shows some limitations stemming from the lack of empirical studies. It is a preliminary framework based on Neuroscience, Positive Psychology, Positive Language Education and Later Life Language Learning, which are all relatively recent fields of education with very little research in language learning focusing on the senior learners' target group. As MOSAIC-H is a theoretical model in progress, to test and evaluate its main components, it is necessary to identify standardised instruments and specific scales. Furthermore, its approaches and pedagogical practices have not yet been clearly defined. Once it is transformed into teaching practices, experimental studies will have to be conducted with senior learners in the classroom to demonstrate its validity and effectiveness.

For a deeper and more comprehensive understanding of the field, future empirical studies should focus specifically on diverse senior cohorts, different learning contexts, and different target languages, seeking to assess the effectiveness of Positive Language Education-based approaches. Considering the rapid pace of change in educational contexts as well as in global life, research should also address how technology can support the development of individual, social and collective wellbeing through technology. An interesting recent field of research, for example, has investigated the potential of using digital applications that support mindfulness, emotional regulation, and Positive Psychology practices within language learning environments (Klimova, 2021). This fully aligns with the vision of wellbeing-based language education, which provides senior learners with valuable opportunities both to effectively cope with life's challenges and to foster connections across cultures, thus supporting language development alongside the development of global citizenship skills. All this makes clear how, as Pikhart and Klimova (2020) stressed, given the global ageing trend and demonstrated benefits, expanded research investment in positive language education for older adults represents both a scientific opportunity and social imperative.

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Authors' contributions

Although both authors have equally contributed to the conception and planning of this paper, sections *1. Introduction, 2. Positive Psychology Foundations*, and *3. Positive Language Education (PLE)* should be attributed to Menegale, while section *4. Later Life Language Learning (LLLL)* should be attributed to Lorenzet. Sections *5. Mapping a Conceptual framework of PLE for LLLL* and *6. Conclusions and Research Directions* should be attributed to both authors.

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