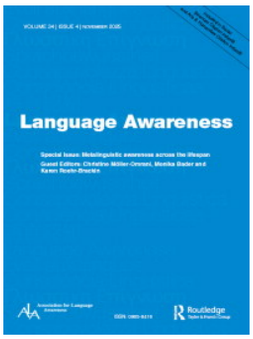

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Older adults' reported use of metalinguistic awareness in beginner-level L2 learning: comparing a monolingual and a multilingual instructional approach

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ABSTRACT

Research comparing different teaching approaches with older adult participants is still in short supply. Moreover, there is no existing work on how older adults utilise their metalinguistic awareness in the context of different instructional conditions. We compared a monolingual and a multilingual approach to the teaching and learning of beginner-level Italian in speakers of German and English ($N = 50$) who participated in a tailor-made 10-week online course. Participants were pre- and post-tested for Italian knowledge and metalinguistic awareness, and demographic background information was gathered. Here we present results from a sub-sample of ten participants (ages 62–69) who provided think-aloud and stimulated recall protocols while resolving a set of second language (L2) tasks comprising grammar, reading comprehension, and translation exercises, and who reported their thoughts about their language learning experience during semi-structured interviews. Through triangulation of complementary evidence from participants' actual performance and their reflections on that performance, our findings demonstrate that learners activated their meta- and crosslinguistic knowledge effectively by drawing on their multilingual reservoirs regardless of teaching approach. Metalinguistic awareness appears to partially determine strategy use and thereby facilitate subsequent learning of the L2.

Bisher gibt es kaum Studien, die den Fremdsprachenerwerb von älteren Erwachsenen im Kontext von unterschiedlichen Unterrichtsmethoden vergleichen. Zudem hat sich noch keine Studie der Frage gewidmet, wie ältere Erwachsene ihr Sprachbewusstsein in unterschiedlich gestalteten Fremdsprachenunterrichtseinheiten einsetzen. In unserer Studie vergleichen wir einen einsprachigen mit einem mehrsprachigen Ansatz in einem zehnwöchigen Online-Italienischkurs für Anfänger mit 50 deutsch- und englischsprachigen Teilnehmerinnen und Teilnehmern. Italienischkenntnisse und Sprachbewusstsein wurden vor und nach dem Kurs getestet und demographische Daten wurden erhoben. In diesem Artikel präsentieren wir die Ergebnisse von zehn Teilnehmerinnen und Teilnehmern im Alter von 62 bis 69 Jahren, die ihre Lösungen zu Grammatikaufgaben in der Zielsprache, Leseverstehen und Übersetzungsaufgaben erklären und von ihren Erfahrungen während des Italienischkurses berichten. Wir analysieren die Erfahrungen und Gedankengänge der älteren Erwachsenen in Kombination mit ihren

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jeweiligen Testergebnissen. Unsere Studie zeigt, dass die Lernenden unabhängig vom Unterrichtsansatz ihr Sprachbewusstsein gezielt aktivieren, sprachliche Vergleiche durchführen und auf ihr mehrsprachiges Wissen zurückgreifen. Sprachbewusstsein führt zu strategisch effektivem Verhalten und kann dadurch das Erlernen einer weiteren Sprache fördern.

PLAIN LANGUAGE SUMMARY

Metalinguistic awareness refers to our awareness of the nature, form, and function of language(s) and our ability to make use of this awareness, for example, to reflect on or analyse language. Research with children, adolescents, and younger adults has shown that metalinguistic awareness can help with the learning of a new language. However, there is no research yet with older adults aged 60+. Moreover, there is little research with older adults which has compared different approaches to language instruction. In our study, we compared a monolingual with a multilingual approach to language teaching and learning with older adults who took part in an online course in beginners' Italian. In the monolingual approach, all learning materials were based on Italian; in the multilingual approach, 20% of the learning materials included other languages and encouraged learners to make comparisons between languages. Ten participants aged 62–69 took part in interviews, think-aloud, and stimulated recall procedures. They tried to solve Italian multiple-choice exercises, short reading comprehension and translation tasks, and articulated their thoughts while and after doing this. They also reported on their experiences in the Italian course. We found that the older adults readily activated their metalinguistic awareness and effectively drew on all the languages they knew, including their first language (German or English). The teaching approach they had experienced made little difference and was generally viewed positively. We conclude that metalinguistic awareness is associated with targeted use of learning strategies and can therefore help with the learning of a new language later in life.

Introduction

Learning a new language is influenced by learners' prior experiences, such as their education and previously acquired languages. In turn, these factors are known to impact on levels of metalinguistic awareness (Hofer & Jessner, 2019; Jessner, 2014) and use of language learning strategies (Bonnet & Siemund, 2018; Cenoz, 2013; Dmitrenko, 2017; Griffiths, 2007). While the role of metalinguistic awareness has been investigated extensively with learners in secondary and tertiary education and to a lesser extent with primary-level learners (for an overview, see Roehr-Brackin, 2018), metalinguistic awareness in late-life language learning is still under-researched.

We addressed this issue in a study with older adults aged 60+ who had experienced one of two instructional approaches: a monolingual approach focused exclusively on the new language to be learned, and a multilingual approach complementing input and practice in that language with activities drawing on other languages to encourage metalinguistic reflection and crosslinguistic comparisons. We triangulated evidence from learners' actual performance on various language tasks with their reflections on their learning experiences and reported strategic behaviour with a focus on the use of meta- and crosslinguistic awareness.

This allowed us to gain insight into strengths, weaknesses, and preferences that can inform instructional approaches in the older adult age group.

Background

Metalinguistic awareness and prior language learning experience

Existing research has shown that older adults are able to activate knowledge of previously learned languages even if the learning experience took place decades ago. This phenomenon has been attributed to a so-called permastore of memory traces that may be retrievable for up to fifty years after first being formed (Bahrick, 1984; Lenet, 2008; Lenet et al., 2011). Language learning experience, whether recent or not so recent, is related to metalinguistic awareness (De Angelis et al., 2015; Haukås, 2018; Jessner, 1999, 2006, 2008, 2014; Jessner et al., 2016) in the sense of an individual's explicit (or conscious) knowledge about language (Roehr-Brackin, 2018) and the associated capacity to treat language as an object of analysis in its own right. Metalinguistic awareness includes the ability to think about and manipulate language and to switch focus between form and function (Hopp et al., 2020; Jessner, 2006; Roehr-Brackin, 2018).

In bi- or multilingual speakers, that is, in speakers who have learned a second language (L2) or a third, fourth, etc. language (L3, L4, Lx), metalinguistic awareness is complemented by crosslinguistic awareness, that is, the awareness of linguistic forms and structures across languages and any similarities and differences between them (Hofer & Jessner, 2019; Jessner, 2006, 2008). Learners' meta- and crosslinguistic awareness develops in line with the number of known languages, indicating a quantitative change as more languages are added. In addition, from the L3 onwards, a qualitative change has been posited. This is attributed to a catalytic effect brought about by a bilingual rather than a monolingual system constituting the speaker's new baseline when learning a third language (Cenoz, 2013; Cenoz et al., 2001; Dmitrenko, 2017; Herdina & Jessner, 2002; Jessner, 1999, 2006, 2008, 2017).

A relationship between language learning experience and metalinguistic awareness in adults has been amply demonstrated (e.g. Cox, 2017; Renou, 2001). Bi- or multilinguals are expected to have greater metalinguistic repertoires, resulting in advantages over monolinguals when an additional language is being learned, regardless of the type of instruction that is offered. As a consequence, higher levels of metalinguistic awareness are seen as both a prerequisite and a product of multilingualism.

Interestingly, a study with older adults learning English found that participants' target language achievement was unrelated to bilingualism (Pfenninger & Polz, 2018). In another recent study with late-life learners of Spanish, prior multilingualism was not a predictor of achievement either (Kliesch & Pfenninger, 2021). The fact that the researchers had deliberately recruited participants with no more than basic knowledge of other languages can no doubt help explain these findings. Indeed, it has been suggested that a certain threshold level of proficiency is required for an individual to harness the facilitative effects of bi- or multilingualism for the acquisition of an additional language (De Angelis et al., 2015; Hofer & Jessner, 2019; Jessner, 1999, 2006). At the same time, it is worth bearing in mind that active use of multiple languages is not the only route to building metalinguistic awareness. Monolingual speakers may benefit from metalinguistic tuition in their first language (L1)

(Bonnet & Siemund, 2018) or develop metalinguistic awareness as a by-product of their profession, for example, writers or journalists who work with language on a daily basis (Jessner, 2008).

Language learning strategies

As in the case of metalinguistic awareness, researchers have sought to establish the potential benefits of strategic behaviour in additional language learning. Language learning strategies can be defined as consciously chosen regulatory techniques which aid effective language learning (Cohen, 2011; Griffiths, 2008; Wong & Nunan, 2011). Oxford's (1990) classic taxonomy of language learning strategies distinguishes direct (memory, cognitive, compensation) strategies which involve the new language and indirect (metacognitive, affective, social) strategies which operate at a higher level, illustrating the broad remit of strategies as encompassing both specific techniques and overarching behaviours.

Knowledge of previously learned languages and the accompanying metalinguistic awareness impact on a learner's strategic repertoire, with multilinguals possessing crosslinguistic compensation strategies. It has been suggested that speakers employ interlingual correspondences to optimise communication; they may also use a so-called meta-mode during which language production is constantly surveyed, thereby compensating for any knowledge gaps in the move from one language to another (Jessner, 1999, 2006). However, as indicated in the context of metalinguistic awareness, being an active user of multiple languages is not the only route to a comprehensive strategic repertoire. Extensive knowledge of and about one's L1 resulting from high levels of education and literacy, for instance, can support the development of language learning strategies and effective strategic behaviour.

Older adults may meet these criteria, yet there has been little research on the application of strategies in late-life language learning (Derenowski, 2021). A study investigating mature (aged 50+) L1 English speakers' strategy use in the acquisition of German by means of think-aloud protocols (Ohly, 2006) found that the participants mainly applied metacognitive and cognitive strategies; multilingual compensation strategies were not in evidence.

Monolingual and multilingual approaches to language teaching and learning

A monolingual approach exclusively provides input and practice in the additional language that is the focus of instruction. It is aimed at imitating the conditions of an immersive, naturalistic context of language acquisition and at avoiding any distraction or confusion brought about by the use of languages other than the target language (Hopp & Thoma, 2021). While it is still regarded as the gold standard of language instruction in many quarters, a monolingual approach has also been challenged because it can seem artificial and may thus actually impede the learning process (Cenoz & Gorter, 2011; Cummins, 2007; Hopp & Thoma, 2021; Levine, 2013).

Indeed, psycholinguistic evidence suggests that all languages in a learner's mind are active at all times, so crosslinguistic interactions are inevitable (Bialystok & Craik, 2010; Herdina & Jessner, 2002). This has been substantiated by evidence from an educational context in a study with trilingual adults: think-aloud protocols demonstrated how learners

engaged in metalinguistic thinking which involved all the languages they knew (Jessner, 1999). It has likewise been shown that learners will resort to translation into their L1 to aid comprehension (Dmitrenko, 2017; Gibson & Hufeisen, 2003). Accordingly, a multilingual approach to instruction has been put forward as an alternative to a monolingual approach with a view to promoting synergy and cross-fertilisation between languages including the L1 (Jessner, 2017), especially in combination with metalinguistic awareness training (Hofer & Jessner, 2019).

To date, a small number of studies has empirically investigated the effectiveness of a multilingual instructional approach to language teaching and learning (e.g. Brown, 2023; Hofer & Jessner, 2019; Hopp & Thoma, 2021; Jessner et al., 2016); these studies worked with either children or mostly younger adults. The findings arising from these studies unanimously point towards the usefulness of drawing on learners' prior language knowledge and of multilingual classroom activities aimed at raising metalinguistic awareness. Two recent studies directly compared a multilingual with a monolingual instructional approach (Brown, 2023; Hopp & Thoma, 2021).

A two-phase intervention study with young learners aged 9–10 showed that children who were taught multilingually partly outperformed those experiencing a monolingual approach (Hopp & Thoma, 2021). In the monolingual approach, children were exposed to the target language English only; in the multilingual approach, 20% of each teaching unit consisted of multilingual activities. The acquisition of two target structures was investigated: passive voice (comparable to majority L1 German) and *wh*-questions (not comparable to L1). The findings suggest that a multilingual approach may be beneficial when the target structure has no equivalent in the majority language (Hopp & Thoma, 2021).

A classroom study with adults in the US (L1 mostly English, ages 19–60) learning either French or Arabic investigated the use of L1 (Brown, 2023). In the monolingual approach, the target language was employed as much as possible; in the multilingual approach, it was employed in combination with L1 English. Test results yielded no significant differences in achievement between the groups learning French but revealed a significant advantage for the multilingually taught group in the learning of Arabic (Brown, 2023), indicating that a multilingual approach seems to be more effective if the target language is typologically distant from the L1. This result points in the same direction as the findings reported by Hopp and Thoma (2021) summarised above.

Focusing on late-life learners, Polish seniors aged 60+ found it helpful to be allowed to use their L1 in the English classroom. Using both Polish and English made them feel more comfortable and increased their reported well-being and perceived agency over the learning process. The researcher concluded that scaffolded L1 use in the language classroom may be beneficial and facilitative (Słowik-Krogulec, 2016, 2019, 2023).

Research issues and questions

In summary, existing research has shown that prior language learning experience and metalinguistic awareness are associated. In turn, both of these variables are related to success in subsequent language learning (Jessner, 1999, 2008, 2017). Furthermore, it has been argued that there is a qualitative difference between learning an L2 where a monolingual system constitutes the norm and learning an L3/L4/Lx where a bilingual system is the baseline (Cenoz, 2013; Cenoz et al., 2001; Dmitrenko, 2017; Herdina & Jessner, 2002; Jessner, 1999,

2006, 2008, 2017). For multilingual benefits to unfold, a minimum level of proficiency in any known languages appears to be required (De Angelis et al., 2015; Jessner, 2006), although it is unclear what exactly this level might be. A small number of studies has taken the research agenda a step further by introducing multilingual teaching that encourages learners to draw on all and any known languages—including their L1—as a possible alternative to a monolingual (target language-only) approach (Brown, 2023; De Angelis, 2011; McManus & Marsden, 2017). A multilingual approach employs multilingual activities aimed at fostering cross- and metalinguistic awareness (Hofer & Jessner, 2019; Hopp & Thoma, 2021).

Taken together, we are faced with a number of interrelated concepts—prior language learning experience, meta- and crosslinguistic awareness, and its strategic application—that have been investigated, mostly separately, in children's, adolescents', or younger adults' L2 learning, but never, to the best of our knowledge, in older adults learning an additional language. Late-life language learners have more extensive experience by definition and may therefore have built up more extensive linguistic, metalinguistic, and strategic repertoires which may in turn enable them to approach the learning of a new language in a particularly effective manner. To investigate this hypothesis, we addressed the following research questions:

1. To what extent do older adults activate their meta- and crosslinguistic awareness in the context of a monolingual and a multilingual approach to language instruction?
2. How do participants use their meta- and crosslinguistic awareness when solving tasks in a new language?

Methodology

Research design

The present study is part of a larger project on the comparison of a monolingual and a multilingual approach to language instruction in late-life language learning (Donnerer, 2024). A total of 50 volunteers aged 60+ took part in a course in beginners' Italian in either the monolingual or the multilingual condition. The course comprised 30 hours in total, delivered over 10 weeks in two 90-minute lessons per week, taught live online *via* Zoom by the first author. Learning materials were made available to participants in advance of each lesson *via* the Moodle platform at the authors' institution.

The full participant sample included 39 German speakers from Austria and 11 English speakers residing in the UK, France, Canada, or the US. The monolingual condition was entirely based on input and practice in the target language Italian. By contrast, in the multilingual condition, Italian language input and practice were complemented by multilingual activities involving learners' L1s (German, English) as well as two other Romance languages (French, Spanish), based on the rationale that facilitative crosslinguistic interactions in the sense of synergies between language systems are especially relevant for typologically related languages (Berthele, 2011; Jessner, 2008, 2014; Mayr et al., 2021). The multilingual component took up 20% of class time in each session, so participants in the multilingual condition had less input and practice in the target language Italian than participants in the monolingual condition.

Participants were pre- and post-tested for knowledge of Italian *via* a 40-item multiple-choice test focusing on basic phrases, vocabulary, and morphosyntactic structures covered in the language course. Participants were also pre- and post-tested for metalinguistic awareness by means of a tailor-made multilingual awareness test (MUAT) which comprised twelve tasks. The first part of the test draws on different European languages and Esperanto, with tasks requiring test takers to identify similarities and differences between languages, translate, match pairs, and use basic metalinguistic terminology. The second part of the test involves the manipulation of a constructed mini-language which requires test takers to infer lexical, morphological, and syntactic regularities. Tasks include sentence formation, word order changes, inserting adjectives and adverbs, case marking, and orthographic grouping. Sample test items and instructional materials can be found in Donnerer (2024) and Donnerer and Roehr-Brackin (in press).

The present study reports the findings arising from verbal protocols gathered from a sub-sample of ten participants after completion of the language course and tests. In individual online sessions with the first author lasting 45–60 minutes each, participants first completed selected language tasks during which they provided think-aloud and stimulated recall data. Participants were then interviewed on their thoughts about the language course they had experienced and their approaches to language learning more generally. The resulting data set was analysed for evidence of meta- and crosslinguistic awareness as well as strategic behaviour during task performance. In the following, full methodological details are provided. Before the start of the research, the project was reviewed by the University of Essex Ethics Sub-Committee 3 and granted approval (reference ETH2122-0879).

Participants

The ten volunteers who provided verbal protocol data were aged between 62 and 69 (mean = 65.9, *SD* = 2.02) and were L1 speakers of either German or English. The sub-sample was purposely selected with a view to including individuals with high, medium, and low scores on the Italian and metalinguistic awareness post-tests. Five participants from each instructional condition were selected. Table 1 gives an overview of the participants' profiles,

Table 1. Participants' profiles.

ID and L1 by condition	Level of education	No. of additional languages	Mean prof. level (scale of 1–4)	Italian post-test (%)	MUAT post-test (%)	Italian post-test level	MUAT post-test level
Monolingual							
05G	MA	3	2.67	78	87	High	High
42E	PhD	3	2.13	93	82	High	High
13G	O-level	1	2	83	45	High	Low
17G	MA	3	1.67	55	62	Low	Medium
09G	O-level	1	1	60	46	Low	Low
Multilingual							
46E	PhD	3	3.33	83	67	High	Medium
21G	MA	5	2	63	77	Medium	High
35G	PhD	4	2	73	55	Medium	Low
30G	BA	1	2	58	46	Low	Low
19G	O-level	1	1	58	37	Low	Low

G: L1 German; E: L1 English; O-level: secondary school certificate; MUAT: Multilingual Awareness Test.

including their educational and prior language learning backgrounds which were gleaned from a demographic background questionnaire completed by all participants.

The descriptive data from the ten volunteers as shown in Table 1 highlight the interconnectedness of variables as outlined above. Specifically, participants with more extensive prior language learning experience in terms of number of languages and self-reported proficiency in those languages tended to perform strongly on the MUAT. Furthermore, there is an indication of a potential relationship between level of education and self-reported proficiency levels, with the most proficient multilinguals holding postgraduate degrees. Finally, it is worth noting that the expected association between metalinguistic awareness as measured by the MUAT and language learning outcome as measured by the Italian post-test appears to be in evidence. Participant 13G constitutes an exception, however, exhibiting a high score on the Italian test in conjunction with a low score on the MUAT.

Data collection procedure

The present study drew on three types of verbal protocol gathered online *via* Zoom: (1) think-aloud protocols, (2) stimulated recall protocols, and (3) semi-structured interviews. The first author met with each participant individually, and the different types of verbal protocol were completed by each participant in a single session.

Think-aloud protocols ask participants to verbalise their thoughts while completing a task (Yoshida, 2008). Conversely, stimulated recall protocols require participants to recall and comment on their thought processes immediately after task completion, aided by a record of their work. Thus, in a stimulated recall protocol, participants explain the steps they took to arrive at a solution (Gass & Mackey, 2016). Accordingly, think-aloud protocols are aimed at capturing task-concurrent cognitive processes, while stimulated recall captures retrospective reflections about cognitive processes that were employed during task completion, to the best of the participant's memory.

Before engaging in think-aloud, the participants underwent a short training session comprising three example protocols previously recorded by the first author which demonstrated how to report thoughts while solving simple arithmetic equations. Then they were presented with five think-aloud tasks: three multiple-choice items which were in the same format as the items in the Italian language test they had completed, followed by a short reading comprehension and a short translation task, as exemplified in Table 2.

The think-aloud phase was followed by a series of stimulated recall tasks which differed between participants. Specifically, four multiple-choice items were chosen from each

Table 2. Think-aloud: excerpts from reading comprehension and translation tasks.

Reading comprehension	*La Vespa non è un semplice scooter, ma un 'mito', un modo di essere, di vivere, di pensare e di esprimere se stessi.*
	Question: Why is a Vespa so special? [Gloss: The Vespa is not a simple scooter, but a 'myth', a way of being, living, thinking and expressing oneself.]
Translation task	*A 24 anni però sente la chiamata del Signore, così Francesco lascia tutte le sue ricchezze e inizia una vita di preghiera in povertà e comincia a parlare con gli animali.*
	[Translation: At 24 years, however, he hears the call of the Lord, so Francesco leaves all his riches and starts a life of prayer in poverty and begins to talk with the animals.]

participant's Italian post-test: two that had been answered correctly and two that had been answered incorrectly. Participants were presented with their previous answers and were asked to explain how they had arrived at these. Unlike the think-aloud tasks, the stimulated recall tasks thus encouraged participants to justify their responses.

The think-aloud and stimulated recall sessions were conducted in the participants' L1 (German or English, as applicable) and took between 8 (19G) and 21 minutes (46E), with a mean duration of 15 minutes. The sessions were audio-recorded and transcribed, resulting in a transcript of 7141 words overall, ranging from 330 (19G) to 618 words (46E), mean = 497 words.

Data collection concluded with semi-structured interviews comprising initiation questions about participants' Italian learning experience (e.g. What are your general perceptions of the course?) and their metalinguistic awareness and strategic approaches to language learning (e.g. How do you access or guess unknown vocabulary or unknown grammatical structures when reading, speaking, or listening to a foreign language?). Initiation questions ($k = 12$) had been prepared and were followed up with prompts and requests for further elaboration, as needed.

The interviews were conducted in the participants' L1 and took between 15 (19G) and 40 minutes (42E), with a mean duration of 28 minutes. The interviews were audio-recorded and transcribed, resulting in a transcript of 10,293 words overall, ranging from 437 (19G) to 1895 words (42E), mean = 979 words. German-language transcripts were translated into English for analytic and reporting purposes.

Data analysis

The analysis of the think-aloud and stimulated recall protocols focused on identifying instances of use of meta- and crosslinguistic awareness during task resolution. For this purpose, the transcripts were scanned for evidence of decision-making processes. The steps leading up to a decision were used to pinpoint participants' activation of meta- and crosslinguistic awareness and their ensuing strategy use by scrutinising and comparing their lexical, morphological, phonological, and syntactic considerations. To exemplify, a multiple-choice question asked participants to choose the correct sentence among four options (1 is the target answer):

1. L'italiano è di Venezia.
2. Lo italiano è di Venezia.
3. El italiano è di Venezia.
4. Il italiano è di Venezia.

The decision-making steps by Participant 05G were as follows (lo spritz = popular drink, aperitif):

It can't be *lo, el, il*. (Step 1)
Lo spritz is before *sp-*, I'd say. (Step 2)
L' comes before a vowel. (Step 3)
So, sentence 1 is correct. (Step 4)

In order to analyse participants' use of meta- and crosslinguistic awareness in the reading comprehension and translation tasks, the target sentences were subdivided into meaning units which could be linked with corresponding units in the transcripts (see Appendix A for an example).

The interview data were coded in several iterations for evidence of reported strategic use of meta- and crosslinguistic awareness. Coding proceeded from initial reading to refined coding to facilitate a full thematic analysis, as exemplified in Table 3. Four themes emerged: overall understanding of spoken or written Italian (underlined), usefulness of other languages (bold), paraphrasing techniques (italics and underlined), and focus on sound, intonation, and pronunciation (italics).

Results and discussion

The present study posed two research questions, that is, to what extent older adult learners would activate their meta- and crosslinguistic awareness in the context of a monolingual and a multilingual approach to language instruction, and how participants would use their meta- and crosslinguistic awareness when solving tasks in a new language. In the following, we address these points in chronological order.

Participants' activation of meta- and crosslinguistic awareness in the context of a monolingual and a multilingual instructional approach

In the interviews, participants from the multilingual condition expressed their appreciation of the multilingual activities during the lessons, above all because they reminded them of vocabulary, phrases, and grammatical structures in other languages which they knew but thought they had forgotten (21G, 35G). Such a reactivation of knowledge which had been gained many decades ago has also been evidenced in existing research referring to a permastore of long-term memory traces (Bahrick, 1984; Lenet, 2008; Lenet et al., 2011). The interviewees reported that this recovery and utilisation of prior linguistic knowledge increased their motivation and encouraged them to look for commonalities between languages—a strategy that was perceived as supporting the learning process (35G, 46E).

Multilingually taught participants reported more activation of meta- and crosslinguistic knowledge across all tasks. As the participants had been encouraged to use their multilingual repertoires during the course, they explicitly compared known languages including their L1 and deliberately tried to apply and transfer any existing linguistic knowledge to Italian. Their behaviour reflects the finding from existing research that perceived familiarity of a new language can facilitate its acquisition (Berthele, 2011; Mayr et al., 2021). For instance,

Table 3. Example coding for metalinguistic strategies for four participants.

05G	13G	17G	42E
When listening to or reading Italian I try to grab the <u>main contents</u> and do not concentrate on single words. French helps me a lot to understand unknown things and to 'make up' Italian words.	I look at the <u>whole text</u> to understand new things and think logically. When speaking, I only use words I know and try to <u>*paraphrase*</u> unknown things. Moreover, the *sound* of a word helps me guess its meaning.	I try to make associations and find similarities in **other languages**. <u>I also remember certain situations when I already heard a word</u>, and I think of the *intonation* to create associations.	I mostly use my **French** to understand and to speak (often without even noticing it), if I am not sure about the right word/grammar.

Underlined: Overall understanding of Italian, Bold: Usefulness of other languages, Italics and underlined: Paraphrasing techniques, Italics: Focus on sound.

21G drew on Latin to conclude that *carne* must be 'meat'. 46E, a proficient speaker of French, repeatedly switched to that language to help him build bridges to Italian; in this way, he identified nouns, pronouns, adjectives, and adverbs. 35G sometimes started with Latin words and then continued with French and/or English to understand Italian vocabulary. The following quotes illustrate participants' approaches:

- 'Many people in our group compare languages.' (35G)
- 'I activate all languages I know and what I know about them to learn a new one and to solve tasks.' (46E)
- 'The Latin word for "dog" is *canis*, so *carne* can't be "dog", it must be "meat".' (21G)
- '*un ricco mercante—un marchand riche*, *stoffe—étoffe*' (46E)
  [Gloss: *A rich merchant* (Italian)*—a rich merchant* (French)*, cloths* (Italian)*—cloths* (French)]
- *'Suo padre—suo* is a possessive pronoun like *son* in French, *son père*.' (46E)
  [Gloss: *His/her father* (Italian)*, his/her father* (French)]
- '*Il mondo—mundus* is Latin and *monde* French, it's 'world'; *vita* is Latin, too, and the same word in Italian, it's "life".' (35G)

Two proficient speakers of French, 21G and 46E, commented that their French continuously and automatically merged with Italian without them being aware of this process. They said that as vocabulary and grammar were very similar in these two Romance languages, they mostly concentrated on differences, which enabled them to learn more quickly and easily. This finding is in line with previous research stating that learners with a bilingual system of related languages as a baseline can reduce the learning burden (Cenoz et al., 2001). As a consequence, learners do not necessarily draw on their L1 as the source language for transfer or any cross-linguistic comparisons but may use L2 or L3 as source languages instead. This phenomenon is reinforced in settings where the naturalistic learning of L1 contrasts with instructed learning of L2/L3/Lx (Hofer & Jessner, 2019), as in the present study. Engaging with L2/L3/Lx in an instructed context can trigger a switch to a so-called meta-mode where language production is surveyed deliberately (Jessner, 1999, 2006).

It is worth noting, however, that despite the general appreciation for multilingual activities, 21G, 30G, and 35G stated that they would have liked more (grammar) exercises in the target language.

As interviewees who had experienced the monolingual instructional condition, 09G, 13G, and 17G deplored the absence of L1 German translations, which, in their view, would have facilitated learning through crosslinguistic comparisons—a situation reminiscent of existing findings with English-speaking learners of German for whom an L2-plus-L1 treatment proved to be beneficial (McManus & Marsden, 2017). However, the three participants in the present study were also content that the course offered them enough exercises to 'digest' (13G) all the information and allowed them to ask clarification questions in L1, if necessary, for example, when they did not understand the teacher's instructions or explanations.

Most participants mentioned that they needed their L1 to understand Italian more quickly, since they could not exclusively think in the new language right from the beginning. This issue also arose in previous research with older adult learners of English who felt more comfortable when being allowed to use their L1 Polish, especially at the elementary level (Słowik-Krogulec, 2016, 2019, 2023). Furthermore, two proficient speakers of French (05G,

42E) would have considered comparisons between French and Italian useful, given the typological closeness of the two languages. Although participants in the monolingual condition had not been encouraged to draw on other languages, several individuals started identifying similarities and differences on their own:

- 'Is there the same rule for the definite article in French and Italian? Because it's *l'ami* ("the friend") in French and *l'amico* ("the friend") in Italian.' (05G, 42E)
- 'In Spanish you don't have abbreviations for the article in the singular.' (17G)

Despite undertaking the above crosslinguistic comparison, 17G also believed that knowing an additional (Romance) language was more confusing than helpful when solving language tasks. There may be two reasons for this view: he often had Spanish and Italian lessons on the same day, and he was a beginner in both languages. Therefore, it was less likely that he would benefit from the typological proximity of the two languages, given that a certain proficiency level is required to exploit any advantages to the full (De Angelis et al., 2015; Hofer & Jessner, 2019; Jessner, 1999, 2006). Compared with 17G as a speaker of Spanish at beginner level, participants with higher levels of proficiency in typologically related languages would likely have been better able to better draw on their multilingual repertoires, as evidenced by 05G and 42E—both proficient speakers of French who actually asked for crosslinguistic comparisons.

In sum, participants' views of the respective instructional approach they had experienced suggest that, on the one hand, individuals in the monolingual condition would have appreciated translations into their L1 and comparisons with other languages, but on the other hand, they also valued the number of target language exercises. Participants in the multilingual condition enjoyed the multilingual activities. The more (Romance) languages they knew and the more proficient they were in these languages, the better they could make interlingual comparisons and build bridges to the target language (Hofer & Jessner, 2019; Jessner, 1999, 2006, 2014). However, they also would have liked more exercises focusing on the target language.

Participants who had experienced the multilingual instructional approach readily involved other languages and were at ease with drawing on their metalinguistic awareness for support. By contrast, participants who had experienced the monolingual instructional approach were more hesitant in this regard. Whereas this shows an entirely expected influence of the respective instructional approach, participants in the monolingual condition also took advantage of their prior linguistic knowledge and metalinguistic awareness. Except for 19G, the monolingually and multilingually taught participants all agreed that the languages in their minds could not be switched off, were always present and were mostly facilitative, though they could also be an impediment at times. Participants perceived transfer from other languages as a virtually automatic and thus a natural process. As the only participant who held a different opinion, 19G reported that she never used her L1 German or her basic knowledge of English to help solve the language tasks, which can probably be explained by the fact that neither of these languages is in the Romance group: 'I never think of German or English when I learn Italian.' (19G)

Participants' use of meta- and crosslinguistic awareness during task resolution

In contrast with the interview data, the think-aloud and stimulated recall protocols from participants who had experienced the monolingual condition contained few references to

other languages or evidence of cross- or metalinguistic strategies. Two participants (17G, 42E) referred to Spanish, stating that *el* is the Spanish article; 42E also mentioned the difference between *molto* as an adjective and an adverb.

In what follows, findings pertaining to participants' use of meta- and crosslinguistic awareness during task resolution are presented for the three different task types employed in the think-aloud and stimulated recall sessions: multiple-choice tasks, reading comprehension, and translation. The multiple-choice tasks (think-aloud and stimulated recall) were at sentence level and offered a set of answers comprising the target response as well as incorrect distractors. Participants could pinpoint their choice right away, or they could consider all options before arriving at their choice (think-aloud) or justification (stimulated recall). The reading comprehension and translation tasks (think-aloud) required participants to engage with the new language at discourse level and arrive at answers to specific questions in L1 (reading comprehension) or offer an L1 version of a given text (translation). We expected all three task types to encourage deployment of meta- and crosslinguistic awareness, whether during task resolution itself (multiple choice, reading comprehension, translation) or retrospectively by way of post-hoc justifications (multiple choice).

The verbal protocol data arising from the multiple-choice tasks show that virtually all participants explained their choices by drawing on familiar metalinguistic terminology, regardless of whether they engaged in thinking aloud or stimulated recall. Participants drew on their episodic memory of specific instances, for example, by recalling items they had seen on Italian menus and/or eaten or bought on particular occasions. By the same token, participants drew on their language-analytic ability and made inferences, for example, by comparing the endings of words and concluding that a particular ending which occurs frequently in the language would be the most likely solution. Most noticeably, the majority of participants provided detailed justifications for their decisions, as exemplified by 42E's comments on the accurate resolution of a multiple-choice task requiring participants to identify the correct sentence among four options (3 is the target answer):

1. *I signori prende due pizze grandi.*
2. *I signori prendono due pizze grande.*
3. *I signori prendono due pizze grandi.*
4. *I signori prendano due pizze grandi.*

'*I signori* (the gentlemen) are the gentlemen, *prende* (he/she/it takes) doesn't go with the plural, so I think I'm going to go with number 3 because *i signori* is definitely plural, *pizze* (pizzas) is plural, can't remember if it's masculine, *grandi* (large, pl.) is plural anyway, so it's number 3.' (42E)

19G was an exception, stating that she had exclusively relied on her intuition. She achieved two correct answers on the think-aloud tasks; she was unable to offer explicit justifications even when prompted in the context of the stimulated recall tasks:

- 'I like this one best. This one sounds/looks right.' (19G, think-aloud task)
- 'This one looked/sounded right.' (19G, stimulated recall task)

It is worth noting that 42E achieved a high score on the MUAT post-test (82%), compared with a relatively low score achieved by 19G (37%). While this can help explain differences in

response behaviour, it is quite clear that it is not meta- or crosslinguistic awareness alone that is responsible for participants' target language attainment. Not only was 19G able to provide some correct responses in the verbal protocols, but she also improved her overall Italian score by an impressive 38% over the duration of the course.

In general, the majority of participants drew on and successfully applied their metalinguistic awareness during the resolution of multiple-choice tasks and offered detailed explanations for their decisions. The different types of explanations observable in our data chime with the literature on source attributions in acceptability judgements: rule knowledge, memory, intuition, and guessing (Tagarelli et al., 2015), with the latter two not entirely distinguishable in the case of 19G.

Data pertaining to the reading comprehension and translation tasks indicate that these formats were more challenging. This is unsurprising, given that there were no response options to choose from and participants had to engage with the new language at discourse level. Differences in performance between participants became more marked on these tasks. Data from 19G and 42E serve to illustrate the increasing contrast between individuals with higher levels of and/or more ready access to metalinguistic awareness and those with lower levels and/or less ready access. Whereas 19G was able to answer only one reading comprehension question correctly and could not easily understand the text to be translated, 42E answered all questions accurately and translated the target text fluently. Overall, 42E as well as other participants with higher MUAT scores (05G, 17G, 21G, 46E), a greater number of previously learned languages and more advanced self-reported proficiency in those languages were at an advantage—a situation that is in keeping with results from previous research (Jessner, 1999, 2008, 2017). Clearly, the more challenging formats, and in particular the translation task, drew to a greater extent on metalinguistic awareness and its successful interplay with linguistic knowledge.

Nevertheless, and as was the case for the multiple-choice tasks, exceptions were in evidence. 17G achieved low scores on the Italian post-test but relatively high scores on the MUAT and delivered a rather good translation. Conversely, 13G attained high scores on the Italian post-test and low scores on the MUAT and provided only a partial translation. These instances suggest that, first, linguistic knowledge and metalinguistic awareness do not always go hand in hand, and second, for the purpose of translation, meta- and crosslinguistic awareness seemingly matter more than knowledge of the target language, at least at beginner level. While this may appear counter-intuitive at first glance, it could be argued that translation is to some extent a quintessentially metalinguistic activity, given that it requires constant interlingual switching and crosslinguistic comparisons.

The interview data provided further insights into how the learners approached the discourse-level tasks. Several participants stated that they read through the entire text first to get a general idea about its topic and then attempted a more detailed understanding by drawing on all (meta-)linguistic resources at their disposal. According to the participants, English—whether L1 or L2—was the most widely used source language for crosslinguistic comparisons and interlingual transfer. It was seen as facilitative when attempting to comprehend Italian due to Latinate cognates, for example, *povertà*—poverty (46E), *animali*—animals (09G). It seems that participants who were not highly proficient in Spanish or Latin drew on English as their best-known additional language (e.g. 05G, 21G, 35G) or indeed as their L1 and thus their strongest language overall (e.g. 42E, 46E).

Despite the strategic exploitation of English cognates and thus evidence of intercomprehension brought about by positive transfer, evidence of negative transfer could also be found. For instance, 17G seemingly drew on his elementary knowledge of Spanish when offering 'parents' (*padres* in Spanish) instead of 'father' for *padre*. Others were misled when attempting to translate *Sente la chiamata* (He hears the call). They knew that *sente* was a verb and *chiamata* a noun because they recognised the definite article, but, influenced by French, English, and/or German, they could not translate the sentence successfully. French-speaking participants (05G, 21G) came up with 'he feels' (French *il sent*), while an English-speaking and a German-speaking participant offered 'he sends' (46E) or 'er sendet' (30G), respectively. Yet, despite instances of negative transfer, 21G pointed out that such mistakes made her focus on the differences between languages, which in turn would accelerate her learning. Successful translators associated the noun *chiamata* with the verb *chiamare* that had been used frequently during the course, thus demonstrating both reliable recall of a linguistic item and metalinguistic awareness.

Overall, the observable differences in performance due to task type emphasise the increasing relevance of meta- and crosslinguistic awareness in line with the increasing complexity of the language tasks at hand. Moreover, metalinguistic awareness may even supersede basic target language knowledge in terms of importance in certain circumstances, as exemplified by the translation task.

Conclusion

In summary, many of our results on the role of metalinguistic awareness in beginner-level L2 learning are in keeping with findings from existing research, thereby offering supplementary qualitative evidence from a hitherto under-researched group, that is, late-life language learners. At the same time, exceptions were in evidence too, again highlighting the importance of qualitative data which allow for a focus on individual cases by means of a triangulated approach drawing on different data sources.

Our participant sample was educated and had quite wide-ranging language learning experience. The participants were mostly keen to bring to bear their prior language knowledge and any associated meta- and crosslinguistic awareness, which they deemed facilitative in the acquisition of Italian at beginner level. Not unexpectedly, evidence of meta- and crosslinguistic awareness could be observed more frequently in the multilingually than in the monolingually taught participants, given that the multilingually taught group had been explicitly encouraged to take exactly such an approach. Moreover, scrutiny of participants' performance on the Italian post-test and the MUAT suggested a generally close relationship between meta- and crosslinguistic awareness on the one hand and target language achievement on the other hand.

However, our qualitative findings also showed that linguistic knowledge and metalinguistic awareness do not always go hand in hand. This was exemplified by 13G, who had high levels of language knowledge and low levels of metalinguistic awareness, and 17G, who had low levels of language knowledge and rather high levels of metalinguistic awareness. 17G clearly outperformed 13G on the reading comprehension and translation tasks, which further suggests that meta- and crosslinguistic awareness were seemingly more important than basic target language knowledge in those instances.

A divergence between language knowledge and metalinguistic awareness can also be illustrated with reference to 19G, who had low scores on all tests, and 42E, who had high scores on all tests. While this pattern of scores is indicative of a close relationship between the two knowledge types, 19G made substantial progress during the Italian course despite low levels of metalinguistic awareness. A gap in success between 19G and 42E only became evident in the think-aloud and stimulated recall tasks. This gap widened with increasing task complexity and culminated in the translation task with its considerable demands on metalinguistic awareness.

Despite yielding interesting insights, it goes without saying that the present study had several limitations. As most of our ten participants held university degrees, and as some were proficient speakers of other languages, our sample is not representative of older adult learners more generally. Our participants' high level of (language) education is likely to have helped them build up solid meta- and crosslinguistic awareness; indeed, many participants reached unexpectedly high scores on both the MUAT and the Italian measure even at pre-test, although they had been recruited as beginners in Italian. Future research should aim to include less privileged learners, so we can draw more generalisable conclusions about the role of meta- and crosslinguistic awareness in late-life language learning. In addition, future research could focus on a target language that is typologically distant from learners' L1(s) in order to explore the role of metalinguistic awareness in such a scenario.

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Helga Donnerer studied for her PhD in Applied Linguistics in the Department of Language and Linguistics at the University of Essex. She completed a thesis on the relative effectiveness of two teaching approaches for older adults aged 60+ learning Italian at beginner level: a monolingual approach which relied on the use of the target language Italian only, and a multilingual approach which supplemented target language input with metalinguistic exercises that drew on all the languages known to the learners including their first language (German or English). She presented her work at several international events. Helga passed away suddenly in November 2024. Her doctoral degree was awarded posthumously in 2025.

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Appendix A

Example sentence from the translation task illustrating participants' decision-making steps: The first row in bold shows the Italian original with an English translation underneath. The columns show how participants translated each sentence part.

A 24 anni **At 24 years**	***però*** **however,**	***sente*** ***he/she hears***	***la chiamata del Signore*** **the Lord's call**
05G, 13G, 17G, 42E, 30G, 21G, 35G, 46E: at the age of 24 05G, 42E, 21G: The French word *ans* is similar/ I can guess it from the French word. 35G: The root is the Latin word *annus*. 09G: the year 19G: -	42E: but (It is the same word in Spanish.) 05G, 09G, 13G, 17G, 19G, 30G, 21G, 35G, 46E: -	13G, 17G, 42E: he hears 30G, 46E: he sent (negative transfer from German *sendet* or English *send*) 05G, 21G: he felt (negative transfer from French *il sent*) 35G: he met 09G, 19G: -	42E, 21G: the call of the Lord 05G: the call of his father 05G, 21G: We (often) had the verb *chiamare* in the lessons, so this is/ must be the noun with the female article. 09G: he was a signore 13G, 35G, 46E: the Lord 13G, 35G: We also use/say *der Herr* in German instead of the Lord. 17G: God sent him a signal 19G: charming signore 30G: a gentleman