learning never stops!

a booklet featuring a comprehensive research syntheses on the perspectives and practices of senior language education



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Content

Project contributors & partners 2

Introduction: Unlock the core essentials of the senior language classroom 3

Understanding the older learner: cognitive changes, emotional needs, and successful aging 4

Principles and practical tips of older-adult-friendly education 6

- Cultivating emotional wellbeing 6
- Optimizing cognition and technology 7

Insights from practice 8

- National reports on promoting active aging and lifelong (language) learning 8
- Foreign language learning among 50 plus 10
- Insights from teachers who instruct older adults 12

Final thoughts on helping older learners succeed 14

References 16

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Document note

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Introduction: Unlock the core essentials of the senior language classroom!

This Research synthesis serves as an exclusive preview of our upcoming international research report – the definitive guide for teaching languages to adults over 50. The forthcoming full publication will offer an exhaustive exploration of the field, delivering a detailed physiological background of the aging brain (e.g., Baddeley et al., 2010) with the emotional and mental needs of older learners (e.g., Singleton & Záborská, 2020), and extensive field data. Created through the prestigious Golden Languages Erasmus+ project (KA220-ADU – Cooperation Partnerships in Adult Education) across four European countries, this synthesis bridges cutting-edge academic theory with practical classroom experience, framing language acquisition as a powerful engine for active aging.

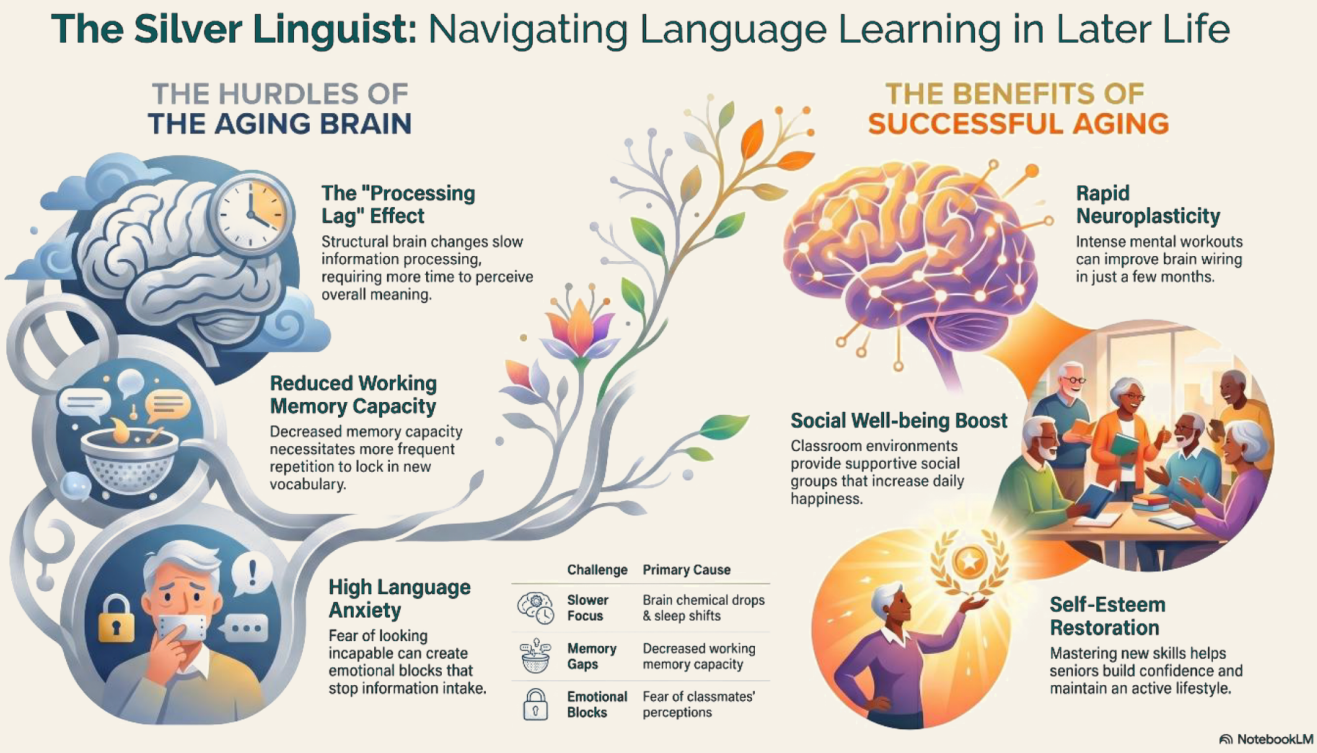


Figure 1. Understanding the older learner: Cognitive changes, emotional needs, and successful aging
Source: Visual representation was generated using Notebook LM (Google)

Understanding the older learner: Cognitive changes, emotional needs, and successful aging

This section looks at how the aging brain and emotions affect older learners (Figure 1), and you can read the full international research report to discover more!

Because age-related structural changes in the brain slow down information processing, older learners often experience a "processing lag" (latency), where the learner may understand the individual words being spoken but might require extra time to perceive the overall meaning of a sentence (see Gong et al., 2024). While their long-term memory remains a rich, stable archive of life experience (Duff et al., 2020), their working memory capacity decreases with age (Gilchrist et al., 2008), meaning older learners may need more frequent repetition to lock in new vocabulary (see Bäckman et al., 2010). Also, natural drops in brain chemicals (Grein, 2013) and shifting sleep patterns

(see Sella et al., 2023) mean that staying focused during a lesson simply may require much more energy and effort for an older adult (see Waters & Caplan, 2005).

Yet, the challenge is not just physical; the emotional side of learning is just as important (see Gómez, 2006). While older adults are highly motivated by personal growth and social connections (Koutska, 2024), they often struggle with strong language anxiety and fear looking incapable in front of their classmates (see Barber, 2020). When this stress runs too high, an emotional block may stop them from taking in new information (see Grein, 2013). In fact, many of these seniors experienced a rather formal and traditional style of schooling in the past (Grein, 2020), which can impact their learning experience today (Schiller, 2022).

However, overcoming these mental and emotional challenges is a key part of staying healthy and active as we grow older (see Rojo-Pérez et al., 2021). Learning a new language is a great way to age successfully because the older brain is still highly adaptable and capable of growth (see Ware et al., 2021). Unlike passive hobbies, this intense mental workout can actually improve the brain's wiring in just a few months, helping seniors learn more effectively (see Bubbico et al., 2023). Ultimately, mastering new language skills can help seniors build their self-esteem (Schiller et al., 2023). At the same time, the language classroom provides a supportive social group that boosts their daily happiness and well-being (Noble et al., 2021; Pikhart et al., 2021).

To bring these wonderful benefits into the classroom, it is important to understand the best practical strategies for older learners. Ready to explore the core frameworks? The following section summarizes the essential findings and core principles for a senior-friendly learning environment outlining the main aspects of the international research report:



Source: ONS Magazine / Senioren Brabant-Zeeland / Vincent van de Hoogen

Principles and practical tips of older-adult-friendly education

To teach older adults well, instructors need to balance the natural changes in the ageing brain with the older student's personal goals and life experiences (Schiller, 2022). Based on prior research, these guidelines offer practical steps for (foreign language) instructors to create learning spaces that suit seniors. Using these methods teachers can better meet the unique needs of older learners (Figure 2) (see Dorner & Schiller, 2023; Schiller et al., 2020).

Cultvating emotional well-being

Shifting from grammar to communication

Many older learners originally learned languages through strict grammar rules (Grein, 2020). A gradual shift toward communicative teaching helps build their confidence and encourages them to participate more (Kotuska, 2024).

This means focusing on the student's message rather than perfect grammar (see Greilberger et al., 2013), teaching communication tricks to keep conversations going (Oxford, 1990). Finally, to lower anxiety from past negative school memories (Greilberger et al., 2013), instructors should use positive self-talk to fight self-doubt (see Wijirahayu & Dorand, 2018) and learning diaries to help seniors see their actual progress (Schiller, 2022).

Optimizing cognition and technology

Acting as a "cognitive scaffold"

As a teacher, you provide an instructional scaffold (temporary teaching support) which acts as a cognitive scaffold to help learners stay on track as their processing speed and focus change (see MacKay-Brandt, 2011). This involves breaking lessons into small, manageable chunks/pieces to prevent students from feeling overloaded (Delaud et al., 2012) and choosing topics that connect to their real-life experiences (Duff et al., 2020). Teachers should also use multi-sensory strategies, like pairing spoken words with pictures, to help students overcome age-related changes in sight or hearing (see Shams & Seitz, 2008). Furthermore, playing vocabulary games or puzzles keeps the mind sharp not just a fun, social environment (Njoroge et al., 2013; Tan, 2025). Finally, introducing technology carefully prevents frustration (Puebla et al., 2022) while boosting motivation and helping older adults stay connected to the modern world (Balkhi et al., 2023).

In summary, masterful teaching for seniors balances strong cognitive support (MacKay-Brandt, 2011) with emotional reassurance. By using multi-sensory tools (Baddeley et al., 2010) and breaking info into small chunks (Delaud et al., 2012), you create a safe, social classroom that reduces anxiety and helps students stay mentally sharp (Koutska, 2024).

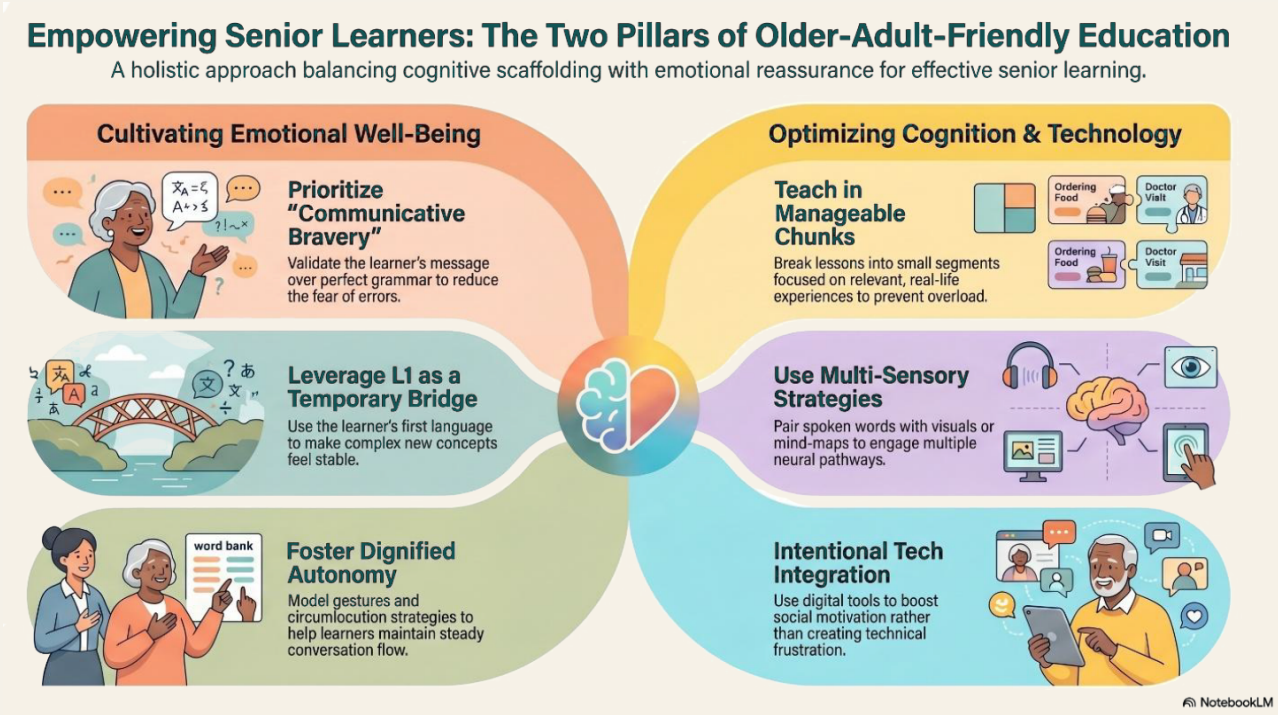


Figure 2. Principles and practical tips of older-adult-friendly education
Source: Visual representation was generated using Notebook LM (Google)

Insights from practice

Next, real teachers and older learners from across Europe share their thoughts on successful language learning and the best ways to teach seniors. Ready to dive deeper? The upcoming International Research Report delivers the full, deep-dive exploration of the empirical research and hard evidence driving these insights.

To give instructors the complete picture of successful senior education, this section begins with a sweeping look at comprehensive national reports, before diving into the powerful empirical research that brings the authentic, real-world learning experiences of older adults and educators.

National reports on promoting active ageing and lifelong (language) learning

To introduce this landscape, we draw extensively from national reports to map out the current educational landscape for older adults across Hungary, the Netherlands, , Serbia, and Spain. This overview highlights the major initiatives, national frameworks, and specialized programs explicitly designed to support senior language learners.

Hungary

In Hungary, education for older adults is part of lifelong learning and aims to keep people active and connected as they age. National policies like the National Strategy for Older People (2010–2035) and the Hungarian National Social Inclusion Strategy (2030) support lifelong learning, digital inclusion, and community programs. Hungary's commitments under the Madrid International Plan of Action on Ageing (2016) further promote senior academies and digital literacy.

Most lifelong learning for older adults happens through non-formal programs, notably Universities of the Third Age now widespread with higher education support (Kovács et al., 2020). Language learning mainly relies on private schools and community programs (Dobos, 2016), with participation linked to prior education (Hungarian Central Statistical Office, 2024). Specialized "50+" FL courses with flexible paths are appearing (Schiller, 2022).

Spain

Spain faces rapid ageing (Eurostat, 2024), prompting "active ageing" strategies where learning is key for cognitive and social engagement. Participation in education among older adults has been low but is rising due to higher educational levels and increased interest (Ministry of Education and Vocational Training, 2023).

Official language schools and university programs (e.g., Universidad de Salamanca, Universidad de Granada) offer accessible, academically recognized courses for older adults. Language learning is part of lifelong development and not seen as age-dependent (Ministry of Education and Vocational Training, 2023). National and autonomous policies follow WHO guidelines (2002).

Serbia

Serbia's ageing population (Statistical Office of the Republic of Serbia ,2024) has led to national strategies for active ageing and lifelong learning, aligned with international frameworks (MFWD, 2023). Although participation rates are low (EFT, 2020), non-formal education through initiatives like Universities of the Third Age, often linked to cultural and educational institutions, is growing (Adult Education Society, 2024).

Most language lessons happen in private schools or community centers, with access influenced by background and region. Tailored "50+" courses focus on communication and flexible methods, supporting cognitive health and social inclusion Challenges remain in funding and national coordination, but demographic trends favour further development (MLEVSA, 2021).

The Netherlands

The Netherlands integrates older adult education into broader lifelong learning policy (Rijksoverheid, n.d.). Main language course providers are Volksuniversiteiten (Stichting

Volksuniversiteit, 2026), commercial institutes, and mainstream universities (e.g. Universiteit van Amsterdam, n.d.). Institutions like Alliance Française, Goethe-Institut, and Instituto Cervantes offer language and cultural training, while HOVO focuses on classical languages. These primarily serve older adults (e.g., HOVO Nederland, 2026).

In summary, reports from Hungary, Spain, Serbia, and the Netherlands show a shared commitment to active ageing through lifelong learning. Despite varied structures, all recognize language learning's role in cognitive health and connection. Education is shifting from hobby-based to more organized networks like Universities of the Third Age and "50+" programs, supporting lifelong personal development.

Foreign language learning among 50 plus

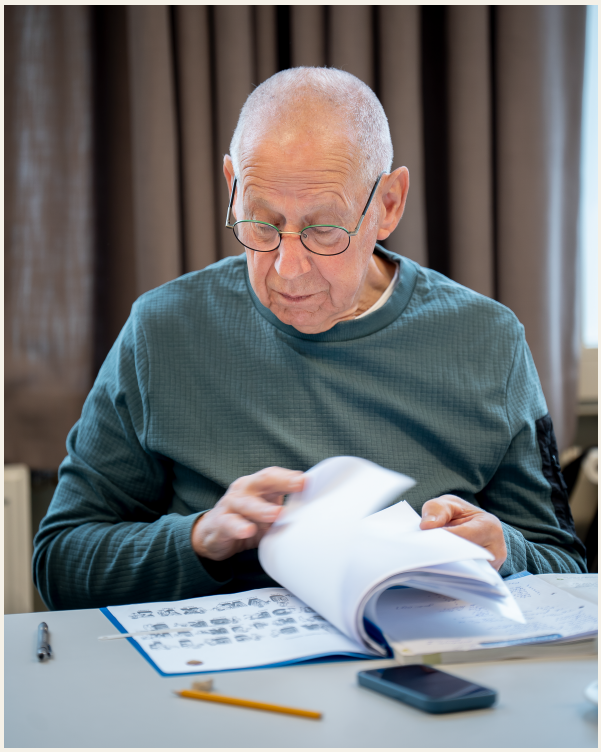
To better understand how older adults learn languages, this Erasmus+ study explored the experiences of both learners and their teachers across Hungary, the Netherlands, Serbia and Spain. By combining surveys with older learners, written interviews with educators, and follow-up focus groups, the research aimed to build a complete picture of language learning in later life.

Insight from older adults' journey of language learning

The study began by focusing on the personal experiences of older learners in the classroom. It examined what they enjoy about learning a language, the cognitive benefits they notice, the challenges they encounter, and what they need to improve their learning experience.

The older language learners' mindset and their ideal learning space

- In total, 57 learners participated: 36.8% from the Netherlands, 24.6% from Serbia, 21.1% from Hungary, and 17.5% from Spain. Most participants (74%) were aged between 50 and 69, meaning they were either approaching retirement or had recently retired. On average, these learners attended 1–2 hours of formal classes per week.
- We saw a clear trend: surveyed older adults prefer structured, formal learning environments over independent study. Whether they attend adult education centres in the Netherlands or private language schools in Spain, Serbia, and Hungary, they



Source: ONS Magazine / Senioren Brabant-Zeeland / Vincent van de Hoogen

consistently value a professional and organised framework.

- Within the classroom, communication and social interaction play a central role. Learners strongly prefer activities such as group discussions and one-on-one conversations over working alone with digital tools. Social connection is a key motivator across all countries. In fact, 28% of participants reported making new friends through their language classes, and 26% felt they had joined new com munities. This social dimension also extends beyond the classroom. While 68% practise through reading, nearly half of the participants identified speaking with others as their main independent learning activity.
- Practical goals are equally important. Many learners study English to communi cate during travel or in internation. As one Dutch participant explained: “[I want to] make myself understood when on holiday.” (Dutch older Participant No. 7)

Benefits and challenges of old-aged language learning

- Our findings indicate how language learning keeps the mind active, especially for Hungarian and Serbian learners. Some reported memory improvements, e.g., “I remember more new words in English than before.” (Spanish older Participant No. 57)
- Many see language study as “brain exercise,” especially in the Netherlands and Serbia. “I feel learning new words is a great exercise for the mind.” (Serbian older Participant No. 53)
- Learners also reported improvements in concentration. Some participants became more attentive listeners: “[Since learning English] I have started to listen more attentively.” (Serbian Participant No. 50)
  However, these positive effects coexist with common challenges. Across all four countries, learners struggle with remembering vocabulary and grammar, as well as achieving fluency in speaking:
  “Learning new grammatical nuances feels increasingly chaotic to me together with maintaining and possibly expanding my vocabulary.” (Hungarian Participant No. 23)

What learners still need

Although overall satisfaction is high, learners expressed clear needs for improvement. They want more opportunities for real-life communication and more consistent feed-back from their teachers:

- They highlighted that they thrive most when lessons feature meaningful, real-world communication paired with consistent, encouraging teacher feedback to help them track their growth.: “More practical conversations [are needed].” (Dutch older Participant No. 24) “I have a need to [...] get teacher’s feedback regularly.” (Serbian older Participant No. 53)

Key implications for teaching older adults: lessons from older learners

The data shows that older students prefer well-organized, social lessons that focus on communication. They also need more opportunities for real-life, practical conversa-tions. Finally, older learners need regular, encouraging feedback from their teachers to help them track their progress.

Insights from teachers who instruct older adults

To complement the learners' perspectives, our investigation also explored the experiences of teachers. In total, 61 educators from the four countries participated in written interviews. Most of them worked in private language schools or adult education centres, and over 60% had more than eight years of experience teaching learners aged 50 and older. Teachers described how they adapt their methods for older learners, how these learners differ from younger adults, and what skills are needed for effective teaching.

Main ideas about education for seniors

- Results show a universal shift toward slow instructional setters 50+, moving from high-pressure supportive, low-anxiety environments. This approach emphasizes a slower pace and a supportive learning environment: "I adapt the speed of my classes to the needs of my students. Laugh, make some fun and try not to take everything too seriously" (Dutch Participant, No. 9)
- Participating teachers consistently reported slowing down their lessons, breaking content into smaller parts, and giving learners more time to process information: "Reorganisation of breaks. More structured and planned sequencing, with better time management." (Spanish Participant, No. 60)
- The surveyed teachers also make an effort to connect lessons to learners' personal interests: "I try to find a topic that keeps them motivated and interested during the class." (Serbian Participant, No. 37)

Differences between older and younger learners

- Teachers highlighted clear differences between older and younger learners. Younger adults are often motivated by career goals, are more dependent on technology, and prefer faster-paced, sometimes competitive learning environments. In contrast, older learners are driven more by intrinsic motivation and require greater emotional support: "Seniors need much more encouragement and support." (Spanish Participant, No. 51)

Teacher skills and missing classroom tools

- Interestingly, surveyed teachers felt confident in themselves but said they needed more professional help. In particular, they pointed to a shortage of suitable teaching materials for older learners: "As I see, there are also limitations of teaching materials. Textbooks, worksheets and audio aids are not designed for older adults." (Hungarian Participant, No. 34)
- Surveyed educators also expressed a need for better classroom management strategies tailored to older learners and a deeper understanding of the cognitive and emotional processes of ageing: "Understanding the specific emotional[...]

Finally, 18 teachers also participated in focus groups to reflect more broadly on their experiences. These discussions explored cognitive, emotional, and pedagogical

aspects of teaching older adults, as well as the unique challenges and rewards of this work. In particular, the conversations focused on generational differences in learning and the roots of adult classroom anxiety. They also discussed using games as a "brain gym" to keep minds sharp, and how teachers can best facilitate meaningful dialogue enriched by their students' life wisdom. If you want to discover more, you can read the full international research report!

Key implications for teaching older adults: lessons from teachers

Insights from participating teachers across four European countries reveal a clear, universal shift: senior language education is moving away from high-pressure lessons and toward a relaxed, structured approach. This means modern classrooms are designed to support natural changes in memory and focus, provide clear rules and emotional encouragement, and directly welcome the rich life experiences that older learners bring to the table.

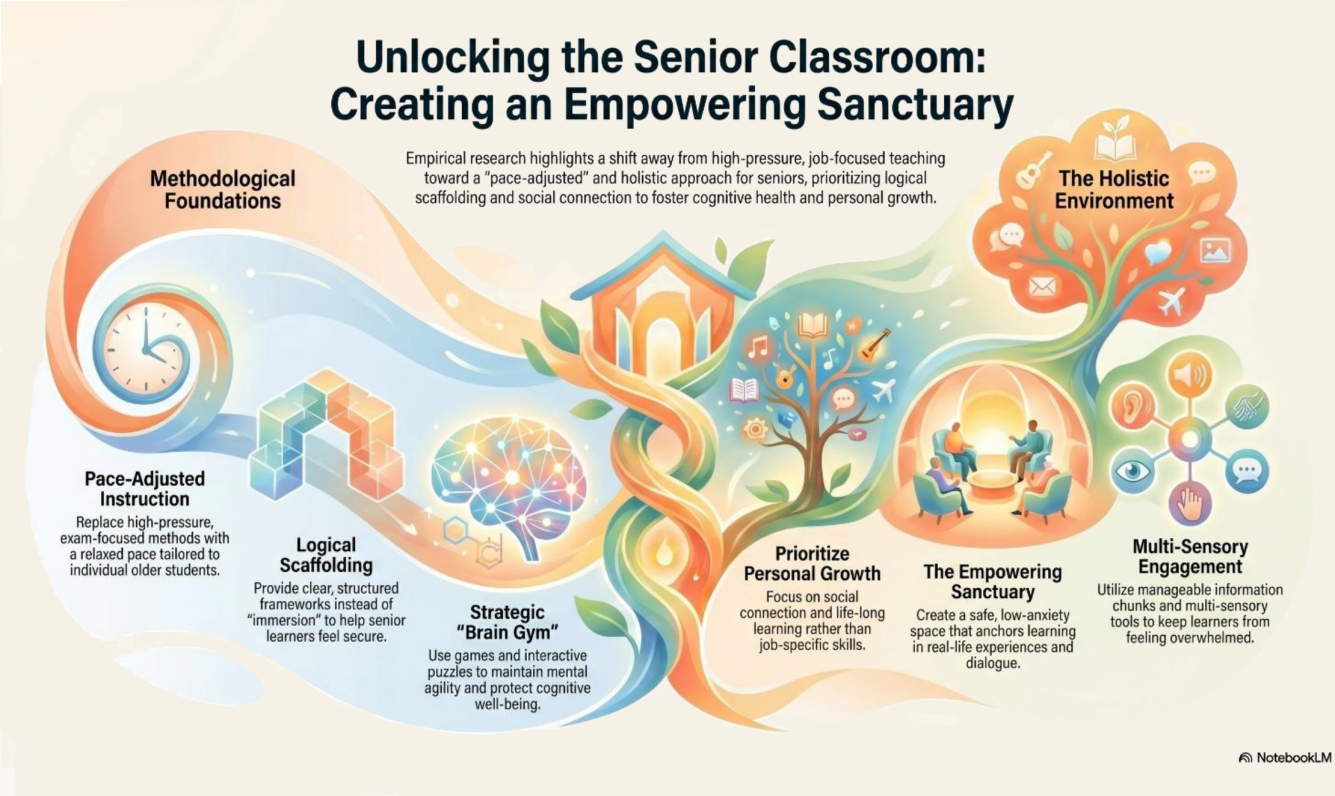


Figure 3. A comprehensive research synthesis: practical ways to help older learners thrive
Source: Visual representation was generated using Notebook LM (Google)

Final thoughts on helping older learners succeed

While standard guidelines give a solid baseline, our groundbreaking empirical research across Europe uncovered the real core drivers. Our empirical evidence points to the following non-negotiable methodological implications (see Figure 3):

- Research from real-world classrooms shows a clear shift toward pace-adjusted instruction. This means that high-pressure, exam-focused teaching methods are being replaced by a more relaxed pace that works for the individual older student.
- Instead of focusing only on learning skills for a job, surveyed teachers are now prioritizing personal growth and social connection This holistic approach helps create a safe, social environment that reduces stress and helps students feel more connected to the world around them (see Singleton & Záborská, 2020).
- Older learners come to class with high motivation and a very specific way of

thinking. Whether they are learning to travel or to keep their brains sharp, these students truly thrive when they are given clear, logical, and structured frame works to follow. By providing this essential scaffolding (or temporary support) instructors can create a safe, "empowering sanctuary". This approach reduces student anxiety and helps them focus on the joy of improving their communication skills (cf. Schiller, 2022).

- Using games, word puzzles, and interactive debates in the classroom is much more than just a way to have fun or fill time; these are actually powerful tools for keeping the brain healthy (Njoroge et al., 2013). Including these activities strategically helps older students stay mentally sharp and protects their overall cognitive well-being (Njoroge et al., 2013). These "Brain Gym" exercises are valuable because they maintain mental agility while making the learning process a rewarding and social experience (Tan, 2025).

In summary, our research shows that to help senior learners reach their full potential, educators must move away from rigid, high-pressure drills and instead embrace a supportive learning environment (Delaud et al., 2012; Koutska, 2024). By anchoring the classroom in structured logical scaffolding and breaking information into manageable chunks, instructors can help students stay on track without feeling overwhelmed (Delaud et al., 2012; MacKay-Brandt, 2011). Using multi-sensory tools and gamified activities like puzzles keeps the mind sharp and makes learning socially rewarding (Baddeley et al., 2010; Njoroge et al., 2013; Tan, 2025). Ultimately, this approach creates an "empowering sanctuary" where lifelong learning and deep social connections can truly thrive (cf. Koutska, 2024).

Looking ahead, we invite you to stay involved as we move into the next phase of this project. We are turning our research findings into practical tools and resources designed to help you in your daily work with older students.

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