The Effect of Learning Strategy Instruction on List Learning Performance of Healthy Older Adults
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Objective: Learning strategies affect how individuals encode verbal information. Some cognitively healthy individuals demonstrate reduced spontaneous use of effective strategies (i.e., semantic clustering), which may lead to lower performance. The current study examines the influence of test instruction on strategy use during list learning. We hypothesize that participants given explicit strategy instruction will increase their semantic clustering during list learning, leading to performance gains. Method: 28 cognitively healthy older adults were administered two 16-word lists with 5 learning trials. Standard administration was applied to the first list. To determine the effect of strategy instruction on participant’s spontaneous semantic clustering, additional instruction sets were implemented: low explicit strategy instruction, in which the semantic clustering strategy was suggested, and high explicit instruction, in which participants practiced using the strategy prior to learning the target list. Results: Two mixed ANCOVAs, controlling for age, compared total performance gains and semantic clustering gains across the levels of instruction. Participants made significant semantic clustering gains across both levels, with the highest gains observed in the high explicit strategy group (p < .05). This increase did not lead to significant performance gains, and participants demonstrated a trend of reduced performance under the highest level of strategy instruction. Conclusion(s): Contrary to predictions, strategy instruction did not lead to performance gains. In fact, increased focus on cognitive organization appears to lead to an increased cognitive load. Implications will be discussed.