Part IV

Language and identity
case studies
Constructing age identity
The case of Mexican EFL learners

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Introduction

During my lengthy career teaching EFL (English as a Foreign Language) in Mexico to adults aged 18 to 70, I often wondered what significance the differences in their ages had on my students, not only in terms of success in learning but also on the social interaction in the classroom. In undertaking a case study to explore these issues, I set out to discover what the experience meant to adult students, how they were changed by it and what part age played in the construction of their identities. My goal was to learn about the non-linguistic outcomes of the language learning experience. This is of particular relevance to applied linguists who grapple with interdisciplinary issues involving language, including language acquisition, second language pedagogy, identity and discourse (Block 2013).

The impact of age on second language acquisition (SLA) has long been a concern of SLA researchers. A vast number of studies on the Critical Period Hypothesis (CPH) have attempted to determine the extent to which the biological constraints operating on first language acquisition are transferrable to second language learning. However, the tradition of CPH studies had several drawbacks for the case study discussed in this chapter. First, CPH studies look at child–adult differences but not at variations among adults of different ages. In addition, the research is limited to the possible effects of age on linguistic attainment, thereby leaving out the question of the non-linguistic outcomes of language study. Moreover, CPH research addresses age in strictly chronological terms, an approach which does not coincide with my own understanding of age as socially constructed and as a dimension of identity. Therefore, I found embarking on the study of age and age identity from a social constructionist perspective to be more in line with my research goals. It also made more sense when considering the inherently social nature of language and language learning.

In order to determine the part that the social dimensions of age played in the experience of learning and constructing identities, and in the broader life circumstances of the participants, I aimed to examine four key issues for the case study: how age was co-constructed in the EFL classroom context and in the personal narratives of adult language learners; what beliefs and attitudes the learners had about age and about language learning; how these beliefs and attitudes
intersected with the way age was enacted; and how age as a subject position was interlinked with the learners’ other subject positions.

I carried out the research at a branch campus of the National University of Mexico (actual name) where foreign language classes are offered to members of the neighbouring community as well as to university students. The findings confirmed the existence of many common characteristics in the construction of age in adulthood in present-day Mexico and in other countries of the West, yet some interesting differences emerged. While the issues are explored in one specific sociohistorical context, it is hoped that what has been learned will resonate with the experience of people in other situations and add to their understanding of the social significance of age and age identity.

Overview

The conceptual foundations

Identity is constructed in our interaction with other people through language, that is, it is ‘constructed out of the discourses culturally available to us, and which we draw upon in our communications with other people’ (Burr 2003: 106). In order to highlight the fundamental role of discursive interaction in identity construction, I address the issue of age identity from a poststructuralist perspective, as multiple, fragmented, changeable over time and a site of struggle. Different strands of poststructuralism, particularly feminist poststructuralism (Weedon 1997), have provided solid theoretical support for identity studies on gender, ethnicity and other social dimensions (see e.g. Norton 2013 [2000]) and I believe offer an equally sound approach to age identity or ‘subjectivity’.

For poststructuralists, identity is not something people have or are, but rather something they perform or do (Butler 1990; Baxter 2003, this volume). This perspective stands in stark contrast to the essentialist portrayal of identity as a single fixed essence pertaining to a unified, conscious, rational subject. The notion of subjectivity, coming from positioning theory (Harré and van Langenhove 1999), can be defined as our sense of ourselves, our conscious and unconscious thoughts and emotions and our ways of understanding our relation to the world (Weedon 1997). It is formed in our relationships with other people through our identification with specific subject positions, or ways of being an individual, within certain discourses, as an ongoing process that is reconstructed in discourse every time we speak or act. The range of subject positions an individual assumes or is assigned by others is of necessity restricted to those available in a particular sociohistorical context, and may be actively taken up, tried out and accepted, rejected or challenged (Harré and van Langenhove 1999). Moreover, subject positions are frequently in conflict with each other, making subjectivity a site of struggle between competing yet interwoven discourses. Consequently, a person may adopt or be allocated multiple positions as part of their age identity, depending on the particular situation.

Poststructuralists maintain that experience has no meaning apart from that constituted in language and is subject to varied and potentially contradictory interpretations. The meaning of age, then, is contingent on the ways individuals interpret the world and on the discourses available to them. Accordingly, the experience of ageing and the construction of age identity can only occur through language and the competing discourses of a particular culture, including gender, ethnicity, social class and other discourses. Furthermore, a person’s age identity is in constant flux, readily appreciated if we consider that the very definition of ageing is ‘change over time’.
Age identity reveals itself in the stories people tell, availing themselves of the narrative form to make sense of their experiences and to ‘present themselves, and others, as actors in a drama’ (Harré and van Langenhove 1999: 8) in which they take up different subject positions. Narrative is the primary means individuals use to give meaning to their lives over the course of time and to communicate their experience to others. Thus, the construction of identity may be seen as an ongoing ‘narrative’ project, in Giddens’s (1991) terms, in which we jointly produce stories about ourselves in our interaction with others.

The life-story narrative is necessarily a story of ageing because it gives meaning to our experience of ‘change over time’ by bringing to light and interpreting the important events in our lives, weaving together our past, present and future. Our age identity – that is, where we position ourselves in the life trajectory – emerges from the narratives we tell and are told through culturally shared discourses.

The cultural discourses of age

The prevalent discourses surrounding age in contemporary Western culture grow out of decline ideology. The view of age and ageing as decrement or deterioration is a pervasive one, shaping ‘our expectations of the future, our view of others, our explanatory systems, and then our retrospective judgments’ (Gullette 2004: 11). While this is not the case in other parts of the world, such as Africa and the Far East, where age has traditionally been associated with respect and esteem, changes in attitudes towards age are taking place in many of those same societies because of increasing urbanisation and industrialisation. Such is the situation in Mexico, a country only recently industrialised.

The decline narrative is sustained by public and private institutions as well as the market economy. It is readily discernible in displays of societal ageism, understood as a set of adverse attitudes and discriminatory practices that target an age group, reinforce their subordinate and marginal place in society and dispossess them of access to material and social resources. Ageism is supported in large part by stereotypic beliefs that ascribe generally unfavourable characteristics to a person solely on the basis of their belonging to a particular age cohort. Some of the stereotypes conventionally associated with old age are inflexibility, verbosity, egocentrism, irascibility, childishness, disengagement and unproductiveness. Similar stereotypes in Mexico characterise old age as ‘a period of poor health, economic instability, loneliness and declining physical and mental capacities’ (Franco Saldaña et al. 2010: 989). Other stereotypes target middle-aged adults, focusing on the loss of physical attractiveness, the empty-nest syndrome and the midlife crisis (Shweder 1998). Beliefs about young people often depict them as rebellious, reckless and lazy.

At the same time, positive stereotypes, such as those portraying older adults as exceptionally wise, dignified or kindly grandparent figures, also contribute to ageism by making oversimplifications that do not take into consideration real differences among people in an age group. Both positive and negative stereotypes disregard the fact that people age in very different ways and ageing does not follow a straightforward course of decline. Research evidence suggests that the experience of ageing is variable both over the life span and also among people of the same age cohort (Coupland et al. 1991).

An ageist discourse that stems from the decline narrative is manifested in age behaviour, that is, the way we concern ourselves with age-appropriateness or the tacit rules regulating the proper manner of acting, dressing, talking or behaving at a certain age. Acting older or younger than the accepted norm will ordinarily be sanctioned.
The way we talk about age can also reveal ageist attitudes. Disparaging words and expressions, such as ‘old codger’, are part of our everyday discourse. So are euphemisms, like ‘golden-ager’, which endeavour to skirt the taboo theme of old age. In fact, a myriad of examples abound in clichés, humour and the media (Palmore 2005). Equivalent terms in Spanish, such as the derogatory ruco or chocho, are commonly used in Mexico. Ageist or patronising behaviour is also evident in the way people sometimes simplify their speech by using baby talk or elder speech when talking to young children or older persons (Nelson 2005).

Age-category discourses disclose another source of ageism. The arbitrary separation of the life course into named stages is often linked to social problems. For example, ‘old age’ became a recognised age category in the early part of the twentieth century because, with urban industrialisation, the latter part of adulthood became problematised as older people were progressively excluded from productive roles in the economy and viewed as a burden to society. These explicit references to age categories are ageist in that they segregate people into groups of ‘us and them’ (Nelson 2005: 217). Further examples of ageism can be found in biomedical and other discourses relating to the body. In today’s world, the norm is indisputably the youthful body and, connected with this, a generalised preoccupation with the loss of attractiveness and other physical changes associated with ageing. Mexico, like most other Western countries, is a target of mass media campaigns by the cosmetic industry, which has capitalised on the fear of bodily ageing prevalent in the female population (Montes de Oca 2001).

At the same time, ageing is considered a ‘health problem’ and illness to be the natural outcome of biological decline. In response to the widespread fear of sickness and death rampant in Western culture, the medical community has directed its attention primarily to the pathology of ageing and channelled its resources to inhibiting the ageing process and prolonging life rather than focusing on ways to promote lifelong good health (Cruikshank 2003). Yet, it is important to note that, while older people may be more susceptible to illness, ageing does not cause it as such. Furthermore, behind the fear of bodily ageing is the value we place on the ageing process, one necessarily linked to the social context. As Featherstone and Hepworth (1995: 30–31) argue:

Whilst the biological processes of aging, old age, and death cannot in the last resort be avoided, the meanings which we give to these processes and the evaluations we make of people as they grow physically older are social constructions which reflect the beliefs and values found in a specific culture at a particular period of history.

Two types of successful or positive ageing discourses have emerged in counter-position to decline ideology. The first of these, the quest for eternal youth or agelessness, seeks ways to eradicating the ‘negative’ manifestations of ageing through, for example, anti-ageing products, health regimes and self-help courses. Such attempts to detain the process of growing old are ageist in that they are based on a decremental vision of ageing. Conversely, a second approach to positive ageing regards the process as one of change or difference rather than decline. These discourses call attention to the range of options offered at each new stage of life, including the freedom to re-evaluate priorities and explore new avenues as we grow older, and the opportunity to live well at every point in the life course by making ‘sensible and efficacious lifestyle choices’ (Tulle-Winton 1999: 289).

Finally, it is important to point out that the age discourses which frame the enactment of identity are invariably interlaced in different ways with other discourses, such as gender, ethnicity and social class (see Block and Corona, this volume). The result is the construction of a complex and nuanced age identity.
Constructing age identity

Methodology

In view of the complexities involved in exploring the interconnection between age identity and second language learning, I chose a qualitative research design for the case study discussed in this chapter that utilised features of Layder’s (1998) adaptive model in order to underscore the cyclical and emergent nature of the research process, one involving a continuous fine-tuning of both theory and methodology. Adaptive theory is Layder’s proposal for linking theory and social research. It is a complement to his theory of social domains and works to interlace the systemic elements with the micro-features of social life in the research process; theory and data mutually influence each other. I opted for a multiple case study (see Robson 2011) with a broadly ethnographic orientation in that I sought to understand and interpret the experience of the participants from their perspective and in light of the larger sociocultural context in which they were immersed.

My goal was to gather stories and identify critical moments or events that would elucidate the meaning the participants gave to their language learning and other life experiences and to ascertain the part age played in the construction of their identities. To accomplish this, I used a combination of narrative inquiry (Clandinin and Connelly 2000), semi-structured interviews (see Brinkmann and Kvale 2015 [1996]), audio-taped narrative accounts and classroom observations.

Participants

From a group of volunteers, I selected seven Mexican adult EFL students for the study on the basis of purposive sampling (Robson 2011), that is, I addressed the specific needs of the project rather than seeking representativeness. I included adults of different ages, course levels and both genders. The participants comprised four women and three men whose ages ranged from 23 to 70, named David (23), Elsa (34), Gilda (36), Adela (48), Berta (59), Felix (68) and Hector (70) (all names are pseudonyms).

Data collection design

The principal source of data consisted of five co-constructed in-depth interviews for each participant, which took place over the course of the four-month school term. The interviews were semi-structured in that I drew up a tentative guide for each interview and adhered to it in very general terms. My purpose was to obtain pertinent information about the participants’ language learning experiences, their beliefs about language learning, and how they constructed their age identity. However, as a consequence of the co-constructed or shared nature of the interviews, the participants often took charge and shifted the direction of the conversations in unexpected, and ultimately enriching, ways.

Moreover, because close relationships between the researcher and the participants typically develop in the case of narrative inquiries, the effects – both positive and negative – are potentially greater, and in consequence so is researcher responsibility. Uppermost in my mind during the interviews was the need to respect the privacy of my informants while at the same time opening up a space for them to share their personal stories. This entailed, among other things, being candid and genuine in my relations with them, both as a researcher and as a person (Holliday 2002).
The interviews were complemented by weekly audio-taped narrative accounts the participants made in Spanish, in which they reflected on the experiences of the previous week, their difficulties and achievements, relations with their classmates and teacher, and any noteworthy incidents they wished to share with me. From the beginning of the term, I attended every English language lesson in order to observe the participants’ interaction in the language classroom with a view to determining how age identity was enacted and what part it played in the language learning experience of these students. Although certain telling incidents occurred over the course of the months during which I was an observer, the English language classes proved to be more teacher-centred than I had anticipated so that the principal interaction took place between the teachers and the participants. Nevertheless, my regular presence in the classroom helped build rapport with the participants. By utilising these three data collection methods concurrently, I was able to capitalise on the connections between them. This allowed me to reduce researcher bias and strengthen the credibility of the research by incorporating some of the measures Robson (2011) recommends, including prolonged involvement with the participants, persistent observation of the context and participants, and triangulation through the use of multiple data sources and collection techniques.

**Organisation and analysis of the data**

Because the interviews, which had been audio-taped, provided the most important source of data, I transcribed them in their entirety, using a simplified transcription style. A Spanish speaker then reviewed the transcriptions for accuracy. I translated only the relevant sections needed for the analysis. For the classroom observations, I recorded field notes during each class session, using a straightforward format which included the classroom activities, their duration, the interaction of the participants with the teacher or with their classmates, and any events which occurred of possible interest to the study. In the case of the audio-taped narrative reflections, I made a detailed summary of each, later transcribing and translating only those sections important for the analysis.

I carried out a qualitative content analysis (QCA) (Bryman in Kohlbacher 2006) to enable the core themes to emerge from the data. QCA places particular emphasis on the role of the researcher and of the surrounding context in interpreting the meaning of a text. It was helpful for me, as the researcher, to be able to function both as an insider, someone with a deep-seated knowledge of the country I had lived in for over 40 years, and as an outsider, an academic and a foreigner, positions which afforded me the critical distance needed to interpret the data.

**The data**

I began the study with few predetermined notions of what the data would reveal, yet it soon became evident that the participants positioned themselves and each other in three clearly delimited age groups: older adults, (midlife) adults and young adults. While this had a certain connection to their chronological age, it turned out that many other factors played a significant role in the construction of these three categories. In what follows, I present a few highlights, taken principally from the interview data, pertaining to each of these categories (see Andrew 2012 for a fuller treatment of the complete data set and the triangulation of the three collection methods).
Age identity in later adulthood

Hector (70) and Felix (68), both retired professionals, identified themselves, and accepted being positioned by others, as older adults. Taking up the study of English in later adulthood responded primarily to their desire to remain active and to keep mental decline at bay. It is a socially acceptable leisure activity and also a means of acquiring cultural capital (Bourdieu 1977), for knowing how to speak English is a source of prestige in Mexico. Yet the spectre of ageism was a constant in our interviews. Hector told me that he was interested in learning the language as fast as possible because if he did not hurry up he might not have time. As he explained:

Yes, it's not a drama but now at this age … at my age … you have to do things more quickly because at this point in time, what for? If I’ve lived my whole life without the language, I can keep living whatever time I have left.

(Hector, Interview 2)

All the participants in the study, young and old, believed that the ability to learn a new language decreases with age throughout adulthood. Felix said that it is more difficult for him to learn and to make progress now because of age-related deficits. Not only did he feel disadvantaged in relation to young people in the classroom but also outside it. He told me:

No matter what, age is going to win out because just that fact that you are an older person means that it is inevitable that you will lose your capacities.

(Felix, Interview 3)

Such ageist beliefs were displayed in Hector and Felix’s enactment of age in the classroom, where they tended to self-segregate and self-handicap, that is, they themselves withdrew or set up obstacles to their own success. It also occurred in the world outside the classroom, where they reported often feeling marginalised and disengaged from mainstream society. This was augmented because of retirement, an event that had a major impact on their lives. In many productivity-oriented Western cultures, retirement has both economic and social consequences, including the loss of status. Both men have internalised this widespread ageist discourse. Felix’s assessment of his own alleged age-related cognitive deficits is a forceful example of ‘internalized ageism’ (Cruikshank 2003: 153), in which ‘the myth of mental decline becomes a self-fulfilling prophecy – and one that brings active harm to the aged’ (Combe and Schmader 1999: 97).

Yet at other times Hector and Felix actively rejected the ageist ideas they encountered and adopted positive ageing attitudes, expressing satisfaction with their lives and the place they now found themselves in the life course. Felix spoke of a recent experience in a job that required both mental and physical abilities, saying, ‘I showed myself that I could do it. I can do anything’ (Felix, Interview 3). Acceptance and resistance to these competing discourses generated an internal tension between their admiration of youth culture and their life satisfaction as older adults.

Hector and Felix’s enactment of age as language learners is closely bound up with their professional, social and gendered identities. The importance of their past professional success is part of their social identity and also characteristic of the identity of the ‘traditional Mexican male’. Moreover, Hector’s deprecating references to himself as an Indian and other negative remarks about his dark-skinned mestizo appearance point to a devaluation of his ethnic heritage and
likely explain his lifelong need to attain a prestigious social position. The complex interplay of identities and the competing discourses of age point up the variable and often conflicting ways in which Hector and Felix enact their age as older adults.

**Age identity in (middle) adulthood**

The four women participants in the study, aged 34 to 59, identified themselves simply as ‘adults’. This term designates a mid-range falling between young adulthood and old age. There is no named age category in Mexican Spanish equivalent to what is generally referred to in English as ‘middle age’. This marks an important distinction between the construction of age in Mexican and Anglophone cultures, for many of the characteristics of the latter, such as forced early retirement or the empty-nest syndrome, have as yet no appreciable presence in the former.

One of the significant issues which the adult women cited as signalling the distinction between themselves and both younger and older adults was that of responsibility. Elsa, the youngest of the ‘adult’ participants at 34, remarked that young people ‘do not have everyday worries or the responsibilities of a job’ (Elsa, Interview 1). The question of responsibility also arose in relation to older adults, who are seen as largely free of their former professional and family responsibilities. When referring to their classmates, the women often utilised ‘we’ and ‘they’ to erect an identifiable partition between themselves and the older and younger students.

Their life stories were punctuated with instances of the responsibilities they shoulder at home and in the workplace. This characterised their approach to the study of English, for they took their classes very seriously. Since they all work, they are not seeking a leisure-time activity like Hector and Felix. Learning English at this moment of their lives meets their need to achieve something important to them, in some cases a new goal and in others an unfulfilled one from childhood. While aware of the professional opportunities that come with knowing English, their motives are more strongly linked to the prestige of the language and the identities they are constructing as adult learners.

Decline discourses surfaced on occasion, particularly when the women spoke of their relations with the other students. Berta (59), for instance, mentioned feeling ‘out of date’ and ‘out of place’ (Berta, Interview 2) in a world belonging to young people. In an interview with Gilda (36), she expressed her fear of the inevitable physical debility and loss of independence she equates with growing old, a position in keeping with prevailing discourses of age (Gullette 2004). She commented:

I’d like to get to be a little old lady, but only if I can take care of myself, not have health problems or not be able to move or need to depend on someone.

*(Gilda, Interview 3)*

More often the narratives of the adult women contained subtler manifestations of ageism, as observed in their collective preoccupation with age-appropriacy. Concerns with having finished school, got married, given birth to their children or having reached other goals within a socially acceptable chronological time frame proved to be a major issue with each of them. A tacit timetable mapping the life course effectively controlled their appraisal of their own achievements.

Age identity was interconnected with these participants’ other identities. Their gender identity as adult women, which in Mexican culture signifies first and foremost that of wife and mother (López Hernández 2007), often conflicted with their identities as professionals. Until recently the customs and traditions in Mexico have discouraged women from assuming both
subject positions. The upshot is that working women have had to demonstrate both at home and in the workplace that they can satisfactorily meet both sets of obligations. If they wish to take on another identity, such as that of a language learner, the result is often the generation of additional conflict. Even though Adela’s (48) children are university students, she explained that she still has to make an effort ‘to free myself of certain burdens that Mexican society itself makes us feel’ (Adela, Interview 3). This complex of identities shaped the experiences of the (midlife) adults both in and out of the classroom.

**Age identity in young adulthood**

At the time of the study, David (23), the only self-identified young adult among the participants, was living at home while completing his university work. Older than most of his fellow students, he still needed to pass examinations in subjects he had failed, meet the foreign language requirement and write a thesis in order to graduate. He spoke often of how much he was enjoying his present life as a student and seemed in no hurry to finish. While he exercised a great deal of liberty in his personal life, he nonetheless remained completely dependent on his widowed mother to provide for him economically. As is typical of many young adults, he had distanced himself emotionally from his family and adopted the social norms of his peers, who constituted his main source of companionship.

David said that he was taking English classes because it might help him to get a job in the future or offer an opportunity to study abroad. Interestingly, he never mentioned the foreign language requirement that was an immediate necessity for him to obtain his college degree. It seems, then, that English had value for him principally as symbolic or cultural capital (Bourdieu 1977). Studying a language was simply part of the student culture, an additional pursuit, but not one perceived to have any practical usefulness.

When writing about young adults in France, Bourdieu (2003) claimed that young adult workers and their same-age student counterparts have little in common. Students, he maintained, are characterised by a kind of interim irresponsibility; in some ways they are children and in others they are adults. They are given a great deal of latitude during their student years but are expected to take up full adult responsibilities after they have finished. This situation is replicated in Mexico, where urban workers, peasants and members of indigenous communities move effortlessly from childhood to adulthood, unlike students, for whom the transition is extended almost indefinitely over time. Because of the critical economic situation of Mexico, part-time work is not accessible to students, and family traditions dictate that young adults should live at home until they marry (Zermeño 2005).

David fits this pattern, for at the time of the study he was entirely dependent on his mother for financial support and still enjoying a carefree student life while at the same time harbouring a vague desire to be fully independent and established professionally at some future moment. He said, in painting a positive, though remote, scenario for himself, ‘By 33 I’d like to be already married and to have at least one child … probably have a stable job and have experience by then … I don’t know’ (David, Interview 3). Yet he had not taken any concrete steps to make this happen, nor had he defined any tangible career goals. The interplay between the competing discourses of dependence and independence generated a certain amount of tension in his life and that of many young adult students in Mexico.

David’s enactment of young adulthood was to a large extent intertwined with his identity as a student. Speaking of the young people in the classroom, he said:
And it’s also kind of funny … or interesting … to observe how all of us sit in the back right up against the wall. Sometimes we students have the idea that only show-offs or nerds sit up front, that is, the ‘brains’ … and, I don’t know, we put them down.

(David, Narrative account 9)

Here David gave voice to a deeply entrenched norm of student culture, namely that it is not socially acceptable to show off or perform well in class. Benwell and Stokoe (2005) and Preece (2009) reported similar findings in their studies in the UK.

He also demonstrated the kind of insularity found in young people’s tendency to limit their social involvement to their peer group and to avoid interaction with older adults. In fact, David never spoke to any of his midlife or older classmates during the entire term. His perception of them as the ‘Other’, outside the group of young university students, was reinforced by his belief that old age begins early in the life span. He said, ‘I suppose that, like everything, you need to know when to retire in time. So, I imagine that between 40 and 50, I’d better go, if I’ve been working such a long time’ (David, Interview 3). He confirmed this viewpoint in a subsequent interview when he commented, ‘Maybe when I’m 50, I won’t be able to work because, well, maybe I’ll be tired’ (David, Interview 4).

David spoke little about his childhood and made only vague references to the future, confirming García Canclini’s (2004) contention that young people do not have much of a sense of history or a connection to the past. Like most young adults, David’s life and identity were firmly rooted in the present moment.

Discussion

Among the findings to emerge in the course of the research, the following are particularly noteworthy.

The co-construction of age is rooted in the prevailing cultural discourses of age

Decline discourses and ageism in various manifestations provided the framework for the social construction of age for all the participants in the study. This was corroborated by the narratives and stories they told and was reflected in their enactment of age in the classroom (see Andrew 2012 for examples of this). In general, they seem to have internalised ageist discourses and to have adopted the traits they believe to be characteristic of their age group. Yet, this involved some conflict as the participants struggled with potentially competing discourses of dependence and independence, engagement and disengagement and competence and incompetence in the construction of their age identity.

The impact of age on the language learning experience varies according to where each person positions herself/himself in the lifespan

The participants positioned themselves and were positioned by others in three broad categories: older adults, (merely) adults and young adults. There was complete agreement about this classification, suggesting that both explicit and implicit cultural discourses have a significant effect on the construction of age and that chronological age is only one factor.
A surprising finding was that (middle) adulthood is not a lexicalised category in Mexico, marked only by its separation at one end from later adulthood and at the other end from young adulthood. It corresponds in most respects to the named category of middle age in Anglophone cultures. The (midlife) adults were characterised by their sense of responsibility at home and in the workplace and their concern with issues of age-appropriateness. This distinguished them from young adults, who were seen as yet encumbered by the economic and emotional responsibilities that come with a job and a family. It also set them apart from the older adults who, having retired, no longer feel the weight of such responsibilities.

The language learning experience varied in accordance with each person’s position in the life course and included both linguistic and non-linguistic dimensions. While the motivation for studying English could be defined in every case as the acquisition of cultural capital (Bourdieu 1977), this had a different meaning for the younger adults, older adults and (midlife) adults. Participation in class activities and feelings of inclusion or exclusion were also largely contingent on each person’s position in one of the constructed age categories. Moreover, it carried over into their lives in the world beyond the classroom.

Age as a subject position is interlinked with other subject positions in adult language learners

Age identity is inevitably nuanced by other social dimensions, such as gender, profession and ethnicity. As seen in the study, dominant cultural discourses surrounding masculinities and femininities remain especially powerful in Mexico. Professional identity and the analogous student identity were also critical for these adults. Ethnicity and social standing played a role in some cases. The addition of a language learner identity contributed further to the complex of multiple subject positions of these participants.

Issues for applied linguistics

Two areas of applied linguistics impinge directly on the case described in this chapter involving the age identity of second language learners. The first of these areas, second language acquisition (SLA) research, aims to provide the theoretical foundations that illuminate the language acquisition process. By the end of the 1980s, the cognitive or psycholinguistic orientation to applied linguistics and SLA research had begun to share the stage with a social focus, one that highlighted ‘language and more general social phenomena and processes’ (Rampton 2014 [1995]: 234), including contextualised language use, interactional discourse and the social meaning of language. A growing body of SLA work in the sociocultural tradition embarked on studies of socially constructed dimensions of identity, including gender, social class and ethnicity. Yet, interestingly, age has not been included, traditionally being treated in SLA research only as an isolated biological factor that could account for differential success in language learning. This is a serious oversight. A better option, in my view, is a social constructionist approach to the issue, one that offers a more nuanced understanding of age, takes into consideration the experiential side of language learning and encompasses both linguistic and non-linguistic outcomes. Because age is a fundamental part of the complex of an individual’s identities, a comprehensive understanding of a person means taking into account their constructions of age/temporality, and SLA research should reflect this.

The change of focus from the cognitive to the social, embraced by many applied linguists (Block 2003), has been extended to foreign language teaching and learning, historically the area
of dominant concern in the field. This is the second and more immediate area of relevance to this study. The social perspective on language learning has brought the social dimension of language use to the fore, language being regarded as a complex social practice, a social and cultural phenomenon learned through interaction. The importance of age as socially constructed to this process has been confirmed by the research findings reported in this chapter. Some of the ramifications of the study for foreign language teaching practices can be summed up in the following reflections:

Adult learners cannot be treated as a single indistinguishable population. Age-related differences exist among them, yet chronological age does not tell us enough about where a person is in the life course because people age in a variety of different ways. Age is a core part of a person’s identity, and the social dimensions of age are particularly significant in a language learning situation. This should be borne in mind by teachers, curriculum planners and textbook designers.

Teachers should look carefully at their textbooks, teaching materials and classroom activities in order to avoid reinforcing ageist discourses. Global textbooks, which target the young adult market, generally under-represent older people or assign stereotypical roles to them (Gray 2010). Conscientious selection and planning can counterbalance this. At the same time, attitudes and behaviour based on faulty preconceptions about age and language learning may surface in the classroom and inadvertently contribute to ageism.

Taking a foreign language class may have distinct purposes for adults of different ages, and mastering the language may not be the top priority. More important priorities might include improving self-esteem, developing personal strengths, seeking new intellectual challenges, engaging in social encounters, acquiring cultural capital or creating a new identity. For this reason, it is important for teachers to be aware that their lessons should go beyond the single goal of language mastery and include other rewarding and meaningful experiences for the learners, who are ultimately persons with multiple identities involved in a world extending far beyond the classroom.

Summary

The case study reported in this chapter examines age as discursively constructed in social interaction in the context of English foreign language learning (EFL) in Mexico. It focuses on the dominant discourses and narratives in contemporary Western culture, particularly the discourse of decline, through which age and age identity are enacted, to illustrate how adulthood is constructed in our present-day world. Attention is directed to the specific case of Mexico, which has tended to follow the pattern of contemporary American and European societies in adopting age discourses and categories, yet with some interesting differences.

The study corroborates the prevalence of ageist attitudes on the part of all the participants, as seen in their denigration of the ageing process and corresponding glorification of youth, as they constructed age as a dimension of their identities. This is reflected in their beliefs about the progressive difficulty of learning a second or foreign language in adulthood. What also emerges from the data is a more nuanced understanding of age identity as it is linked fundamentally to other social phenomena, such as gender, ethnicity and social class. In a broader sense, the study suggests that social constructionism can offer a privileged vantage point from which to appreciate the complex nature of identity.
Constructing age identity

Related topics

Positioning language and identity: poststructuralist perspectives; Language and ethnic identity; The significance of sexual identity to language learning and teaching; Being a language teacher in the content classroom: teacher identity and content and language integrated learning (CLIL); Intersectionality in language and identity research; Identity in language learning and teaching: research agendas for the future.

Further reading


Bamberg, M., De Fina, A. and Schiffrin, D. (eds) (2007). *Selves and identities in narrative and discourse*. Amsterdam: John Benjamins. (The authors provide a thorough treatment of the three principal traditions in identity studies, sociolinguistic, ethnomethodological and narrative, centring on the role of discursive and narrative practices in the ongoing construction of our identities.)


References


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