The Social Construction of Age

SECOND LANGUAGE ACQUISITION
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Adult Foreign Language Learners

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A Antonio, siempre

Contents

Acknowledgments

Introduction: A First Glimpse of Age

The Age Dilemma

Felix, an English student, and I talk about age.[1]

F = Felix
P = Patricia

F: I … I can tell you that I am not … despite the fact that I am going on 70, I'm not old. I am not old. Why? Because I am still interested in life, OK.
P: And in the eyes of your children … your friends … your … society in general, how do they see you, for example?
F: Look, they see me like … I mean, 'Ah, you're retired. Now you're an old man.' Yes, but, no. I don't care … I don't care anything about that.
P: Exactly, so you …
F: I am young inside. I am still capable.

Young or old? In our interview, Felix constructs himself as 'young inside' and vigorously rejects being positioned as 'an old man' by his family and friends. I can readily understand the quandary this represents for him, for at the beginning of the new millennium I decided that I wanted to go back to school. I was excited at the prospect of spending the next few years of my life immersed in books and engaging with new ideas as I worked toward a doctoral degree. But I was also apprehensive, for I was nearly 60 years old and on the receiving end of discouraging messages from the society in which I lived about the deleterious effects of aging. So I wondered if I could succeed, if I was 'still capable', as Felix put it, if I could count on the same intellectual abilities that I had as a younger student and if I could muster the discipline and stamina needed for long hours of study. On the upside, I knew I was

bringing many years of experience to the task, and I was convinced that this would count for something. I was curious about how others would view my return to the world of academia as an older student, and what impact the experience would have on me as a person, for I felt that it would surely change me irrevocably.

At the same time, I had been working for many years as an EFL (English as a Foreign Language) teacher in Mexico, where I had adults of all ages in my classroom. From the beginning I was intrigued by the significance of the age differences of my students, not only in terms of possible effects on their learning, but also, and perhaps more importantly, on the social interaction that takes place in the classroom. I also suspected that age might figure substantially in what the learners bring to and take away from the experience. Yet, second language pedagogy pays little heed to the diversity existing among adults of different ages, in essence adopting a generalized young-adult focus.[2] It has been mystifying to me that, in an era of learner-centeredness in education, and given the increasing importance of lifelong learning, such a narrow outlook should persist. I thought that perhaps it reflected the largely invisible status of older adults in cultures around the world which are increasingly youth-oriented. I hoped some day to discover answers to my concerns.

Once I decided to go back to school, I became doubly interested in the impact of age on the experience of being an adult learner. Having promised myself at the outset that I would choose a research topic that was meaningful to me both personally and professionally, the question of age and aging in adult learners emerged as an ideal subject to explore. My interest as an older learner in my own aging process dovetailed with my concern as a teacher with the undifferentiated treatment of adults in the language classroom. I wanted to find out what bearing age had on those of us who had added a learner identity to our other identities.

Accordingly, I set out to explore what it is like to be an adult language learner in Mexico. To accomplish this, I recruited seven students enrolled in English courses at the language center of the university where I work. Their ages, 23, 34, 36, 48, 59, 68 and 69, spanned a broad range of adult years. Four were women and three were men; one was a university student and the others members of the neighboring community. During one semester term, I attended their lessons, met with them periodically for interviews and received weekly audio-taped narrations from each of them. The close contact with these participants enabled me to learn much about the significance the language-learning experience had in their lives.

My interest was whether the experience coincided with the beliefs and expectations adults have about language learning, what different kinds of feelings it produced in them and in what ways they considered themselves to be changed by it. Most importantly, I wanted to know how they construct their age identity and what part they think age plays in the learning process and in their lives beyond the classroom. My concern was less with the issue

of linguistic attainment than with what the experience means in the larger context of their worlds. To this end, I endeavored to ascertain the significance the language-learning experience had for them at this precise moment of their lives in terms of their personal, academic or professional circumstances and aspirations. This connects importantly with the ways in which they constructed complex, new identities for themselves as a major nonlinguistic dimension of their language-learning experience.

English Language Learning in Mexico

Although English was studied by the elite in 19th-century Mexico, along with Latin, French and Italian, it was only in the post World War II era, when Mexico was catapulted from an agricultural to an industrialized nation, that the language took on special importance. By the 1960s, a broad spectrum of students from all social classes were receiving an education at the National University (*Universidad Nacional Autónoma de México*), and English was taught in many of its faculties. At the same time, bilingual schools, language institutes and private universities began to proliferate in urban Mexico, making the study of English even more widespread. For large sectors of the population, the customs, habits of consumption and aspirations of the United States constituted a model to emulate. In this sense, newly urbanized Mexico took on many of the values of the industrialized West.

A further upsurge in the learning of English in Mexico took place in the 1980s and 1990s as a result of the opening up of markets and the negotiation and signing of a free trade agreement with the United States and Canada. The desirability of knowing English was reflected in the increased demand for language courses both in educational institutions and in the work place. In addition, the proximity of the United States and Canada made travel to these countries a genuine possibility for many Mexicans and an aspiration for many others.

Now, in the 21st century, the importance of learning English goes relatively unquestioned; its status as a world language is universally acknowledged by all sectors of the population in Mexico, as it is elsewhere in the world. Characteristics of the current global context, such as the expansion of transportation and communication, the increase in international commerce and trade agreements, the internationalization of professional standards, training and accreditation, the need for intercultural communication at a personal level, the mushrooming of the internet and the presence of a new international political order as seen, for example, in the formation of new nations and the increased democratization of others, are cited as the most salient causes of the growing demand for opportunities to study foreign languages, and particularly English.

This demand is felt even more intensely in the case of Mexico, whose geographical proximity to the United States has had direct repercussions on

trade relations and demographic movements, bringing about a pressing need for effective means of communication between the two countries. At the same time, it has engendered an ambivalent attitude toward English that is fairly common among Mexicans (Francis & Ryan, 1998). On the one hand, definite, though largely unacknowledged, prestige is associated with knowing English for it is imbued with the elevated status of the American and European worlds. On the other hand, an aversion to English and Anglophone culture is frequently found, even among students of the language, attributable to the asymmetrical relationship between Mexico and the United States. In my view, Mexicans are attracted by the technological and economic superiority of the United States, yet at the same time wary of the power it wields, the encroachment of American culture in Mexico and, consequently, the perceived threat to their national identity. Precisely because of the power associated with the United States, knowledge of English carries with it an aura of privilege, accomplishment and refinement, furnishing an entrée to both social and professional worlds in Mexico.

English is studied in Mexico as a foreign language rather than as a second language. This is because it is not a community language in Mexico. As such, learning takes place principally in a classroom setting as distinct from a naturalistic one. However, as Block (2003) points out, making broad generalizations about foreign-language contexts can be misleading for there are differences in the conditions surrounding the learning of different languages. For example, English has a higher visibility in Mexico than languages such as Korean or Arabic. The presence of transnational companies, the media and foreign visitors provide greater opportunities for contact with English outside the classroom. Nevertheless, the classroom remains the principal venue for learning the language.

The university where I work, and subsequently carried out my research, is a branch campus of the National University. The language center at the university regularly enrolls a small population of older people (25–70) returning to the classroom, who study alongside the university-age (18–22) students. The resulting amalgamation is an interesting one, for while the multiage group is drawn together by the shared goal of learning English, their reasons for wanting to learn the language are wide-ranging, as are the ways they go about it and participate in the process, and ultimately, what the experience means to them not only in terms of their learning but also of their broader life circumstances. While the tradition of lifelong learning is a relatively recent phenomenon in Mexico, the study of foreign languages has long been an acceptable activity for students of all ages. English courses are particularly popular among adults who, for personal, work-related or academic reasons, return to the classroom as older learners. In consequence, educators are facing issues about how best to fulfill the needs and expectations of such a varied population. Certainly, searching for methods to enable successful mastery of the language is an important goal, yet it is only part of

the equation. Learning a new language, as I have observed, comprises vital experiences of a social nature that color this endeavor in significant ways. These, too, must be taken into account.

The Study of Age in Second Language Acquisition

Interestingly, age has been a highly visible topic in second language acquisition (SLA) research for many years. An important body of literature on the Critical Period Hypothesis (CPH) addresses the contentious issue of whether biological constraints operate on second language learning; that is, whether people are neurologically programmed for language at a predetermined period of time in childhood ending at puberty, and after which time they can acquire new languages only with great difficulty (Long, 1990; Singleton & Ryan, 2004). Researchers who believe that age is a determining factor in successful language acquisition take up any of several positions that vary according to the degree of stringency of the biological argument, but all based on the conviction that 'younger is better' (see e.g. Johnson & Newport, 1989; Marinova-Todd, 2003). Those adopting the counter-position draw on evidence from reported cases of older learners who outperform younger ones (see e.g. Birdsong, 1999; Ioup *et al.*, 1994). Because researchers involved in this debate are primarily interested in determining whether facility in language learning stops at around puberty or earlier, they compare language attainment of children of different ages or of children and adults, but they do not look at possible differences existing among adult second language learners. Differences in current language policy, particularly regarding the best time to initiate second language programs in schools in order to achieve optimum results, mirror the inconsistent findings of these studies.

In consequence of this focus, virtually nothing in the CPH literature makes distinctions between, for example, 30-, 40- and 50-year-old learners. Thus, while the CPH debate has proved interesting and informative in overall terms, it has not shed much light on adult second language learning nor has it broadened its scope beyond the issue of linguistic attainment. This is a concern to me as an English language teacher, for I have often wondered whether there are age-related differences among adult learners that I should be taking into account in my classroom teaching practice. One way I might have proceeded in my search for an answer is to have conducted a study of younger and older adults in the tradition of existing CPH research in order to determine whether age has an impact on success in adult language learning. Such an investigation would have filled a gap presently existing in the CPH literature. Nevertheless, I decided against approaching age as a biological factor precisely because it cannot tell me about the experiential side of learning a language. In the course of my work with mature students, I have on occasion observed the feelings of inadequacy, self-doubt and frustration, and of the concomitant threat to their identities, that learning a new language can

engender. It is clear to me that the experience encompasses a broad range of concerns involving the social dimensions of age that are present in the classroom and that extend far beyond it as well. That is what I set out to explore.

Two Key Concepts: Age and Aging

The two central terms in this book are 'age' and 'aging'. Cognizant of the limitations inherent in any attempt to pin down such elusive concepts, I have adopted the following brief definitions that underscore the distinction between them. 'Aging' is a multidimensional process that is physiological, psychological, social and cultural. It entails movement through time and signifies change. 'Age', on the other hand, is a place or position a person has at a given moment in time. Age and aging are in reality two facets of the same phenomenon in that an understanding of one necessarily involves the other. The life course transpires as an ongoing process of change known as 'aging' and provides the backdrop for identifying any point along the way. 'Age' captures one of those fleeting moments; it is the point where we situate ourselves at a precise instant in the life course. It is important to clarify that at times 'age' is used as a superordinate term, encompassing the notions of age and aging, as in 'age theory' or 'age studies'. At other times, 'age' can refer to a stage in the life course, such as 'middle age'. I also recognize that in common parlance 'aging' is a euphemism for 'old age', an expression closely associated with decline and mortality in Anglophone cultures, and one which I have tried to refrain from using.

The Purpose of the Book

With the issues outlined above in mind, I embarked on the study of age from a social constructionist perspective, in line with many contemporary sociolinguistic approaches to social parameters, such as ethnicity and gender (see e.g. Blackledge, 2002; Cameron, 1999; Eckert & McConnell-Ginet, 1995; Wodak *et al.*, 1999). Specifically, I explore the ways in which age as socially constructed is experienced by adult EFL learners in Mexico.

An increased awareness of how language learners construct their age identity and how it comes to bear on their involvement in the learning process can enable teachers to take into account not only what learners share in common but also how they differ from one another in their experience both in and outside of the classroom. People cannot fully understand each other without a sense of where they are in their lives – in the life course – relative to each other. Age is a core part of a person's identity. The age discourses[3] that people draw on to enact their identities can be perceived in their beliefs and attitudes about age and about language learning, in the way they position themselves and others, in classroom practices, as well as in the interplay of age identity and their other identities.

At the same time, the book contemplates the significance that taking a language class may have for people of different ages in terms of nonlinguistic aspects of the experience, such as working toward personal development, pursuing a fresh intellectual challenge, engaging in social encounters with other people or acquiring cultural capital and shaping a new identity. Understanding this can lead to more fruitful cooperation in building a classroom community that is dynamically connected and responsive to the real-world circumstances and aspirations of the learners.

Issues that have an impact on SLA research are also addressed. Our understanding of the age factor in SLA has until now been informed principally by research undertaken in the prevailing biological and cognitive tradition. The trend in the recent history of SLA research in the sociocultural tradition has been to view the social dimensions of identity, such as gender, social class and ethnicity, as socially constructed in discursive interaction, rather than as isolated variables. This has generated a more finely grained understanding of them as they are implicated in the construction of identities. For whatever reason, age has not been included in studies working from this perspective in SLA, although it is beginning to occupy an important place in research carried out in other fields. This omission is a serious one because age adds a temporal quality to the complex of a person's identities. A social constructionist approach, then, can round out our picture of age by providing a socially focused counterpart to work carried out with a psycholinguistic orientation to SLA.

On a broader level, the research on which this book is based sheds light on the ways in which age is socially constructed by adults in Mexico. A great deal of overlap exists between present-day urban Mexico and what might be termed 'generalized Western culture', yet there are some important differences in the construction of adulthood in Mexico that surface in the course of the study and that enhance our understanding of the social significance of age and aging in contemporary society elsewhere.

While research on age as socially constructed has been carried out in a variety of different contexts, it has not been studied in the foreign language classroom. This book brings fresh findings to the fledgling field of age studies and, by comparing and contrasting them with other research findings, it is hoped it will contribute to moving it forward.

Organization of the Book

The book is divided into two parts. Part 1 provides the conceptual basis for looking at age as a social construct. It begins with an examination of age in SLA in both the cognitive and the sociocultural traditions, followed by a discussion of social constructionist and contemporary sociolinguistic approaches to age and other social dimensions. In the final section of Part 1,

I explore the age discourses underlying the creation of age identity and giving meaning to the experience of aging in contemporary Western society.

In Part 2, the construction of age comes to life in the stories told by seven adult language learners in Mexico. The three data chapters revolve around their construction of later, middle and young adulthood as it links up with their experience as language learners.

Notes

(1) The interview extracts throughout the book are my translations from Spanish. Space does not permit the inclusion of the original Spanish texts.

(2) This appraisal is based on my own analysis of the characters, topics, settings and classroom activities in three English language textbooks used in Mexico at the time the research was undertaken: *Look Ahead* (Hopkins & Potter, 1994), *Interchange* (Richards *et al.*, 1991) and *American Headway* (Soars & Soars, 2001b).

(3) The term 'discourse' is used in two separate, but related ways in this book. In the present context, 'discourses' refer to ways of thinking, feeling, believing, talking about, behaving and valuing that are characteristic of specific communities. In short, they are 'ways of being in the world' (Gee, 1999: 7). At other times, 'discourse' denotes language in use, that is, language in interaction. The topic of discourse is treated more extensively in Chapter 2.