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# Discursive Construction of Age in Older Immigrants' Narrations of Language Learning

*Construction discursive de l'âge dans les récits d'apprentissage linguistique par les personnes âgées immigrées*

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# Discursive Construction of Age in Older Immigrants' Narrations of Language Learning

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## PLAN



## TEXTE

# Introduction

1 Increasing longevity is a global phenomenon (WHO, 2015) that has contributed to growth in the older population. In public discourse and government policy documents, older adults are often represented through negative constructs, such as being slow or frail, and in need of support (WHO, 2018); or through positive constructs as active citizens who play a crucial role in strengthening communities (WHO, 2002). Both negative and positive constructs of age can be stereotyping, especially when older adults are a heterogeneous group with varying needs, desires and abilities. Consequently, this necessitates a more expansive dialogue around age and ageing, particularly to highlight the diverse educational experiences of older adults. Furthermore, with increasing numbers of people migrating in later life or ageing in the context of immigration,

researchers across the globe underscore the importance of re-evaluating discourses surrounding age, particularly in the context of additional language learning. In line with global demographic trends, Canadian census data reveals an increase in the senior population across all provinces (Statistics Canada, 2014), noting a large number of immigrant seniors. Depending on their immigration trajectory, many older immigrants report limited or no proficiency in English, one of Canada's official languages. As such, the language training sector is expanding to accommodate these needs and we continue to see more older immigrants accessing programming.

2 This article draws on a year-long narrative ethnography (Goodall, 2004) conducted within an English as an additional language program tailored to older immigrants. Among other offerings, the program featured a storytelling class that was attended by ten seniors (Balyasnikova and Gillard, 2021). The narrative ethnography, conducted within the storytelling class, aimed to trace the learning pathways of older immigrants within Canadian educational systems, and identify various discursive constructs (e.g., Canadian culture, values, etc.) that the older learners drew on in their narratives. A recurring theme that emerged from the research was the role of age in shaping educational experiences. As such, this article explores the ways older language learners define and navigate their positionality through the discursive construction of age.

3 Central to this article is an exploration of how older language learners contribute to and navigate the discursive construction of age in language learning. The data analysis indicates a spectrum of age-related constructs, varying from positive descriptors to negative ones. This understanding will support greater age-based inclusivity in educational environments, while also paving the way for development of critical geragogy in additional language learning contexts (Ramírez-Gómez, 2015). This focus is pivotal in reshaping how age is perceived and discussed, ensuring that educational practices are equitable and empowering for learners of all ages.

# 1. Learning in Later Life

4 This section presents a review of academic literature on the language learning experiences of older adults. It explores research that

highlights the complex nature of older adults' learning and situates the current article within a broader discussion on age and learning in later life.

5 The literature on older adult learning shows a gradual shift in educational gerontology, moving away from the pure biological or cognitivist approaches to learning in later life that have long influenced the field. Cognitive decline models, for example, address the limitations of older learners based on their age. Despite a growing body of evidence challenging such deficit framing of cognition (Ramscar *et al.*, 2014), the view of older learners as struggling due to cognitive decline has historically framed older adult education as a social welfare initiative, and consequently as a burden on the rest of population.

6 In contrast, educational gerontological research paints a more nuanced picture of learning in later life. It views older learners as a heterogeneous group (Lemieux and Sanchez, 2000) of agentive individuals with complex identities and underscores the significance of social interactions in learning. The challenges that older adults face in learning are attributed to other factors beyond biomedical ones. Namely, the widespread occurrence of ageism in education, which many studies recognize as "one of the last socially acceptable prejudices" (Weir, 2023 : 36). Ageism or "age-attributed differential treatment" (Massie and Meisner, 2019: 29) can be further compounded by other marginalising discourses, such as of gender (Krekula, Nikander and Wilińska, 2018), heteronormativity (Meisner and Hynie, 2009), racism and ableism (Jones *et al.*, 2017), to identify a few.

7 Relevant to this article is Formosa's (2021) concept of internalized ageism within the context of older adult learning, particularly at the University of the Third Age (U3A). Formosa writes that older learners exhibit ageist stereotyping, particularly towards themselves, by claiming affinity to youth or rejecting shared experiences with other older learners. However, Formosa argues that internalized ageism is a result of older adults absorbing and reflecting broader societal attitudes that are negative towards ageing, often subconsciously. In addition, research indicates that internalized ageism can significantly impede access to educational opportunities for older adults (Liu *et al*,

2022). Acting on self-imposed limitations, older adults might feel less capable as they engage in learning (Köttl *et al.*, 2021; Maulod and Lu, 2020), which can lead to a lack of confidence as a learner. These ageist stereotypes can be further reinforced by power dynamics and inequalities in the educational settings (Formosa, 2012) and educators' desire for a one-size-fits-all approach to educational program development. In contrast, a more positive and nuanced view of ageing can mitigate internalized ageism and increase older adults' motivation to learn (Kampen *et al*, 2023).

8 The literature on older adult additional language learning, similarly, warns against ageist thinking in older language learning contexts. In contradiction to the cognitive decline models, research shows many older adults successfully acquiring additional language (Cox, 2019). Moreover, many studies demonstrate the cognitive benefits of bilingualism in later age. For example, Bialystok *et al.* (2016) argue that bilinguals show less cognitive decline than monolinguals, implying significant public health benefits. As with all language learners, older adults may face challenges in retaining new linguistic information (Mackey and Sachs, 2012), however these challenges can be mitigated by other facilitative factors. Relevant to this article, are arguments by Pfenninger and Polz (2018), who discuss the benefits of language learning for healthy ageing, but also note the prevalence of internalized ageist stereotypes by older learners.

9 Studies on language acquisition in later life underscore the need for nuanced approaches to exploring why and how older adults learn additional languages. For instance, Schulz and Elliott (2000) describe the language learning experiences of a 57-year-old woman in Colombia and emphasize her high motivation and intensive interaction in Spanish learning. Older adults' motivations to learn vary. Kuklewicz and King (2018), for example, underscore the instrumental motivation for learning among Polish seniors learning English, who saw it as a practical skill for travel and communication. These learners set and achieved realistic language goals. Working with older adult language learners in Japan, Ramírez-Gómez (2015) argues that not all language learning experiences are empowering. She connects this phenomenon to ageist stereotypes, including internalized ones. To counter this she recommends applying

Formosa's principles of critical geragogy to create learning contexts that work to address ageist stereotypes.

10 Research on older immigrants who use or learn additional languages is complicated by intersecting multiple stereotyping discourses. Tran (1990: 94) notes that older immigrants and refugees "lack preparation for their adjustment…[in the host] society. They also have fewer opportunities to make successful adaptation[s] to their host society than the younger generations". At the same time, prior life experiences (e.g., level of education, professional occupation, family status, etc.) also significantly influence older immigrants' language acquisition. Such background factors, Tran (1990) argues, should be considered in the development of educational programs for older immigrants. Further, Hubenthal (2004) and Pot *et al.* (2018) highlight older immigrants' feelings of shame and linguistic insecurity as they attempt to speak their additional language, particularly in high-stakes situations. Hubenthal (2004) worked with Russian-speaking older adults who immigrated to the United States at different stages of their lives. In her analysis of the participant interviews, she notes the highly critical discourses of the learners towards their own language improvement. Pot *et al.* (2018) observe similar feelings of shame and inferiority harboured by older immigrants, which led them to avoid interacting in Dutch with native speakers. Finally, older immigrants in Canada experience higher levels of loneliness as compared to younger immigrants or older adults in general (Wu and Penning, 2015). As a result, older immigrants might seek language learning to overcome social isolation and establish a community of peers who share their life experiences as well as to maintain mental health (Taylor *et al.*, 2005) or find ways to interact with their English-speaking family members (Arxer *et al.*, 2017).

11 Research on how age-related discourses shape older adults' language learning experiences joins the arguments for development of tailored educational approaches for each specific group of learners (Formosa, 2022). A more nuanced approach would represent a substantial evolution in understanding the educational needs and capabilities of older adults, and lay pathways for approaches that respect their agency and multifaceted language learning experiences, rather than relying on one-size-fits-all teaching approach. However, the public

and academic examination of ageist stereotypes in education remains inadequate (Fragoso and Fonseca, 2022).

# 2. Narrative Ethnography and Discursive Construction of Age

12 In this section, I first outline the theoretical orientation towards discourse as well as introduce the concept of discursive construction of age, which was applied in the presented study. I follow by explaining the origins of the generated narrative data.

13 The term discourse is an ambiguous one often used interchangeably across language, texts, narratives, and many other media (Dijk, 1997). In this paper, I specifically draw on the discourse of the classroom setting while also recognizing the broader discursive contexts of the interaction (public, social discourse). Importantly, discursive strategies that interlocutors engage in serve to construct specific social relations through recognized communicative practices and contextualization cues (Gumperz, 1982).

14 The larger study from which the data was obtained was conceptualized as a narrative ethnography (Gubrium and Holstein, 2008), which is a methodological approach that views narratives not as objective recounting of events, but as "direct, intensive observation of the field of study—in this case, the multifaceted field of narrative practice" (Gubrium and Holstein, 2008: 250). The benefit of narrative-focused studies is that they highlight the use of language as a discursive resource to focus on the socially constructed understanding of what it means to be a senior, the experiences of ageing, and how older people are positioned in society. Narrative ethnography presented me with an opportunity to combine story-sharing as a pedagogical practice and my interest in narrative with attention to the discursive, material, and interactional contexts of narrative production.

15 Informed by Gubrium and Holstein (2008), my analysis focused on the narrative practice itself. I view narrative practice as a space where various dimensions of ageing are constructed, from the interplay between constructs of cognitive decline and expressed desire to live healthy and meaningfully, to the articulation of the specific learning

experiences of ageing immigrants. In addition, my analytical lens recognizes narratives as "constructive means that are functional in the creation of characters in space and time, which in turn are instrumental for the creation of positions vis-a-vis co-conversationalists" (Bamberg and Georgakopoulou, 2008: 379). Therefore, I view narratives not merely as reflections of experience, but as situated usage of discursive tools such as storying practices, descriptive resources, and the environments that condition storytelling. Further, recognizing that life experiences are constructed for us in the form of stories (Riessman, 1993), the analysis of narratives had the overarching goal of analyzing the discursive construction of experience itself. Furthermore, this analysis not only considers age as a discursive construct but sees the process of construction itself as influenced by social norms, cultural beliefs, and personal experiences (Pavlenko and Blackledge, 2004; Weedon, 2004).

# 3. Seniors Storytelling Club: The Context of Narrative Production



Interested in understanding the language learning experiences of older immigrants in Canada, between 2016 and 2019 I developed and co-led classes in the Seniors Storytelling Club, which was offered as part of the Seniors Thrive program at UBC Learning Exchange in Vancouver, Canada (see more Balyasnikova and Gillard, 2021). As an English language learning class, the Storytelling Club aimed to immerse participants in narrative events to collectively explore the impact of English language learning on their lives. The choice to use storytelling as the main pedagogical practice was strategic, as it created a contemplative discursive context for seniors to reflect on and articulate their lived experiences, thus reaffirming their existing identities and constructing new ones (Bamberg, 2011; Connelly and Clandinin, 2000). The club was attended by ten immigrant seniors (ages spanning from 61 to 86), each with varied durations of residence in Canada. The most recent immigrant had settled in Canada in the early 2000s, while some had been Canadian residents (and citizens) for over three decades. The national origins of the group included four from Mainland China, one from Hong Kong, one from Iran, and two each from Vietnam and Taiwan. The club composition reflected

the heterogeneous nature of older adult learning communities. Educational gerontologists have long advocated against perceiving older populations as uniformly marginalized (Withnall, 2006), instead advocating for a recognition that older adults age unequally due to their differences in socioeconomic backgrounds, reasons for pursuing education, and prior learning experiences.

# 4. Discursive Construction of Age Among Older Immigrant Language Learners

17 In this section, I analyze the discursive construction of age in the language learning narratives of older immigrants. By narratives I refer to instances of conversational storytelling (Ochs and Capps, 2001), small stories that included brief narratives such as "tellings of ongoing events, future or hypothetical events, and shared (known) events, [and] refusals to tell. " (Bamberg and Georgakopoulou, 2008: 381) and longer elicited narratives both written and spoken, within the context of a class discussion.

18 I specifically revisit narratives constructed during the third class of the Seniors Storytelling Club, which was titled "Learning at an old age." During this class, I first invited participants to read a news story about an octogenarian student and discuss the reading. I recorded the conversation at the time. Then, as a group we used the insights from the conversation to craft narratives titled "My learning journey." In addition to generating spoken and written texts, the class was followed up by narrative interviews with every class member. I open this section by sharing a narrative I crafted to provide a context of narrations. The names of the seniors have been replaced by pseudonyms. The participants presented in the vignette are: Ann and John (Mandarin speakers) and Tom and Bu (Vietnamese speakers).

> Today's class begins with a reading of a news article about a 90-year-old Kenyan woman who started school for the first time, having been denied the opportunity in her youth. The group seems to be enjoying this topic. Everyone is chatting. [...] The story about an older woman going to school has resonated with the whole group.

> They reminiscence about [how] our own learning experiences shapes the development of the class. [...] Looking back, there was one significant episode in this class. As June wrapped up the discussion, Ann said: "Like John, already 80 something, but he still come to learn English. I always say, I admire him, and he is so good he still come to learn something." Bu added, "never give up" he says. Ann reflected on the reasons why the [redacted] is so popular with seniors. In her opinion, it is because younger people need to learn English faster and "get to work." Because of this, she goes on, language learning in other centres is more intensive and practical. The seniors or retired learners, she continues, have more time, they don't want homework, they just want conversation and meeting new people. Everyone laughs and agrees. Bu imagines that if he gives up learning, he will immediately forget all language skills that he has developed throughout his life in Canada. In a candid moment, Tom laments that he must speak Vietnamese and that "some teachers hate that" he confesses. Tom says that despite having lived in Canada for many years, he is still afraid to talk in English because he is "embarrassed of the pronunciation," Bu adds that he doesn't feel comfortable talking on a phone in English. Jacqui agrees with Bu and laments her forgetfulness. In response, Ann says "You are a good student, you always ask questions about grammar and vocabulary." Despite the class ending, everyone is still talking and sharing their experiences of learning. (Researcher's journal, entry four)

19 It is within this discursive context that I argue that learners construct their language learning experiences through affective stancetaking (Stoica, 2022) towards aging and agentive positioning (Davies and Harré, 1990) as older language learners.

## 4.1. Affective Stancetaking

20 I use the term "affective stancetaking" to highlight constructs that refer to the "mood, attitude, feeling, and disposition, as well as degrees of emotional intensity vis-a-vis some focus of concern" (Ochs, 1996: 410) that emerged when the participants of the Seniors Storytelling Club spoke about age in the context of their learning experiences. I particularly focused on the adjectives that the participants used to describe themselves as older learners. In the dataset I analyzed, I observed a dynamic discursive pattern of affective stancetaking that ranged from negative to hopeful. To

illustrate, I draw on narratives of two learners introduced earlier, Tom, Bu and John. Consider this excerpt from the narrative vignette shared above.

> In a candid moment, Tom laments that he has to speak Vietnamese and that "some teachers hate that." Tom says that despite having lived in Canada for many years, he is still afraid to talk in English because he is "embarrassed of the pronunciation." Bu adds that he doesn't feel comfortable talking on a phone in English either. A classmate agrees with Bu and laments her forgetfulness.
> Here, Tom shares that teachers hate it when he speaks Vietnamese in class. While not directly addressing aging at first, his narration becomes increasingly more emotionally saturated when he mentions being embarrassed by his lack of language proficiency. This affective stance is shared by the other learners, who connect language proficiency with the ability to recall words. (Excerpt 1)

21 In the follow-up clarification, Tom again constructs ageing through a series of affective stances. Consider the exchange below:

> N : right. So why do you learn English?
>
> T: You know, I like to learn English. I like to read. When I speak to my friend, I am not confused. If you do not learn English or something your friend easy forget [about you]. Not easy for old people. You understand. Alzheimer's. I am very scared. Most people, they have big trouble about that disease. (Excerpt 2)

22 Tom exhibits a distinct affective stance towards learning English that is motivated by health-related concerns. He explicitly addresses his fear of Alzheimer's disease and shares that he believes that learning English might mitigate its risks. His statement, "I am very scared," and his reference to the struggles other seniors face with this disease, exemplify what Stoica (2022: 381) describes as a "highly marked affective stancetaking" in discourse. In Tom's case this affective stancetaking is directly related to ageing and the potential of facing cognitive decline. At the same time, Tom says that he likes learning and reading, juxtaposing his concerns with a hopeful outlook towards learning. This hopeful outlook is further strengthened by Tom's belief in the health benefits of language learning. This, against the backdrop

of his fear of age-related cognitive decline reveals a complex affective stance.

23 A similar pattern was evident in the narratives of one learner, John, who often positioned himself as reluctant to be a burden on his family. This affective stance was constructed when John expressed uncertainty and doubt regarding his English language proficiency, which he often mentioned right after identifying his age. However, his narrative noticeably shifts to a more hopeful stance when he talks about wanting to continue learning English. This discursive trajectory, from expressing concerns and self-doubt to articulating aspirations and hopes, captures the essence of John's emotional stancetaking as he described his language learning experiences. Consider the narration below:

> I with my wife first time came to Canada. That was a happy time and a worry time! We are both was 70 years old and both not understood English! My son had a job design building—his job very busy only weekend he has free time company us to look around so that day we had a wonderful time. (Excerpt 3)

24 Here John's affective stance taking regarding "a happy time" and "a worry time" as a new immigrant in later life ties with his age and inability to understand English. John also observes that he and his wife could not explore the city on their own because they needed their son to assist them. Here John's narrative suggests that had they been younger and proficient in English, they could have been more independent. As such, while the time spent with their son was wonderful, it might have also been clouded by a sense of regret and feelings of inadequacy. Consider the following exchange:

> N: Tell me about your English language learning.
>
> J: You know me. First time I speak English, I very scared. I think I have no, no condition to learn. So complicated language. Now little bit better, but not good. (Excerpt 4)

25 John's affective stance and his self-positioning as an English language learner are constructed through his use of descriptors such as "scared" and "not good." These terms not only underline his negative

stance towards speaking English, but also reflect a broader sense of apprehension and self-doubt, particularly when he describes himself as being in "no condition to learn." The language choice here is crucial as this narrative was constructed within the context of discussing learning in later life. However, John does not explicitly connect this affective stance taking with broader stereotypical discourses on ageing. This omission is significant and it may suggest that his feelings of inadequacy are rooted in personal challenges, rather than being an internalization of societal attitudes towards aging and learning. However, as I discuss further, research has found that internalized ageism can be subconscious. In either case, John's dynamic affective stances can be viewed as a process of complex interplay between his self-positioning and the immediate learning context that embedded in broader societal discourses.

26 To conclude, older learners' affective stancetaking towards themselves as they engage in language learning in later life overall is dynamic. Produced in the context of a language learning class, the narratives often follow a discursive pattern that progresses from negative to hopeful. Learners constructed their language learning experiences as challenging, but at the same time positioned themselves as agentive individuals who are determined to overcome the difficulties. Maintaining cognitive health was not part of the Seniors Storytelling Club's mission. Nonetheless, most participants identified that their fear of cognitive decline, and mitigating it though language use, was a key motivation for joining. Thus, I argue, the participants positioned themselves as proactive seniors and engaged learners. I expand on this argument in the following section.

## 4.2. Agentive Positioning

27 To analyse how the participants construct their agency as older language learners, I consider how they position themselves (Davies and Harré, 1990) in relation to ageing and constructed their identities as older learners.

28 My analysis of the data suggests that participants constructed their identities as older learners within a particular discursive context of age-related cognitive decline. Such agentive positioning involves enabling interlocutors the capacity to act and make strategic choices.

To illustrate, I return to the exchange described in the narrative vignette that opened this section. I select an exchange between Ann and Bu that shows how they position John and themselves in relation to each other and John. Consider this excerpt from the narrative vignette:

> As June wrapped up the discussion, Ann said: "Like John, already 80 something, but he still come to learn English. I always say, I admire him and he is so good he still come to learn something." Bu added, "never give up" he says. (Excerpt 5)

29 Initiating the exchange, Ann positions John as an agentive older adult who is to be admired. By emphasizing his age "already 80 something" and his commitment to learning English in the phrase "but he still come to learn English," Ann draws on broader discourses of aging as a barrier to learning. Her use of the phrase "I always say, I admire him" suggests that she has been noticing John's commitment and she sees it as commendable. Through this she constructs John as a proactive senior who defies age-related complications. Her statement, "I always say, I admire him and he is so good he still come to learn something," further solidifies this positioning by explicitly stating her admiration towards John's continuous efforts to learn. Bu's agreement with Ann's view of John is evident in his response "never give up" which also positions John as agentive in in his learning, despite his age. This short utterance illustrates Bu's attitude towards life and learning. Bu not only positions John as an agentive individual, but he also aligns himself with the value of persistent action towards learning.

30 In John's narratives he positioned himself as a learner who initially struggled with fear of speaking English and perceived inadequacy, but who has made some progress in learning English. Consider this exchange in our dialogue:

> N: Tell me about your English language learning.
>
> J: You know me. First time I speak English, I very scared. I think I have no, no condition to learn. So complicated language. Now little bit better, but not good. (Excerpt 6)

31 John answers the initiated conversation through affective stancetaking about his initial fear speaking English in the phrase: "First time I speak English, I very scared." This self-positioning constructs an identity of a vulnerable older adult, who at the same time his agency and engages in this challenging activity. His phrasing "I think I have no, no condition to learn" constructs him as a learner who lacks the necessary skills and suggests that he may draw on ageist beliefs about age as a limitation, resulting in doubt about a senior's ability to learn a new language in later life. By describing English as a "so complicated language" he constructs the experience as challenging and positions himself as someone who is trying to overcome a learning challenge. John also notes that his ability in English has become "little bit better, but not good." Thus he positions himself as a learner who continues to seek English language proficiency.

32 In the following section I analyse how Tom, Bu, and Jacqui position themselves as older learners who share challenges and have common attitudes about English language learning and the use of English outside the classroom.

> In a candid moment, Tom laments that he has to speak Vietnamese and that "some teachers hate that." Tom says that despite having lived in Canada for many years, he is still afraid to talk in English because he is "embarrassed of the pronunciation," Bu adds that he doesn't feel comfortable talking on the phone in English. Jacqui agrees with Bu and laments her forgetfulness. (Excerpt 7)

33 Tom's note that he does not have proficiency in English and therefore has to speak Vietnamese suggests a conflict between his native language and English-only language learning classrooms and that his agentive choices are constrained. In response, Bu adds that he doesn't feel comfortable talking on the phone in English. By sharing their discomfort relative to the context of their classroom interactions, Bu positions himself as sharing Tom's challenges in certain communicative situations, despite possibly being comfortable in others. Bu's identity as an agentive user of English is constrained by the sociomaterial conditions of English language use. Jacqui adds to the exchange by affirming her own struggle with forgetfulness. This self-positioning indicates that she perceives her agentive

English language use to be constrained by memory loss, which analysis suggests highlights certain internalized ageist perspectives. However, in agreeing with Bu and by extension with Tom, Jacqui includes herself as experiencing similar challenges inherent in learning English as an additional language. Consider the exchange between Tom and myself below:

> N: right. So why do you learn English?
>
> T: you know, I like to learn English. I like to read. When I speak to my friend, I am not confused. If you do not learn English or something your friend easy forget [about you]. Not easy for old people. You understand. Alzheimer's. I am very scared. Most people, they have big trouble about that disease. (Excerpt 8)

34 In response to my question, Tom expresses a personal liking for learning English stating, "you know, I like to learn English. I like to read" and self-positions as an agentive learner who is driven by personal interest and enjoyment of the process. He constructs an identity of a self-driven older learner who has a positive attitude. In the statement, "When I speak to my friend, I am not confused," Tom points out the applied benefits of using English to communicate with other classmates. Through this, Tom self-positions as a practical learner whose agency constructs an effective interaction in the classroom context. Tom's use of the phrase "If you do not learn English or something your friend easy forget [about you]" further reinforces the notion of social isolation as something to avoid and asserts Tom's desire for social connection. Tom's affective stance towards cognitive decline indicated by his use of the phrase "I am very scared," positions him as a learner who is concerned about his cognitive health and takes action to learn English to mitigate the risks associated with ageing.

# 5. Discussion and Implications

35 This article underscores the fact that English language learning for older immigrants extends beyond intellectual development, and is deeply intertwined with personal fears, societal perceptions of aging, and the pursuit of cognitive well-being. My analysis of older

immigrant learners' talking about their learning experiences aligns with previous research on affective stancetaking. In particular, the notions of shame and inferiority related to age and ageing, as identified in this study, echo the research of Hubenthal (2004) and Pot *et al.* (2018). These studies similarly highlight how senior learners may grapple with often internalized ageist stereotypes.

36 Despite the fact that the participants actively positioned themselves as agentive learners, there was a notable pattern of negative affective stancetaking towards ageing, and the construction of age as a potential hindrance to language learning. This was evident in the class discussions, written texts, and interviews, in which participants frequently reflected broader ageist stereotypes. Both Tom and John talked about memory loss, Alzheimer's disease, and the fear of being socially isolated. It is within this affective stancetaking that the two participants constructed English language learning as a strategy to counter age-related barriers. This pattern suggests an internalization of ageist narratives. These findings echo those of Ramírez-Gómez (2015) and Andrew (2012), who argue that internalized ageism can profoundly affect the learning trajectories of older individuals.

37 Some studies have found that adopting a more positive view of aging can help mitigate internalized ageism and enhance the motivation of older adults to learn (Kampen *et al.*, 2023). Similarly, Ann and Bu constructed John as a proactive, admirable older learner and commended him for his resilience and desire for lifelong learning, despite his advanced age. However, analysis of the classroom exchanges echoes Ahearn's (2001: 112) theorization of agency as "the socioculturally mediated capacity to act". Indeed, the learners' agency towards learning English was seen as mediated by age, social connectedness, classroom policies, and other factors. In light of the findings, I join critical educational gerontologists such as Formosa (2002) and, particularly, Ramírez-Gómez (2015, 2019) in restating the need for pedagogies of critical geragogy in additional language learning. An explicitly anti-ageist pedagogy, critical geragogy can create discursive contexts for older learners to explore internalized ageism and challenge prevailing stereotypes and misconceptions about ageing.

# Conclusion

38 This article presents insights derived from a narrative ethnography conducted within an English as an additional language program, which was developed to support older immigrants' learning through shared personal narratives. The literature review presented in this article sheds light on the issue of internalized ageism, a phenomenon that can create barriers to the educational advancement of older adults. Empirical studies have documented the adverse effects of self-imposed limitations and a diminished sense of self-efficacy, frequently rooted in societal norms and biases. Concurrently, there is compelling evidence indicating that older adults are actively countering these ageist stereotypes, especially by constructing identities of agentive language learning. In the Seniors Storytelling Club, the learners often reproduced larger ageist discourses regarding their cognitive development and overall learning competence. At the same time, they constructed identities as agentive and proactive learners.

39 This paper joins the academic dialogue concerning how constructs of age and ageing impact learning in later life. It echoes studies that call for a more nuanced and contextualized approach to the issue, seeing older adults as a complex and heterogeneous group (Walker and Foster, 2006). Moreover, I call for continued scrutiny of ageist stereotypes within language learning contexts, including internalized ageist stereotypes by older learners themselves. As the global demographic trends continue to shift, it is imperative that we continue to evolve our approaches to older adult language learning.

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## RÉSUMÉS

**English**

This article explores the discursive construction of age by older adult language learners, with a particular focus on older immigrants in Vancouver, Canada. It draws on data generated as part of a larger narrative ethnography conducted over the course of a year within an English as an additional language storytelling class. Specifically, it looks at one narrative event in the classroom that was later followed up with a series of narrative interviews. In this paper narration of age and ageing is approached as a contextualized discursive practice. Analysis of discursive patterns in learner narratives suggests that learners construct their language learning experiences using affective stancetaking towards aging and agentive positioning as older learners. The article argues for a close attention to the discursive construction of age by older learners and enactment of ageist stereotypes within language learning contexts.

**Français**
Cet article se penche sur la construction discursive de l'âge par les personnes âgées, apprenantes en langue et plus particulièrement par les les personnes âgées immigrées de Vancouver, au Canada. L'article se fonde sur des données produites dans le cadre d'une étude ethnographique narrative plus vaste, menée pendant un an dans une classe d'anglais en seconde langue consacrée à la narration d'histoires. Plus précisément, il se concentre sur un événement narratif qui s'est déroulé en classe et qui a été suivi par une série d'entretiens narratifs. Dans cet article, la narration de l'âge et du vieillissement est envisagée comme une pratique discursive contextualisée. L'analyse des modèles discursifs dans les récits des apprenants laisse penser que les apprenants construisent leurs expériences d'apprentissage linguistique en adoptant un positionnement émotionnel à l'égard du vieillissement et un positionnement actif en tant qu'apprenants âgés. L'article défend l'idée d'une attention toute particulière portée à la construction discursive de l'âge par les apprenants âgés et à la mise en œuvre de stéréotypes âgistes dans les contextes d'apprentissage des langues.

## INDEX

**Mots-clés**
vieillissement, âgisme, analyse du discours, anglais, langue seconde, gérontologie, narration, positionnement énonciatif

**Keywords**
ageing, ageism, discourse analysis, English, additional language, gerontology, narrative stance

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