Preface

Reinventing the Golden Years: A New Narrative on Lifelong Perseverance

I have always been captivated by stories of unwavering perseverance and tireless pursuits of personal growth. Especially enchanting to me are the tales passed down by 'our elders', serving as a wellspring of inspiration in various narrative forms, be it through visual art, literature, personal recollections or even more anecdotally, through newspaper articles. Take, for instance, the remarkable motivational journey of Archie White, a retired British solicitor who, at the age of 92, chose to return to university (Drury, 2021). With resolute determination, he delved into the realms of painting, photography and clay modelling, and eventually achieved his degree in fine arts at 96, becoming the oldest graduate in the history of the United Kingdom. His indomitable lifelong learning mindset finds a parallel in the story of Shigemi Hirata, a Japanese student who, at the remarkable age of 96, completed an art and design degree in 2016 (Shrestha, 2013).

Similarly, how can we not be inspired by the likes of Yuichiro Miura, who, in 2013, defied all odds by becoming the oldest person to conquer the summit of Mount Everest at the age of 80 (Shrestha, 2013)? Or wish to understand what drove Harriette Thompson, a cancer survivor, to embark on her first marathon at the age of 76? Undeterred by the passage of time and illness struggles, she completed her 15th marathon at the age of 91, securing her place as the second-oldest marathon runner in US history. What built the astonishing resilience of Sister André, a French nun who, at the miraculous age of 118, not only held the title of the world's oldest person but also emerged victorious in her battle against COVID-19 (Le Monde, 2023)? Regardless of the forms of resilience and the nature of their mesmerising accomplishments, and those of many others, these lifelong 'super' achievers serve as a testament to the limitless power of physical resilience and mental grit. Their stories also illuminate the boundless potential and plasticity of the human brain and the motivation to fulfil any ambition and act upon personal drive, reminding us that

age and life impediments are no barriers to the pursuit of self-fulfilment, nor should they determine our capacity to achieve any ambitious deeds, however unattainable they may initially seem.

Of course, there is always a backdrop context to the story itself. However, while I must concede that the origins of the enduring motivation behind the unflinching commitment of a multitude of other anonymous overachievers will forever remain shrouded in the enigmatic annals of history, the question of what drove them to this motivational height throughout life is surely not unwarranted.

In fact, in its own unique linguistic lineage, this book aligns with the broader and captivating efforts of other research groups that have also delved into the subjects of longevity and 'superageing', primarily from a medical standpoint. In Amsterdam, for example, the 100-plus study,[1] conducted by Professor Henne Holstege, is a widely recognised research project that focuses on investigating centenarians and their immediate family members. The study aims to understand the genetic and biomaterial factors that contribute to cognitive health in individuals who have managed to avoid disease until extreme ages. Within the realm of linguistics and communication sciences, noteworthy contributions to the study of 'superagers' are also being made by Professor Angela Roberts and her team at the University of Western Ontario.[2] By examining the brains of remarkably healthy older individuals, these studies offer valuable insights into preventing cognitive decline and achieving advanced ages without developing dementia.

In the field of applied linguistics, a growing number of research groups have laid the groundwork for exploring lifelong language learning, as is the case with the Bilingualism and Aging Lab (BALAB)[3] research group from the University of Groningen, run by Professor Merel Keijzer. Another current line of work that is gaining traction and embraces meaningful cross-pollination is the VARIAGE project,[4] led by Professor Simone Pfenninger and her group of linguist collaborators from the University of Zürich. VARIAGE seeks to examine educational and occupational transitions throughout the lifespan, looking at dis/continuity patterns before and after retirement, with a particular focus on retirement as a concept that is both socially determined and linguistically constructed. Very much aligned with my own work, the project acknowledges the unique lived experiences of individuals and recognises retirement as influenced by contextual variety and life milestones.

There are no coincidences, only encounters. As I pen these few lines, I am reminded of those words of Paul Eluard, which probably most aptly capture the genesis of this book. In fact, my research essentially originates from my encounters with inspiring lifelong achievers, whom I have always admirably perceived as human embodiments of boldness. This book is my personal tribute to those living voices of tenacity.

Stories that Inspire: Motivational Narratives from Later Life

My personal interest in making sense of motivational resilience took root in my own experience as a language teacher over 15 years ago and developed in the last 8 years of private English teaching through fortunate encounters with retired older adult learners outside traditional language schools. Coincidentally, my journey into third-age English teaching began in 2017 with the encounter of my very first retiree student, who was learning English. Through him, I heard of the recent mushrooming of national learning centres for older adult learners to develop and practice foreign languages (FLs), among other skills, including the University of the Third Age in Europe (U3A in the UK, *Université du Troisième Âge* in France or *Universidad de la Experiencia* in Spain), first established in 1973 in Toulouse, and its American counterparts, such as the US-born Osher Lifelong Learning Institute (OLLI), the skilled nursing facility (SNF), the assisted living facilities (ALF) or the independent learning facilities (ILF) (Oxford, 2018), to name but a few.

Before I had even officially initiated this research, my curiosity grew through the numerous informal conversations I had with Georges, my first student, during our private English tuition classes together. Sessions would largely consist of chats, which naturally led to anecdotal storytelling and would often take the form of short stories. In every session we had together, Georges would usually take five minutes to tell me about the myriad of new ways and opportunities he had found to improve his language skills aside from our sessions of practice. In this particular context, he was the one who first introduced me to the concept of language café groups for older adults, and more particularly pointed out the one he was involved in at *Brasserie Félix Faure*, in Nice, South of France.

At that time, I was unconsciously influenced by common ageist beliefs and societal stereotypes. Consequently, I initially believed – somewhat naively – that my student's profile and motivational patterns were exceptional and unique for someone of his age and social status as a retiree. While I initially envisaged a single case study on his English learning habits and assumed that exploring his successful motivational trajectory would sufficiently feed my wish to delve into further study, I soon realised that other similar enthusiastic additional language (AL) learners (with English being their second language [L2]) from all walks of life would also take part in these venues. Like Georges, they would also proactively look for new ways of using their language skills outside any formal and traditional learning structures. This was the case with my two other candidates, Josette and Patricia.

Fascination for those lifelong motivated learners, and especially for their sustained motivational behavioural patterns over a lifetime, shaped the contours of my inquiry, and led me to further consider this micro phenomenon of motivated later-life multiple language users under a

retrospective longitudinal prism, i.e. via the retrospective reporting of past events (Dörnyei & Ushioda, 2021). *Why was it that those language learners were able to consistently commit themselves to linguistic challenges and experience quite uninhibitedly pure pleasure in the process?* Inevitably, my biased view and first readings on foreign language learning (FLL) in the third age also triggered my questioning on 'the difficulties claimed to be imposed on them by the effects of an age-related decline in language-learning capacity' (Singleton & Záborská, 2020: 112). In other words, *how were those highly motivated learners responding to, and potentially compensating for age-related cognitive hurdles?* More generally, understanding what had maintained their motivation high over the span of their whole life became my research leitmotiv.

Collecting their personal interpretation of lived experiences with multiple language learning and identifying the remit of successful learning across time and sustainable motivation inevitably had to be rooted in their personal life stories (Consoli, 2021a), hence the use of a narrative study. While the topic of third-age language learning had already been addressed from various disciplinary perspectives, including linguistics, social sciences, neurosciences and medical sciences, this book takes a different angle by combining both narrative and motivational studies. Self-accounts yield rich insight into the dynamic motivational systems at work in one's lifelong and unique journey to language learning and into the resulting language experience in one's autumn years. In the context of my investigation, my participants' lifelong motivational growth emerged organically as the main thread of their stories.

Challenges and Misconceptions about Ageing

Navigating the discourse around 'superageing' requires careful consideration. Firstly, certain narratives can inadvertently widen the gap between the glorified perceptions of ageing and the everyday realities faced by many individuals (Sweetland *et al.*, 2017). These portrayals of exceptional older individuals are often perceived as anomalies, reinforcing existing stereotypes. This perspective creates a stark division that overlooks the complexities of ageing, where, as I argue, both positive and negative aspects coexist. I thus aim to avoid oversimplifying the discussion by merely showcasing 'success stories' or the most favourable aspects of ageing. Such an approach might suggest that ageing does not inherently lead to decline and that high motivation can be maintained at all costs. These statements, while partially true, are somewhat blunt and require a more nuanced exploration to fully capture the complexities of the ageing experience, which, in fact, reflect the complexities of life itself.

Secondly, the storytelling methods used in this book can inadvertently promote an individualistic viewpoint, whereby individual stories imply that personal choices, conditions and encounters are the sole

determinants of well-being. This approach neglects the significant role of social factors and environmental contexts, leaving the audience with a false sense of security in the belief that ageing outcomes are purely personal matters, rather than public issues that can be addressed at the broader level of society and learning communities.

I aim to present forward-looking narratives that minimise the pitfalls associated with ageism, including issues such as demographic stereotypes, 'otherism' and the 'living proof' or 'sympathetic senior' traps. To shift this narrative and steer clear of ageist or overly simplistic portrayals, I intend to use personal stories that not only showcase the potential for healthy ageing and sustained motivation in later life, but also highlight the significant impact of social environments on well-being as we age. In this revised approach, the setting emerges as the central character, illustrating how our surroundings profoundly shape the ageing experience.

Personal Indications on Readership

This book presents a thorough overview of lifelong language learning and its motivational dynamics through the personal stories of seasoned and experienced older adult learners. By combining scientific content with storytelling, it aims to offer a comprehensive exploration of the topic, delving into the motivations, challenges and strategies employed by these learners in their language learning journeys and distinct social contexts. This book thus weaves together individual experiences, creating a tapestry of stories, which will hopefully appeal to readers of all walks of life and transcend professional and personal backgrounds. The purpose is to cultivate a sense of connection by catering to a diverse audience, each embarking on their unique path of discovery and intellectual interests, with the hope that they will find meaningful insights and personally relate in one way or another to the real-life 'characters' of the following stories.

Accordingly, I have identified three primary audiences for this book. Firstly, it is targeted at learners of all ages, with the intention of inspiring and motivating them to embrace the boundless possibilities and achievements that can be pursued throughout life's various stages, including later adulthood. Countless mature individuals encounter a lack of motivation or harbour a disheartening belief that their time has passed for (re)engaging in certain activities. This book whispers a gentle reminder that the symphony of life continues to unfold regardless of one's age and circumstances. For within these pages lies a profound truth: it is never too late to embark upon a transformative journey towards (self-)discovery and fulfilment.

Secondly, the book is intended for language teachers to help them understand and appreciate the underlying connections and narratives that shape their students' lives. It aims to enable them to perceive the

invisible thread that runs through each student's learning story beyond the classroom walls, encompassing their experiences, emotions, life aspirations and challenges. By acknowledging and comprehending the intricacies of this intangible bond and embracing their role as mentors in shaping this narrative, they can enhance their ability to connect with their students on a profound level and think of them as 'people, not simply as "language learners"' (Ryan, 2019a: 28). Through this understanding, they can also find solace in the knowledge that their influence is not trivial, but rather has the power to cultivate a truly meaningful and transformative educational experience that is not only impactful but also imbued with a sense of long-term purpose and significance.

Lastly, the book is intended for scholars, including both researchers and students in the fields of applied linguistics, second language acquisition (SLA) and the psychology of language learning. In particular, I hope that my colleagues interested in FL motivation will glean valuable insights from it for their own research and teaching, and critically engage with it in order to keep nurturing the ongoing dialogue in this blossoming field. Other research groups from related disciplines, including cognitive psychology and the social sciences, and specialists in neuroscience, geriatrics and gerontology, may also find certain aspects discussed in this book to be of interest. By addressing these three distinct audiences (lifelong learners, teachers and scholars), the book seeks to empower older adults and learners in general, support teachers in their instructional practices and contribute to a broader societal shift towards a more positive and inclusive view of ageing.

With all due humility, it is also my duty to acknowledge the limitations of this book. As I myself am not yet a learner in later adulthood, I sincerely hope that I have been able to surpass this perceived limitation and effectively incorporate the experiences and wisdom of those who possess the maturity and decades of experience to describe their lifelong journeys. I have endeavoured to fade into the background and allow their narratives to take centre stage in the most effective manner possible. Throughout the writing process, I have also strived to immerse myself in the perspectives of researchers, learners of all ages and teachers who, I hope, will engage with the stories on different levels, both personally and professionally. These stories are not just meant for scientific and academic analyses or discussion, but they also resonate with the human experience we all accumulate across our years of existence, learning and thriving. This blending of perspectives is reflected in the language and terminology I used, occasionally resembling the narrative style of a book, and at other times drawing from the realm of scientific writing. Accordingly, and while most chapters are suitable for a non-academic audience, I have chosen to indicate in both the book's introduction and at the beginning of more technical and conceptual chapters when the primary target audience is scholars.

Terminology Used

The terms second language acquisition, second language learning and foreign language learning are often used interchangeably, including in this work. However, I must give a word of caution as they do not denote the same underlying processes. FLL typically refers to acquiring a language that is not commonly spoken in the learner's immediate environment. L2 learning refers to acquiring a language used as a means of communication within a particular community or country. L2 also refers to any language learned after the first language (L1), which is typically the one acquired early in life and primarily used in daily interactions. Further note that, like other scholars before me (Krashen & Terrell, 1983; Mohr & Ferrara, 2024), I make no distinction between *learning* and *acquisition*, despite their different definitions. Acquisition is a natural process of knowledge development that occurs without conscious awareness of language mechanics, whereas learning is a deliberate process that emphasises the rules and structures of a language. It can be argued that the learners examined in this book can be seen as both FL and L2 users, which is technically correct. However, this characterisation does not fully capture the dynamic and evolving nature of their language proficiency and history.

The learners portrayed in this book have acquired and practiced multiple languages, which complicates the task of distinguishing clear boundaries between their L2 and their third language (L3), or even determining whether English is classified as their 'L2' or 'L3'. Moreover, at times, they no longer view English as a 'foreign' language; instead, it has become their primary means of communication, often replacing their L1 (which, in the three case studies of this book, is French). Consequently, discussing designations like L1, L2 or L3, or even labelling languages as *foreign*, becomes less relevant at this advanced stage of their language use and practice.

In the field of applied linguistics, the term additional language learning (ALL), which I will hereafter use, better reflects the users' 'lived language realities' (Mohr & Ferrara, 2024: 2) by providing a greater sense of inclusivity and accurately depicting the process of learning multiple languages in specific socialising contexts. ALL acknowledges the broader scope of foreign/L2 acquisition, the blurred boundaries of language designations in multilingual environments and, more generally, the significance of social context(s) in the language learning process. In the instances where I have retained the acronyms 'L2' and 'FLL', I aimed to preserve the terminology commonly used when referring to existing research and analysis. My intention was to maintain consistency and respect the conventions established by my colleagues in the field, ensuring that the usage aligns with established scholarly discourse.

Finally, while revising my word choice in this work, I also found myself caught in another trap related to nomenclature, confronted with terms such as 'seniors', 'elder', 'elderly' or 'the aged' which I had previously used in other research and publications, yet admittedly unaware that they could be considered biased or ageist (Friedman & Van Vleck, 2022). New guidelines[5] from the American Medical Association, the American Psychological Association and the Associated Press advocate for avoiding terms that may marginalise older adults. Instead, they encourage the use of more neutral expressions like 'older adults' or 'individuals in later life'. Although I believe the adjective 'older' can be somewhat ambiguous – prompting the question 'older than whom?' – I have chosen to maintain this guideline, assuming it refers to individuals aged 63 and over. My concern throughout was thus to use age-inclusive language and ensure those rules were applied.

How to Read This Book

The book consists of five distinct parts, each of which can be read independently and in any order without impacting overall understanding. The purpose of this structure is to allow readers to explore specific topics of interest by presenting clear themes and research lines at the beginning of each part. This ensures that readers can easily navigate and delve into the research areas that most intrigue them.

It is important to note, however, that while the structure of the book is designed to enhance the accessibility and readability of each individual section, it is also informed by a broader doctoral exploratory work (Darnault, 2023). Consequently, the book aims to not only present standalone sections but also emphasise a logical and dialogical framework. To fully grasp the central theme, cross-disciplinary connections and narrative-like progression of my research, I recommend following the order of the sections. This sequential approach will provide a more cohesive reading experience and enable readers to appreciate the overarching narrative and insights that emerged from a four-year-long investigation. The aim is to strike a balance between accessibility and coherence, ensuring that readers can engage with the content in a way that suits their interests, practices, timetables and preferences.

In accordance with this vision, the following introduction contextualises my research within a lifelong paradigm and provides key definitions on third-age and ALL motivation. The basic frame informing this book is long-term motivation in ALL, which indeed requires a systemic and multifaceted analysis. Accordingly, Parts 1 and 2 provide the theoretical landscapes of this book and aim to add to the complex-orientated literature on third-age SLA studies and L2 motivational dynamics from a lifelong and ecological perspective. Part 3 covers chapters on the flourishing

field of narrative studies in SLA and addresses specific methodological and ethical considerations, all part of the increasing need for research to enhance reflexive practices (Consoli & Ganassin, 2023). Part 4 then introduces the three real-life stories of Georges, Josette and Patricia, respectively, each followed by an individual discussion and narrative analysis. Part 5 subsequently offers an overall interpretation of the stories as a whole and engages in a broader discussion in light of the research's multitiered theoretical framework and within the wider academic literature covered in Parts 1 and 2. Finally, the book concludes by summarising findings, highlighting contributions and considering potential pathways for future investigation.

This research somewhat forms a *mise-en-abyme* of a complex system by taking a transdisciplinary approach, enhanced by my wish to associate psychological and SLA issues with the larger phenomena of ageing, well-being in later life, motivation and lifelong learning in an integrative and ecological manner. As Morin (2001: 3) once famously cautioned the research community, deploying a complex lens forces us to 'learn to navigate on a sea of uncertainties'. In hindsight, a complex and dynamic perspective on L2 lifelong motivation is applied throughout this book and pervades my choices and trade-offs, from the design of the overall study and literature discussion through to the data collection and analytical processes of the present research. By adopting a complex and dynamic perspective that offers parallel insights across research areas, I hope to highlight the permeable and shifting nature of boundaries from one field to another, in a more universal and ontological attempt to look at the human condition through a wide-angle 'fish-eye' complexity lens (Sampson & Pinner, 2021; Ushioda, 2021). I thus propose cross-disciplinary connections, locating third-age ALL experience in the wider spectrum of narrative and motivational studies.

'Every new beginning comes from some other beginning's end'. Roman philosopher Seneca unwittingly – yet quite convincingly – made a strong case for where I believe this monograph should humbly depart from: some other beginning's end. This over 2000-year-old statement also echoes the cyclic and dialogic nature of research and reminds us all – teachers, students and researchers at any stage of their careers, study, research endeavours – of our unending duty to constantly reassess scholarly work in light of emerging theories, new empirical findings and practical issues in real-life learning situations. It is my hope that the following chapters will not only provide a novel angle to researching third-age AL learners' lifelong motivation but also trigger cross-disciplinary discussions and collaborations and welcome additional perspectives. Above all, my sincere hope is that the stories shared in this book will serve as a personal inspiration for readers, encouraging them to persist in their learning endeavours and, like Georges, Josette and Patricia, create

personal lifelong strategies of their own to nourish and cultivate their motivational reservoir.

Notes

(1) See https://holstegelab.eu/.
(2) See https://uwo.ca/fhs/news/2023/04_13_roberts.html.
(3) See https://www.balab.nl.
(4) See https://www.variage.ch.
(5) This initiative has the backing of the American *Reframing Aging Initiative* (see https://www.reframingaging.org/). However, it has faced contrasting views from its British counterpart, the Centre for Ageing Better. The centre perceives terms like 'senior' or 'older' as less negative (see https://ageing-better.org.uk/sites/default/files/2021-07/Reframing-ageing-public-perceptions.pdf). Please note that discussions around this topic can vary significantly depending on the sources consulted, and the debate remains ongoing. To ensure that the guidelines are applied effectively, I have chosen to adopt a strict and limited approach in my use of terminology, as discussed in this preface.