What Do You Call Older People? Lesson Plan

Introduction

Terms we use to refer to older people often are used without much thought to the subtle but powerful differences in meanings. Like other word choices, there are no right or wrong answers, but the terms may be better or worse depending on the social context, audience and purpose.

Objectives

Students will:

- understand the importance of word connotations; and
- explain the connotations of words used to refer to older people.

Key Terms

connotation, denotation, elder, elderly, golden ager, older adult, senior citizen

Materials

Handout: "What Do You Call Older People?"

Procedures

1. Explain the difference between *denotation* (explicit or direct meaning) and *connotation* (suggested meaning). Give an example, such as *politician* and *statesman,* or *police officer* and *cop,* which carry similar denotations but different connotations.
2. Introduce the handout, which lists words used to refer to older people. Follow the directions on the handout.

3. Discuss what each term in the handout means to students and whether or not these meanings are favorable. Students will differ among themselves about the connotations of terms which refer to older people. They even may speak with some emotion about why they like or do not like a term. Reinforce the fact that persons may have differences of opinion. In such cases, ask those with opposing viewpoints if they are able to understand the reasoning of others.

4. While accepting students' expressions about the terms, the following points should be made.

a. Although the word *elderly* is commonly used, it often is associated with social service or health programs. It generally connotes a nameless, faceless population of poor, frail older people over 75. It can be used to elicit feelings of sympathy. *Elderly,* as a descriptive adjective such as *the elderly woman,* conveys different messages from

elderly as a noun, such as *the elderly.* The latter tends to place all older persons in a stereotyped group which some older adults would find offensive.

b. *Elder* suggests respect and wisdom, as in *respect your elders.* It is a term which is not widely used. It is more often associated with males than females. For some religious groups, the term carries a different connotation, referring to positions in churches.

c. *Senior citizen* generally suggests a younger-aged population. People typically think of senior discounts and groups of persons engaged in some activity. While some older people do not mind the term, others object to being called *senior citizens.*

d. *Senior* is a more relative term than *senior citizen.* We use it to refer to persons who have more years of experience, but who are not necessarily older in years, such as *seniors in high school* or *senior bank officers.* For some, it is preferred over *senior citizens, since it does not carry the group or discount connotation.*

e. Old man or old woman generally are viewed as derogatory terms. The word old is considered harsh, direct and negative. The terms might be used for emphasis in some literature. Most people think the term is unfavorable and one which should be avoided in written and verbal communication.

f. Golden ager usually brings mixed reviews. For some, the term connotes a carefree, happy, older person. For others, the term is a euphemism for a more serious time of life. It may suggest that older people are not to be taken seriously. The television program Golden Girls illustrates both points of view.

g. Of all the terms, older adult is the most neutral and the safest. Older is a relative expression, since everyone is older than someone else. The word adult demands respect, and connotes independence and responsibility. younger people want to be treated as adults--so do older people. For these reasons, older adult is the better choice for expository writing and speaking.

Extension Activities

To help students understand and apply the differences in word connotations for older people, ask them to write statements using different terms for older people*.*

Have students consider which terms for older adults they think the following persons would most likely use: movie star, politician, medical doctor, news reporter, political cartoonist, nursing home employee. For example, a politician seeking public office might say, "The good citizens of this state cannot neglect the needs of its elderly." Then have students write sentences using terms for older adults which the following persons might use: (1) a retail advertiser promoting a new line of clothing, (2) a restaurant manager offering discounts for young and old people, (3) a bank president whose bank offers financial advice for older people, (4) a real estate agent promoting a retirement condominium, and (5) an Asian college professor discussing the role of age groups in Chinese culture. Discuss which sentences are the most and least condescending.

Relate the exercise to other applications of word choice, such as girl, gal, woman, black, Afro-American, Negro, Hispanic, Latino, Chicano, homosexual, gay, children, kids, and young people.

Emphasize the importance of addressing people by name, whenever possible. Discuss the appropriateness or inappropriateness of calling older people by their first names. In some cultures and geographic areas, addressing an older person by anything other than Mr., Mrs. or Miss is taboo. In others, young people may address older people whom they know well

by their first names without leaving the impression of arrogance or disrespect. However, the safer personal address is the formal one.

What Do You Call Older People?

Directions: Column 1 lists words used to refer to older people. In column 2, write brief notes on what comes to your mind with each word. For example, how many persons do you see? About how old are they? What are they doing? In column 3, indicate with a check mark the extent to which you think each term is favorable or unfavorable.

Term	Description of Term	Very Favorable	Favorable	Luke-Warm	Unfavorable	Very Unfavorable
Elderly						
Elder						
Senior Citizen						
Senior						
Old Man/ Old Woman						
Golden Ager						
Older Adult						