

Jizzakh State Pedagogical Institute



**Journal of Preschool
Education**

*The faculty of pre-school
education*

The role of age in second language acquisition.

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Abstract: Whether starting learning foreign languages in the early age or not is an argumentative topic among most pedagogics and researchers. It is mostly believed that age is significant factor in learning foreign languages. While, *others argue and advocate for imposing the learners to foreign languages a bit later is preferable. Studies also have shown that other factors play significant roles in this, varying from learning languages in natural way and by the help of instructor to settings in which language is learnt and the amount of time spent. So far, there has not been a definite finding suggesting the certain age or the right factors to start learning a foreign language which has resulted in a discussion on this matter. This paper intends to discuss how much age factor is important in learning foreign languages.*

Key words: **critical period hypothesis**, language behavior, second language acquisition, bilingual learners, accent-free pronunciation, **semi-lingualism**.

According to Lenneberg's **critical period hypothesis** (1967) there is a **biologically determined period of life** within which one can learn the language more easily. He claims that beyond this time a language is more difficult to acquire. He suggests that **second language acquisition** can only happen during the critical period (age 2 to puberty). The critical period hypothesis is closely connected with **neurophysiological mechanisms** suggesting that in **the process of learning foreign language** the early and the late acquired languages are represented in spatially separated parts of the brain (Broca's area). In **early bilinguals**, however, a similar activation in Broca's area takes place for both languages. It means that in the younger age the brain. This loss of the brain's plasticity explains why adults may need more time and effort compared to children in second language learning.

Second Language Acquisition (SLA) has received its attention from all parties involved in the educational field since the 1960s resulting in the massive amount of studies on the theoretical implications of observed language behavior. Furthermore, there are numbers of conferences and journals devoted to the studies of SLA with different perspectives and foci. Currently, the field of SLA is still within the scope of interest of researchers and there are enormous opportunities

and depth in terms of the variety of topics yet under investigations (Hulin & Xu, 2014).

The findings of investigations clearly tell us all language learners can not acquire the language in the same level. Moreover, the same pattern is not followed by the learners in their learning process. Learners are different from each other with regard of their behavior in educational situations. This gives illustrations about the possible result that may come out, though instruction may be the same and the aims are set ahead. Another matter is individual differences. There have been three categories according to Ellis (1994). It is learners' beliefs that are shown first concerning the learning of a language, such as their ability or way of learning. The second one includes the affective factors which play a positive or negative role towards the process of learning; a clear example of these is anxiety. Set number three gathers the general factors that complete the whole image of the individual differences affecting SLA, and age is one of them. It is worth to mention that these factors are listed separately for the purpose of studying, but they form an interrelated network where each factor affects or being affected by other factors. Consequently, the final acquisition is a reasonable result of understanding how these factors work together. Hence, age does not stand alone though it has a distinctive role to play. For more clarification, its relations to other factors will be a part of our interest hereafter.

First, it was assumed that children acquire their first language following similar developmental stages. These stages were found different of which they pass when they learn their L2. However, it was noted that children acquire the grammatical structures in a similar sequence (Mitchell and Myles, 2004). Children of different languages tended to repeat the same mistakes made by other children learning their second languages.

Practical implications of the age effect on the L2 have been considered in depth by the educationalists. They have to set up their systems according to the traits that each age group has. Based on the conclusion of Ellis (1994), that direct or formal learning environments do not give young children the chance to acquire the language, we assume that forming natural situations in which young learners are exposed to the language may result in better acquisition. Several methodologists have shown that young children learn the language in a way different from adults. Harmer (2001: 38) refers to a number of traits that characterize each group.

The advantages of early second language acquisition

In early childhood, becoming bilingual is often an unconscious event, as natural as learning to walk or ride a bicycle. But why? According scientific surveys, language aspects such as pronunciation and intonation can be acquired easier during childhood, due to neuromuscular mechanisms which are only active until to the age of 12. Another possible explanation of children's accent-free pronunciation is their increased capability for imitation. This capability fades away significantly after puberty. Other factors that we should take into consideration are children's flexibility, spontaneity and tolerance to new experiences. Kids are more willing to communicate with people than adults, they are curious and they are not afraid of making mistakes. They handle difficulties (such as missing vocabulary) very easily by using creative methods to communicate, such as non-verbal means of communication and use of onomatopoeic words. Also the idea of a foreign civilization is not formed in their minds yet. Only at the age of 8 does it become clear to them that there are ethnic and cultural differences. Last but not least, aspects such as time, greater learning and memory capacity are in any case advantages in early language learning. On the other hand there are surveys which point out the risk of semi-lingualism and advise parents to organise language planning carefully.

The advantages of late second language acquisition

First of all it is important to clarify that by late second language learning we mean learning a language after puberty. Linguists, psychologists and pedagogues have been struggling for years to answer the following question: is it possible to reach native-like proficiency when learning a language after puberty? In order to give an answer we have to consider the following factors: First of all, adults (meaning people after puberty) have an important advantage: cognitive maturity and their experience of the general language system. Through their knowledge of their mother tongues, as well as other foreign languages, not only can they achieve more advantageous learning conditions than children, but they can also more easily acquire grammatical rules and syntactic phenomena. According to Klein Dimroth (see references), language learning is an accumulative process that allows us to build on already existing knowledge. Children cannot acquire complex morphological and grammatical phenomena so easily.

It would be useful to point out that sometimes incorrect pronunciation is not a matter of capability but of good will. According to different surveys, adults do not feel like themselves when they speak a foreign language and they consider pronunciation an ethno-linguistic identity-marker. A positive or negative attitude towards a foreign language should not be underestimated. Another factor to consider is the adults' motivation to learn a foreign language. When an adult learns a foreign language there is always a reason behind it: education, social prestige, profession or social integration. The latter is considered a very strong one, especially in the case of immigrants.

During the last decades the topic of age factor has been focused on to decide whether to continue teaching the L2 in primary schools for children or to embrace a new approach to start teaching it to adults. In Egypt and many other countries, teaching English as a second language starts from the very early years due to its increasing importance, even in countries where English is not their first language. Marinova-Todd, Marshall and Snow (2000) suggest that if CPH is proved to be true, then L2 should be introduced earlier, and this seems to be the belief in Egypt. This should not lead to adult learning neglect; on the contrary, methodologists should continue thinking about providing enhanced techniques and course books which suit the learners' needs and natures.

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