

The effect of Age Toward Learning a Second Language

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Abstract

Age has long been perceived as a pivotal factor influencing proficiency in acquiring a second or foreign language. The disparity between child and adult second language (L2) learning is widely acknowledged, with children often deemed more adept and rapid learners compared to adults. The prevailing notion suggests that adults cannot attain native-like fluency in a second language, indicating a potential limitation in adult L2 acquisition. Furthermore, there is a notion of a critical period during which language acquisition is most effective and success in second language learning is attainable. Nevertheless, the debate surrounding this topic has persisted among language researchers for numerous years. This article endeavors to delve into this contentious issue, aiming to elucidate whether the success of second language learning is indeed constrained by age. Through a systematic review methodology within a descriptive qualitative framework, this study examines previous research to discern patterns, insights, and contradictions in the literature regarding the impact of age on second language acquisition. By critically evaluating existing findings, this research aims to contribute to a deeper understanding of the complex relationship between age and proficiency in learning a second language.

Keywords: Age effect; L2 learning; Foreign language; Critical period

INTRODUCTION

The assumption regarding the relationship between a learner's age and his or her potential for success in second language learning has become a great discussion between some researchers in second language acquisition. Age, in some studies, has been considered as a major factor in determining the successful second or foreign language learning (Getie, 2020; Dewaele & Dewaele, 2020; Abdullaev, 2021; Korkmaz & Öz, 2021). It is believed that there is a difference between child second language learning and adult second language learning. Children are generally considered more competent and faster than adult in learning foreign language (Irkinovich, 2021). On the other hand it is said that adults are not able to master a second language like native speaker. It is also believed that there is a critical period when learner can learn language effectively easy and can meet the degree of success in second language learning. However, some researchers argue that adults are better than children in L2 learning. Children only better particularly in pronunciation while adults are better in morphology, syntax and vocabulary. A recent study says that there is a misconception about age and second language learning. Actually, there is no critical period in SLA and also there is insufficient

evidence to accept the claim that mastery of second language is determined by maturational factors

The purpose of this paper is to explore these controversial issues between language researchers in order to get an answer whether young learners are better in learning second language than adults. The answer would be important for both theoretical and practical reasons in relation to the teaching and learning a second language. The discussion would be based on some studies which have been conducted before the last twenty years. Some findings conducted before the last twenty years would be presented in this discussion as the general point of view as well as the basic of consideration of the recent findings.

Method

The research employed a systematic review methodology within a descriptive qualitative framework to investigate "The effect of age on learning a second language." Data for the study were obtained from prior research studies relevant to the topic. Inclusion and exclusion criteria were rigorously applied to select studies meeting the research objectives. Through systematic review, the study synthesized findings from diverse sources to gain comprehensive insights into the relationship between age and second language acquisition. This approach facilitated a thorough examination of existing literature, allowing for a nuanced understanding of how age impacts various aspects of second language learning.

RESULTS AND DISCUSSION

Initially, that is Lenneberg (1967) who popularized that there is a critical period for language learning. Lenneberg, in relation to the Critical Period hypothesis suggested that there is a time in human development when the brain is relatively easy to success in first language learning, that is, roughly between ages two and puberty. Before the age two, language learning is impossible due to lack of maturation of the brain, whereas lateralization of the language function to the left hemisphere is complete by the time of puberty resulting in the loss of cerebral plasticity needed for natural language learning (Lenneberg 1967: 175). It is assumed that after the critical period, it is possible to learn a second language, yet it becomes more difficult and is less effective. Later research carried out by Krashen (1973) has challenged Lenneberg's characterization (as cited in Marinova-Tod et. al., 2000). He argued that lateralization is complete by the age of 5. Since the time of Lenneberg's book, a number of studies have examined to answer the question of age-related effects on the learning of a second language (e.g. Patkowsky, 1980, Johnson and Newport 1989, Marinova-Todd et al., 2000, Birdsong, 1999, etc.).

Previous research that pointed about the relationship between age of acquisition and second language development was Lightbown and Spada (2001), they have focused mostly on learners' phonological and pronunciation achievement. In general, these studies have made conclusion that only young learners, not adults, can attain native-like pronunciation in the second language. What about syntax? A study carried out by Patkowsky (1980) for example, showed that there is a difference between learners who began to learn English before

puberty and those who began learning English later. He found that only those who had begun before the age of 15 could ever achieve native-like mastery of the spoken language. Regarding grammatical structure, a study conducted by Johnson and Newport (1989) for instance, indicated that there are critical period effects in second language learning. By giving grammatical judgment test on wide variety of English grammar to 46 Chinese and Korean speakers who had lived in America and begun to learn English at different ages, they found that the levels of ultimate L2 attainment are better for those who begin before the age of 15.

However, some evidence reveals that adults actually have some cognitive and affective advantages over children, especially when language is learned in classroom situations with much emphasis on formal correctness and/or on academic matters. Besides adults also possess a greater capacity to store memories and to reason analytically as well as to develop a strong instrumental motivation that can lead to very effective learning of certain aspect of language. This general picture provides a consideration for some researchers to conduct further studies concerning the agreement of Critical Period Hypothesis in L2 learning in relation to the results of the studies reported. Surprisingly, from some studies that had been conducted, the evidence have indicated that adolescence and adults are faster and better learners than children do, particularly in the areas of morphology, Syntax and vocabulary (e.g. Snow and Hoefnagel-Hohle, 1978, Harley, 1986). Snow and Hoefnagel-Hohle (1978) in this case, had studied the progress of a group of English speakers included children, adolescents, adults who were learning Dutch as a second language in Holland. From the results obtained, it had provided direct evidence for them to conclude that there is no critical period for L2 learning. This means that the evidence on age effect in relation to second language learning in some research is contradictory.

A number of studies have still continued in order to answer the existence of critical period in L2 learning (Birdsong, 1999). The studies conducted have tended to show such as, the relationship between early age of entry into the host country and the successful acquisition of its language (e.g. Slavoff and Johnson, 1996, Bongaerts, 1999, DeKeyser, 2000), the relationship between critical period and level of ultimate attainment in phonology and syntax (Moyer 1999, Bongaerts, 1999, Fledge 1999, Bialystok 1999), the relationship between age and cognitive constrain (Webber-Fox and Neville, 1999, Eubank and Gregg, 1999, Bialystok 1999), etc. Some studies replicated the findings of any previous researchers like Patkowski (1980), Johnson and Newport (1989). Snow and Hoefnagel-Hohle (1978), etc. However, such studies still cannot give an apparent answer to the question since they seemed to be controversy and confusing. The answers were obvious between for and against the existence of critical period. Bongaerts (1999) for example, showed in his experiment that native speakers of Dutch who began learning L2 in late adolescence were able to attain native-like pronunciation in English and French. This really contradicts Patkowski's previous finding, that adult were not able to master a second language like native speaker While Dekeyser (2000) on the other hand, found very much similar with the experiment obtained by Johnson and Newport (1989) who suggested that there really is critical period in L2 acquisition.

From the discussion above, it is clearly seen that the concept of age related effect in second language learning is still much debated. According to Singleton (1989: 4), one reason for the continuing debate about early second language instruction is the controversy which surround the idea of a critical period for language development. However, Bialystok (1997) who against the existence of critical period in second language learning eventually said that there is insufficient evidence to accept the claim that mastery of the second language is determined wholly, or even primarily, by maturational factors. She found that the correspondence between language structure in the first and second language is the most important factor affecting acquisition. She added that the age at which the second language acquisition begins is not a significant factor in the study, but the length of residence, indicating the amount of time spent speaking in second language, is significant in the second language learning.

Moreover, Marinova-Todd, Bradford and Snow (2000) attempted to clarify the misconception of age examined in many research in second language learning. By analyzing some relevant literature concerning age and critical period research, they found that there are 3 misconceptions about age and critical period in second language learning:

1. A misinterpretation of the ultimate attainment of children in a second language as proof that they learn quickly and easily.
2. A misattribution of conclusion about language proficiency to facts about the brain.
3. A metaphase on unsuccessful adult learners and ignoring the older learners who achieve native-like second language proficiency (Marinova-Todd et al., 2000).

In terms of age difference in learning a language according to them, it is not the major reason in order to achieve a level of ultimate attainment in a second language. But an age difference influence differences in the situation of learning rather than capacity to learn. This means that the success in second language learning is not determined by age and any critical period but any other factors such as; their high degree of motivation to learn a language, their exposure to a target language environment, and their commitment to learn consciously the grammatical language structure.

CONCLUSION

The role of age in second language learning has become a matter of controversy between second language researchers. The first position argues that only children, not adults, can attain native-like pronunciation in the L2. The second finds that adults are better particularly in morphology, syntax and vocabulary. The third position holds that the data and evidence are insufficient and ambiguous. However, since there is no certainty concerning age effects on learning a second language, it is necessary for second language teachers to consider that a learning situation in combination with age which is related to affective and cognitive factors,

rather than the age alone, could account for some success variation between children and adults in second language learning.

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