

Review

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Review

Age Factor in Second Language Acquisition and Effective Instructional Methods for K-12 Learners in Vietnam

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Abstract: Age is an influential factor in the Second Language Acquisition (SLA). The debate on whether young learners are more successful than older learners has been going on for more than half of a century, starting from the Critical Period Hypothesis, which is based on brain structure. This study examines a range of studies revolving around the Critical Period Hypothesis in the past several decades to analyze the common SLA belief 'Younger learners are more skillful than older learners in acquiring second language.' The study disagrees that all younger learners are more advantageous than older learners in all areas of SLA. In fact, learners from different age categories have unique advantages and disadvantages in SLA. Moreover, the study approves a more holistic perspective on a wider range of non-biological factors that impact the success of SLA. At the end, the study puts forward a diversity of instructional methods that suit children and adolescents specifically in Vietnamese English Education context.

Keywords: SLA; Critical Period Hypothesis; age; children; adolescents; young learners; older learners

Introduction

No adults could learn languages as effectively and spontaneously as children in their first few years (Ramirez & Kuhl, 2017). Studies show that the brain of infants is excellent at learning two languages (Garcia-Sierra et al., 2011; Petitto et al., 2012; Costa & Sebastián-Gallés, 2014; Ramirez et al., 2017), and that the best possible time to learn languages is infancy and early childhood (Johnson and Newport, 1989). While children can learn languages efficiently, adolescents and adults face great constraints and difficulties in acquiring a new language. (Ellis, 1986; Scovel, 1988; Singleton and Ryan, 2004). According to the above linguists, young learners are believed to be more superior than older learners in picking up a new language. However, there has been a wealth of research and study standing on the opposite side of the above belief. Ekstrand (1976) stated that the ability to acquire L2 'improves with age'. In Harley's research (1986), older learners perform a faster acquisition rate. These opponent linguists argue that older learners could acquire L2 more efficiently.

This study discusses several questions arose from this long-standing debate:

- (1) Is it true that young learners can acquire language better than older learners?
- (2) What are determining non-biological factors that need to be considered?
- (3) Based on the understanding of learners, what are suitable instructional methods for children and adolescents in Vietnam?

Firstly, this essay will present the conflicting theoretical discussion on the Critical Period Hypothesis. Secondly, the essay will adopt a holistic approach to examine a wider range of factors that influence the SLA process to draw a conclusion on the common assumption 'The younger the better.' Finally, based on the presented theory and my practical teaching experience as an English as a Foreign Language (EFL) teacher in Vietnam, I will propose a range of instructional methods that facilitate the language learning process of children and adolescents in Vietnam.

Literature Review of Age Factor in Second Language Acquisition Studies

1.1. The Critical Period Hypothesis

The Critical Period Hypothesis was first introduced by Penfield and Roberts (1959) and popularized by Lenneberg (1967). The hypothesis, which is based on the neurological changes in the brain structure, claims that early years of childhood is an ideal time to learn first and second languages. After this time window, language acquisition becomes more difficult and requires more effort. It is reasoned that the plasticity in the cortex gives children advantages in acquiring new languages. Therefore, children demonstrate better performance in pronunciation than adults do (Zhang, 2009; Munoz, 2010). Young learners can achieve a native accent if they are exposed to the language in their early age (Singleton and Ryan, 2004). Long (1990) agrees with Scovel (1988, 2000) that a native-like accent cannot be acquired beyond age of 12. Meanwhile, older learners are likely to develop a foreign accent because of their maturational constraints. Lenneberg (1967) proposed that this critical period starts at 2 years old and ends at puberty (13 years old) because of the lateralization process - when there is a clear cut between the two hemispheres and that language is no longer present in both hemispheres but only in the left one. However, Lamendella (1977) preferred to call this 'sensitive period' because people can still learn languages after this period, even though, with declining efficiency. Moreover, researchers also found evidence of different CP for different aspects of L2 acquisition such as phonetics, phonology, morphosyntax and semantics (Oyama, 1976; Flege, Munro & MacKay, 1995; Johnson & Newport, 1989; Granena & Long, 2012).

According to these arguments, children are superior in acquiring second language than adolescents and adults in many aspects thanks to neuroplasticity.

Is it true that 'The Younger, the Better'?

Along with supporting research and studies for CPH, there is an equivalent number of contradicting ones. Birdsong (1999) was able to offer a 'balance of competing view' by synthesizing research by both proponents and opponents of CPH. McLaughlin (1992) asserted that children experience difficulties in acquiring L2 too because they have not sufficiently developed their cognitive abilities and do not have enough life experience. As a result, their learning process is more complicated and time-consuming. Additionally, study of Nikolov and Djigunovic (2006) revealed that not all children are ready for learning languages at 6 years old because of their lack of specific cognitive abilities and affective stability. Regarding research on the relationship between Age of Acquisition (AoA) and Ultimate Attainment (UA), AoA is revealed to be a strong predictive indicator of UA across dozens of studies (Birdsong, 2005; DeKeyser and Larson-Hall, 2005). This means that the earlier the learners immerse in the target language speaking environment, the more L2 proficient they will be. However, when the data analysis method is adjusted, the yielded results are inconsistent, which produces a clouded picture of early immersion significance to language learning outcome.

While researchers and linguists have not come to a conclusive and definitive answer to whether younger learners are more successful than older learners in SLA, this essay agrees with Shakuori and Saligheh (2012) that 'we must avoid the danger of creating a dichotomy between the younger-the better and the older-the better' (p. 3). I put forth the idea that learners of each age category have unique advantages and disadvantages. Herschensohn (2007) presented evidence that older learners could use their first language learning strategies to perform better in grammar. Moreover, Dunkel (1991) revealed that adult learners outperformed young children in primary schools in comprehension tests thanks to their fully developed cognitive capabilities. Zhang (2009) showed that adults possess clear motivation, experience, both short-term and long-term memories, metalinguistic awareness and common sense. Therefore, their performance in writing and reading skills are superior to children and adolescents. However, their pronunciation and communication might be hindered by their L1 interference. Regarding adolescents, some researchers have claimed that they are the best performers in language learning. Zhang (2009) revealed that they are fast learners and outperform children and adults in syntax and listening skills. Their flexibility and mature development process facilitate learning. Their tendency to disruptions and egocentrism states are their disadvantages. When it comes to children, research consistently found that they are adept at attaining native-like pronunciation, accent (Herschensohn, 2007; Dunkel, 1991) and great oral proficiency (Harley, 1986).

Non-Biological Factors That Influence Second Language Acquisition

Beside age-related factors, there is a vast number of factors which can influence SLA or UA, including endogenous and exogenous factors, or in other words, internal and external ones (Birdsong, 1999). Andrew (2017) revealed the most influential internal factors including attitude, cognition, personality (introversion or extroversion), motivation (instrumental and integrative), L1 proficiency and external factors including classroom instruction, curriculum, materials, culture, socioeconomic status, access to communication with native speakers. Sun (2019) referred to political, economic, cultural, and technological development as external factors. Significantly, Curtain and Dahlberg (2010) stated that the intensity of exposure to the target language, which is the time and amount of language that learners are exposed to, is critical to the future level of L2 proficiency. To sum up, a combination of cognitive, psychological, affective, instructional and social factors greatly affects the SLA of learners at all ages.

1. Instructional method for children (from birth to puberty) and adolescents (from puberty to 19 years old)

1.1. Children

Firstly, linguists claim that children acquire languages intuitively and subconsciously (Ozfidan & Burlbaw, 2019). Therefore, they benefit the most from a natural learning environment that mimic their daily playful environment. Moreover, most teachers attest them as energetic, spontaneous, and easily distracted. Learning activities must greatly spark their curiosity, interest, and imagination to be able to catch and maintain their attention. Hands-on activities, stories, games, colorful and creative visuals are recommended to teach young learners. Secondly, since students are known to be excellent at pronunciation and they are likely to learn best in a natural setting with implicit instructions (Munoz, 2010), a classroom that cultivates a natural target language speaking environment (e.g. similar to an English/Spanish speaking country) is highly effective in teaching young learners. Such classroom will maximize the intensity of exposure for learners and encourage them to produce speech and develop their pronunciation features. As a final note, as their cognitive abilities have not fully developed, children usually do not have instrumental (e.g. have a job, earn a degree, etc.) or integrative motivation (e.g. to connect with a target community), it is important for teachers to constantly motivate children by engaging activities and positive praise.

1.1. Adolescents

Teenagers are different from children mainly because of their cognitive maturity. By virtue of cognition, they benefit from formal settings with explicit instructions and measurement tests (Munoz, 2010). Nikolov and Djigunovic (2006) stated that teenagers can intentionally learn deductive grammar with clear explanations and examples for each grammatical rule. They now start to have instrumental and integrative motivation. They are willing to invest in language learning if they are aware of its importance for their future. Therefore, teachers are recommended to acknowledge their needs and design curriculum and lesson plans that meet those needs. Moreover, while children are unaware of mistakes, adolescents start to feel frustrated when they make any errors in speaking or writing. Teachers need to be understanding not to point out personal errors but rather correct them in general with the name of the students being anonymous. Finally, the egocentrism of teenagers can be a disadvantage but can also be an advantage if teachers put it into good use. Adolescents are particularly engaged in lessons if they are tailored to their interests. For example, most adolescents are more interested in topic if teachers can relate it to their favorite K-pop stars, cartoon characters or online games. To sum up, it is important for L2 teachers to understand the psychology, the needs of adolescents to design suitable and effective lessons.

Application in English Language Education in Vietnam

This essay focuses on English Language Education because English is the most popular foreign language in Vietnam that the government has advocated and invested substantially ever since 'Doi Moi' (Renewal in 1986). English learners in Vietnam are benefited from the political and economic

factors created by the government. In 2008, the Ministry of Education and Training (MOET) in Vietnam initiated a 12-year project called the National Foreign Language 2020 Project (NFL 2020) with an ambitious goal that 'By 2020, most young Vietnamese graduates of professional secondary schools, colleges and universities will have a good command of foreign (English) language.' (Vietnamese Government, 2008). The government allocated a substantial budget of approximately \$400 million to implement the project. Moreover, the Opening policy creates job opportunities in multinational corporations where English is a primary communication language. The instrumental motivation is obvious. Therefore, it has been a persistent trend to learn English at an early age in Vietnam. The government also lowered the Age of Onset (AO) from 12 to 8 years old in public schools. These actions from the government positively affect the learners' attitude. However, despite substantial investment and decisive actions, the project NFL2020 did not accomplish its objectives. MOET's leader publicly admitted the project's failure in 2016 'Let me get it straight: The project has failed to meet its target.' (Luong, 2016). According to a survey, most Vietnamese high school leavers cannot communicate in English for survival needs after 9-years of formal language education (Le, 2015). Moreover, Vietnam is ranked in the Low English Proficiency category in 2021 (EF EPI, 2021). According to research, one of the main reasons is the ineffective practice of the Communicative Language Teaching method, which aims to put learners in the central position and help them communicate in the target language. Based on section 3, teaching methods for young learners and adolescents are significantly different and unique. However, most public school teachers in Vietnam are not well equipped with these methods. Therefore, they adopt teacher-centered approach and passive instructions and lecturing in the classrooms for both types of learners. For instance, young children in elementary schools and adolescents in secondary schools are often required to sit still, read textbooks and do grammar exercises throughout the lessons. There is rarely an activity that sparks their interest, curiosity or tailor to their needs or interests. Moreover, while linguists suggest that the optimal learning environment should simulate an English-speaking country, the primary instruction language in English courses is Vietnamese. Therefore, despite the early AO, the intensity of exposure to English is too low for children and adolescents to unlock their linguistic potentials.

Cultural difference is another considerable challenge. 'CLT principles such as 'calling for learner involvement, allowing learners' choice, changing teachers' and students' roles, and breaking down hierarchic barriers in the classroom' (Larsen-Freeman, 2000, P.66) challenge basic Vietnamese socio-cultural and educational values' (Nguyen, 2016, p.2). It is a widespread practice that teachers are considered superior while students are perceived as inferior in the classroom. I would argue that further preparation for pedagogical skills, mindset shift and cultural integration with the Western world is essential for an improvement in SLA outcome of children and adolescents.

Conclusions

The myth about the CPH has not had the final answer from the researchers and linguists. Whether young learners are innate to learn languages better than older learners is still a long-standing debate. In fact, there is only 14 out of 30 studies in the past 30 years support the CPH (Marinova-Todd, Marshall, and Snow, 2000). Therefore, an early start of learning second language is not a convincing predictive indicator for ultimate proficiency level. This essay disapproves the dichotomy of 'The younger – the better' or 'The older – the better' but rather advocates the acknowledgement of advantages and disadvantages of learners in every age category. Moreover, a holistic view on a number of factors that affect proficiency level are promoted in this essay. Next, based on the solid theoretical standing and research findings, I suggest unique teaching methods that are suitable and effective for children and adolescents. Finally, I argue that the Vietnamese government should prioritize quality over quantity in their investment by focusing resources on improving the practice of teaching English in elementary and secondary schools.

While researchers and linguists have spent a tremendous effort and energy into the analysis of age factors alone on SLA, there is still limited number of research on the effects of a combination of internal and external factors on SLA. The suggested direction for future research is the

interconnection of plethora of variables to the UA of learners in various age groups in different scenarios (in the inner-circle and outer-circle countries).

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