

# AGE AND ITS INFLUENCE ON SECOND LANGUAGE ACQUISITION

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## ABSTRACT

*The purpose of this paper is to point out some of the major psychological, social and linguistic theories which have governed the field of Second Language Acquisition. The paper also highlights the fact that the perspectives on child and adult SLA have been changing along with these theories. Whether speaking of Second Language Acquisition or Native Language Acquisition, there are always several variables to be taken into consideration and one of them is age. The interpretation of this variable is very complex, as age does not only refer to a person's biological, or neurological maturity, but to his/her cognitive change and social development as well.*

**KEYWORDS:** *language acquisition, age, influence, motivation*

## 1. Introduction

According to dictionaries, second language acquisition, or SLA, is a long process of learning foreign languages, which includes several stages [1]. Is it a frustrating or illusory experience for an adult to want to learn a second language, once he has passed this critical period of childhood where the acquisition of a new language seems so easy? There is general belief that children and young people are better language learners than adults, based on the fact that their brains have a natural ability to absorb new information as part of their developmental growth. The concept of “better learner” is, however, quite

controversial among both linguists and psychologists. There are voices who claim that children's achievements are also due to social pressure and environment, such as school, parents, or friends that constitute motivating factors for their desire to do better.

On the other hand, adults may be poorer learners, but they have many skills that allow compensating the decline in the ability of the brain to acquire new information. They are able to better organize their learning strategies and can build on experiences, skills and knowledge already acquired. They also have targets and personal or professional interests that

increase their motivation for further learning.

The age issue in the acquisition of a second language continues to stimulate interest and provoke lively debates, both on a theoretical level and in terms of its practical applications. From the theoretical point of view, the idea of biological constraints relating to the acquisition of the language made researchers think of a 'bio-specific programming specific to its development. On the practical level, the disparities between early learning and those of adolescents and adults are constantly evoked when it comes to decide on the most appropriate time to begin the second language to school teaching.

## 2. Theories Concerning Second Language Acquisition

The age of second language (L2) acquisition is a factor that has raised a lot of interest and controversy. This phenomenon is called the "critical period" [2] or "time sensitive" [3] According to Lenneberg, the critical period for language acquisition begins around the age of two. [4] Research published prior to the mid-1990s claimed that people learning a second language after puberty still retain a foreign accent, while those who acquired it before puberty did not. Scovel suggests that if a second language learning begins after the age of 12 years, learners can never "pass themselves off as native speakers phonologically" [5]. Long agrees, but goes further by conditioning the acquisition of a native competence in morphology and syntax to exposure to the second before the age of 15 [6]. These assertions are contradicted by empirical studies on older beginners who have reached very high in second language levels of competence.

But the idea that younger beginners would achieve in the long run higher levels of language proficiency than late beginners is valid only as a general rule. Researchers nowadays disagree with this theory. The

controversy comes as previous research focused on people having acquired their second language in a classroom situation, so they were exposed to this language for a very limited number of hours. This is not the case for learning in a natural environment, where the amount of "input" is more significant [7]. It is not uncommon to find immigrants who have no trace of foreign accent. Of course, the quality of education and students' level of motivation also vary greatly.

Therefore, many studies reveal that adolescents and adults seem to often be able to reach levels of second language competence comparable to native speakers. In addition, early bilingualism research indicates that the age of the first access to the second language is only one of the factors reflecting the ultimate jurisdiction. Several studies challenge the existence of a point of rupture, contained in the notion of "critical period". Recent interpretations of empirical studies proposed by many researchers such as E. Bialystok, K. Hakuta, J. Flege, and others, second language acquisition is a process that continues throughout life.

As a conclusion of what has been pointed out so far, the decline of the ability to learn a second language, which seems to be correlated with age, varies greatly depending on the individual, and appears to be continuous and linear.

## 3. Educational Aspects

When we decide to learn a new language, we take an important commitment: to study and to improve ourselves continuously. For adults this is a challenge they are aware of, but is it the same thing for children? Why a mother and her 10-year-old daughter, for example, would not be able to attend a level A1 course together? They would be both at the same level, so why not study on the same material? Why are texts in an A1 textbook for children shorter than one for teenagers?

Why is an A1 manual for teenagers easier than the one for adults? There are notable differences in terms of foreign language learning before children and adults.

First of all, it is important to mention the distinction between *rate of acquisition* and *eventual* or *ultimate attainment* of an individual having reached his maximum level of competence in the second or foreign language, introduced for the first time by Krashen, Long and Scarcel [8] in order to explain the divergent results encountered in various studies concerning the influence of age on second language acquisition. According to these authors, studies show that during the early stages of learning, adults and older children are faster second language learners than younger children, although the latter generally reach a higher competitive level in the long term.

According to James Flege, “*adults might become more easily discouraged regarding their second language progress than children because the «tolerance region» for adults’ production of sounds is narrower than for children’s, because adults are more able than children to note their own divergences from second language phonetic norms, or both*” [9]. Indeed, adults are often terrorized not to make mistakes. Therefore, it seems important for them to be explained that error is normal even for native speakers and that they need practice so that to reduce the error rate.

Adults are also more motivated. According to Janet Enever, for example, “*as the learning task becomes harder, some children lose interest, become more anxious, or are influenced increasingly by peer and societal pressure to perceive foreign language learning as unimportant and not enjoyable*” [10]. As students grow older, they become more aware of the importance of the second language for their life and career.

One last point that seems important to stress in this panorama of studies that have investigated the language learning in

relation to the age of the learners concerns the differences in terms of teaching strategies and number of hours allowed. Here are a few suggestions that can help the second language teacher with learners of any age:

- avoid using the first language with beginners;
- not force anyone to talk;
- avoid stress during the memorisation phase;
- not remove the tension during the communicative phase;
- use live and interesting themes for learners;
- integrate cultural components;
- promote contacts with second language native speakers;
- correct mistakes discreetly.

#### 4. Some Implications for the Classroom

Vivian Cook argued for some important implications that knowledge of the first language and second language acquisition can have on classroom instruction [11]. The area of interlanguage circumscribed by Selinker as a system of its own is not far from a person’s first language own system (sometimes called protolanguage). The difference is that the interlanguage will never reach a complete native-like mastery, but some elements will “fossilize” at an intermediate stage. Fossilization is also age-dependent, as older second language learners are more likely to fossilize than younger ones.

From the teaching point of view these observations are important, so that second language learner’s system is not to be seen anymore as some fragment of the native one, but as a linguistic system in its own right and the teaching of the language can distance itself from accumulative learning, as language acquisition is not an additive process but a re-structuring one.

Language learning is also a multi-faced process and not a simple matter of

learning vocabulary and syntax. As a result, the tendency today is for many courses (emergence of English for Specific Purposes) to move towards the communicative functions drawn from the first language needs and towards the second language learner's expectations of the functions he/she may need the second language for. It should be used for organizational and social functions both by the teacher and by the student and not just for pedagogical functions, consequently ensuring "natural discourse".

Out of the results of the studies on the order of acquisition and those focusing on cognition and language learning/ acquisition, some essential conclusions can be drawn with equally important applications to the class. Second language learners will learn easier than first language learners some elements of language depending on cognition. This can be reflected in the classroom in the grading and sequencing of language in relation to learner's cognitive development, so that some elements can be introduced earlier in the second language than in the first language acquisition/ learning. However, the teaching system today is still rigid to major shifts and very few attempts had been made to follow the natural order of acquisition, with some of them based on the learner's errors.

Due to the fact that in terms of long-term mental capacities (storage, rule organization) second language learners have much in common with first language learners, the teaching of the second language might emphasize more the re-development of the first language strategies

by second language learners (clustering of vocabulary, inference), so that materials can be designed accordingly.

### 5. Conclusion

The interpretation of the influence of age is very complex, as age does not only refer to a person's biological, or neurological maturity, but to his/her cognitive change and social development as well. That is why, in the acquisition of a second language, it seems preferable to refer to a range of factors of age, rather than a single factor age.

There is a common general belief that young persons are better language learners than adults, based on the fact that they gain easier mastery of a second language. However, many researchers dispute this assumption by questioning the concept of *better learner*. If we are to consider the speed of learning, no actual advantages have been found for young learners but rather for adults. Another variable involved could also be the type of learning task, as it can be over the cognitive capacity of young people. On the long run, however, evidence shows that young learners reach native-like mastery of the second language, surpassing adults. Therefore, the speed of learning is higher for adults only in the early stages of second language acquisition.

In conclusion, we cannot generalize about young persons or adults being better learners. It really depends on the circumstances and the motivation or level of enthusiasm each person has for acquiring new knowledge.

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