

REVIEW ARTICLE



INTERNATIONAL
STANDARD
SERIAL
NUMBER
INDIA
2395-2636 (Print);2321-3108 (online)

IDENTIFYING THE EFFECTS OF AGE ON SECOND LANGUAGE ACQUISITION

To Thi Le¹, Nguyen Ngoc Thuy²

¹Lecturer, Ho Chi Minh University of Natural Resources and Environment, Vietnam.

Email address: lett@hcmunre.edu.vn

²Lecturer, Ho Chi Minh University of Natural Resources and Environment, Vietnam.

Email address: thuynn@hcmunre.edu.vn



Article Received: 04/02/2022
Article Accepted: 10/03/2022
Published online:13/03/2022
DOI: [10.33329/rjelal.10.1.193](https://doi.org/10.33329/rjelal.10.1.193)

Abstract

Second Language Acquisition (SLA) is a complex process, involving many interrelated factors. In which, age effects in SLA are often construed as evidence for a maturationally based critical period (Birdsong, 1999b). There are a lot of studies dealing with age and SLA; however, the effects of age on SLA is still remained a noticeable lack of agreement in the conclusions. This paper will examine an issue that I have ever concerned much about "Effects of age on SLA", helping adult learners and younger learners make the most use of critical period to take an active role in achieving a foreign language. It will begin by considering some related theoretical background, and then go on to discuss the main issue of this paper "the correlations between age and SLA". Finally, some principles for language pedagogy and implication will be set up for the discussion of these issues in the rest of the paper.

Key words: Second Language Acquisition, effects of age, language learning

Introduction

Learning a foreign / second language is a complex process, involving many interrelated factors. This paper will examine one tiny issue that I have ever concerned much about "Effects of age on SLA". It will begin by considering some related theoretical background, and then go on to discuss the main issue of this paper "the correlations between age and SLA". Finally, some principles for language pedagogy and implication will be set up for the discussion of these issues in the rest of the paper.

Literature review

Definition of Second Language Acquisition

To begin with, the definition of SLA will be mentioned. It can be summarized from the book "Understanding Second Language Acquisition" by Rod Ellis (1999) that SLA is a process of learning a language after the first language unconsciously. In other word, SLA is the interaction between *the learners* and *learning environment*.

According to Krashen (1982), SLA is concerned with the study of the way in which an individual becomes able to use one or more

language different from his first language. This process can take place in a natural setting or through formal classroom instruction, and, although the degree of proficiency that can be attained is a controversial topic, it can start at childhood or during the adult age.

Aspects influence on the learner

Rod Ellis (1999, P4) stated that “there is no single way in which learners acquire a knowledge of a second language, ... different learners in different situations learn a L2 in different ways”. Thus, there must be many aspects affect the L2 learners. It can also be concluded from his book that, there are three aspects influence on the learner. They are *internal process*, *output* and *individual differences*. It is true that variability in second language learners (L2 learners) is the result not only of *contextual factors* but also because of *individual differences* in the way learners learn a L2 and the way they use their L2 knowledge. In which, *individual factors* are divided into two factors: *general factors* and *personal factors*. Many SLA researches have examined five general factors that contribute to *individual learner differences*. These are *age*, *aptitude*, *cognitive style*, *motivation*, and *personality*. An interesting question is raised that whether adults or children learn a L2 better? In order to find out the answer to this question, in the next part, the effects of age on SLA will be examined carefully.

Effects of age on SLA

Age is the variable that has been concerned much in discussions of individual differences in SLA. There are a lot of researches dealing with age and SLA (Hatch 1983a, Stern 1983, Krashen 1982, ...); however, the effects of age on SLA is still remained a noticeable lack of agreement in the conclusions.

Some theories about the effects of age on SLA

The Critical Period Hypothesis (CPH)

The relationship between age and SLA, though complex in nature, is linked to the Critical Period Hypothesis (CPH). This hypothesis states that “there is a period when language acquisition takes place naturally and effortlessly”. In other word, it is

a *biologically determined period* of life when language can be acquired more easily and beyond which time language is increasingly difficult to acquire. Penfield and Roberts (1959) also added that the optimum age for language acquisition falls within the first ten years of life. During this period the brain retains plasticity and is “open” to another language, but this plasticity begins to disappear at puberty.

In my viewpoint, this assumption is only partially correct. It is somewhat true that learners who start learning a foreign language as children achieve a *more native-like accent* than those who start as adolescents or adults (Oyama 1976; Asher and Garcia 1969). If the critical period does exist for humans, it should be impossible for adults to achieve native fluency in pronunciation. In fact there are several individuals who learned a second language after puberty and attained native pronunciation.

In addition the CPH needs to recast to account for why loss of plasticity affects pronunciation but not other levels of language. A total agreement on the CPH can have a bad impact on learner effect. Especially with older learners, do not make them feel defeated before they even start. Therefore, there might be multiple critical periods for the different aspects of SLA as Seliger (1978) argues.

Some general views of the age effects on SLA

After seeing the evidence from different aspects of SLA, some general comments about the CPH can be constructed. Despite all the contradictory argument, it is possible to conclude that:

- (1) In circumstances where formal exposure is given, adult learners learn faster than children. When children receive enough exposure in the L2, they catch up with adults.
- (2) Researchers have proved that learners who start learning a foreign language as children achieve a more native-like accent than those who start as adolescents or adults (Oyama 1976; Asher and Garcia 1969). However,

younger learners do not acquire phonetic skills as rapidly as older learners (Rod Ellis, 1999).

Furthermore, the age suggested for the critical period varies from one researcher to another from 6 to 10, and some argue that it is until puberty. However, some exceptions must be noted. Thompson (1991) suggests that there are those who do not acquire a native-like pronunciation even though they start a L2 as early as the age of 4 because of first language maintenance and some other factors. In addition, many adults who learned a second language can have fluent control of not only grammar and communicative functions, but also a native-like accent. The evidence is that Dr. McClelland of Pittsburgh has tested the hypothesis on Japanese speakers who are learning English as a second language. The result is that the subjects could produce native pronunciation of sounds in English (/l/ and /r/, which are allophones of the same phoneme in Japanese) after intensive training of exaggerated and natural speech in a relatively short amount of time. McClelland notes that the "subjects do not generalize what they have learned to all /l/ and /r/ sounds", but the experiment is a promising start to training adult brains to adapt to new sounds.

From all above, it is believed that with the assistance of instruction, adults may be able to acquire native-like pronunciation.

- (3) The critical period for grammar may be later than that of pronunciation (around puberty). However, adults may also be able to succeed in achieving a native level of grammar accuracy in speech and writing. Adolescents learn faster than adults and children as far as grammar and vocabulary are concerned. Although young learners do not learn as fast as older ones, they are prompt to gain a higher overall success because of a longer exposure to the language. He also provides some explanations of the research results. Neufeld

(1978) distinguishes two levels of language: 'primary' - vocabulary, pronunciation and grammar rules, and 'secondary' - ability to handle complex grammatical structures and different language styles. He states that all people have an inborn ability to acquire primary levels, but children are more likely to acquire secondary levels and be more successful in learning a foreign language. Although adults learn faster, children are more motivated because they want to be accepted by their peers groups.

- (4) Where success of SLA is concerned, the general finding is, not surprisingly, that the longer the exposure to the L2, the more native-like L2 proficiency becomes. Burstall (1975:17), reviewing the results of the NFER project on the teaching of French in the primary school, concludes "the achievement of skill in a foreign language is primarily a function of the amount of time spent studying that language". Thus, those children who started French in the primary school tended to outperform those who did not start until the secondary school.
- (5) The effects of length of learning period are most strongly felt in productive rather than receptive skills (Ekstrand, 1975). In his research, Burstall (1975) states that with the passage of time, the influence of the age of the learner begins to outweigh the length of the learning period, at least on listening and reading test, but less clearly so on speaking and writing test.
- (6) Number of years of exposure to the L2 leads to greater success to overall communicative ability rather than to grammatical or phonological accuracy (Hatch, 1983a).
- (7) It is obvious that adolescents and adults comprehend language as a formal system, but young children do not. Older learners can learn about language by consciously studying linguistic rules. They can also apply these rules when communicating. In contrast, younger children are not so prone to respond to language as form, as for them language is a tool for expressing meaning. In

a nut shell, "age differences in SLA can be explained in terms of the different orientation to language of children and older learners" (Halliday, 1973).

Principles for language pedagogy

The aim of the studies investigating the age factor was to establish the optimal age of learning a foreign language. It is noticeable that each age brings about some advantages and disadvantages to the learning process and the decision when to start learning a foreign language depends on the situation of the individual learner. Students are taught in all age groups and teachers' task is to use appropriate methods to suit the demands of a given age group.

Apart from choosing the most appropriate methods, teachers should understand their learners' characteristics. Learners are divided into two groups: younger learners and older learners.

Younger learners may possess the following advantages over older beginners in learning an additional language:

- They are likely to find it easier to acquire a good command of the sound system of the language, not only the pronunciation of individual sounds but also patterns of intonation;
- They are likely to be less 'language anxious' than many older learners and hence may be more able to absorb language rather than block it out;
- They are likely to have more time available overall. If young beginners at age 5 are compared with older beginners at age 10 then after one year the older group are likely to be ahead. However, if both groups are compared at, for example, age 14, then the younger beginners stand a better chance of being ahead, in part because of the greater amount of time available overall;
- An earlier start enables productive links to be made between first and additional languages, which can have important

benefits for a child's language awareness and literacy;

- A range of acquisition processes can come into play, e.g. largely intuitive processes at an early age, complemented by more analytical processes later. This potentially allows the additional language to become more deeply embedded in the person;
- There can be a positive influence on children's general educational development (e.g. cognitive, emotional, and cultural) and on the formation of a multilingual and intercultural identity.

Older learners may possess some or all of the following advantages over younger beginners:

- They may be able to plot their new language on to concepts about the world which they already possess from their first language. This can help greatly in vocabulary acquisition, and in making inferences as to meaning. Younger learners by contrast may have to acquire these concepts as well as learn how to express them in both their first and their additional languages;
- They may be more experienced in handling the discourse of conversations and other language activities, and thus may be more adept at gaining feedback from native speakers or teachers and in negotiating meaning.
- They are likely to have acquired a wider range of strategies for learning, e.g. note-taking, use of reference materials, searching for underlying pattern. This, allied to their established literacy in their first language, may help them become more efficient learners;
- They may have a clearer sense of why they are learning an additional language and may therefore be able to work purposefully towards objectives of their own choosing.

- One more advantage for adults is that the neural cells responsible for higher-order linguistic processes such as understanding semantic relations and grammatical sensitivity develop with age. Especially in the areas of vocabulary and language structure, adults are actually better language learners than children. Older learners have more highly developed cognitive systems, are able to make higher order associations and generalizations, and can integrate new language input with their already substantial learning experience. They also rely on long-term memory rather than the short-term memory function used by children and younger learners for rote learning. (Johnstone, R. 2002)

Bearing these principles about younger learners and older learners in mind, it is hope that teachers can give students in all age groups appropriate teaching and the best conditions for their learning.

Implication

Classroom practices for older learners

In fact, there exist certain language teaching methods which may be inappropriate for older adults. For example, some methods rely primarily on good auditory discrimination for learning. Since hearing often declines with age, this type of technique puts the older learner at a disadvantage.

Exercises such as oral drills and memorization, which rely on short-term memory, also discriminate against the adult learner. The adult learns best not by rote, but by integrating new concepts and material into already existing cognitive structures.

Speed is also a factor that works against the older student, so fast-paced drills and competitive exercises and activities may not be successful with the older learner.

Affective factors such as motivation and self-confidence are very important in language learning. Many older learners fear failure more than their younger counterparts, maybe because they accept the stereotype of the older person as a poor

language learner or because of previous unsuccessful attempts to learn a foreign language. When such learners are faced with a stressful, fast-paced learning situation, fear of failure only increases. The older person may also exhibit greater hesitancy in learning. Thus, teachers must be able to reduce anxiety and build self-confidence in the learner.

Teaching older adults should be a pleasurable experience. Their self-directedness, life experiences, independence as learners, and motivation to learn provide them with advantages in language learning. A program that meets the needs of the adult learner will lead to rapid language acquisition by this group.

Older adults can be good foreign language learners. The difficulties older adults often experience in the language classroom can be overcome through adjustments in the learning environment, attention to affective factors, and use of effective teaching methods. (Schleppegrell, Mary. 2000)

Classroom practices for younger learners

Class activities which include large amounts of oral repetition, extensive pronunciation correction, or an expectation of error-free speech will encourage the younger learner's active participation. Teachers should emphasize the positive focus on the good progress learners are making and provide opportunities for them to be successful. This success can then be reinforced with more of the same. (Schleppegrell, Mary. 2000)

Materials, real objects, pictures, activities and games that are interesting, authentic and incorporate real life of their age will succeed with younger learners.

Being believed to be "open" to another language, younger learners have much more chance to acquire the second language. Teachers' role is to make the most use of their active characteristics to help them full fill their language acquisition.

Conclusion

In a nut shell, there are many factors affect learners language acquisition. Age factor only is not a determined one on learners learning a language. In

other word, there is no loss of language ability or language learning ability over time. In fact, learning a second or third language actually keeps the older language learners mind active. People of all age groups can benefit from learning languages.

REFERENCES

Birdsong, D. (Ed.). 1999b. "Second language acquisition and the critical period hypothesis". Mahwah, NJ: Erlbaum.

Burstall, C. 1975. "Factors affecting foreign language learning: a consideration of some relevant research findings" *Language Teaching and Linguistics Abstracts* 8:5-125.

Ekstrand, L. 1975. "Age and length of residence as variables related to the adjustment of migrant children with special reference to second language learning". Paper presented at AILA, Stuttgart. Also in Krashen, Scarcella, and Long (eds.) 1982

Ellis, R. 1999. "Understanding Second Language Acquisition", Oxford University Press.

Halliday, m. 1973. *Explorations in the Functions of Language*. London: Edward Arnold.

Hatch, E. 1983a. "Psycholinguistics: A Second Language Perspective". Rowley, Mass.: Newbury House.

Johnstone, R. 2002, "addressing 'the age factor': some implications for languages policy", *Guide for the development of Language Education Policies in Europe from Linguistic Diversity to Plurilingual Education*.

Krashen, S. 1982. "Principles and Practice in Second Language Acquisition". Oxford: Pergamon.

Newfeld, G. 1978. "A theoretical perspective on the nature of linguistic aptitude". *International Review of Applied Linguistics*. XVI: 15-26.

Oyama, S. 1976. "A Sensitive Period in the Acquisition of a nonnative phonological system". *Journal of psycholinguistic research* 5: 261-85.

Penfield, W. and Robert, L. 1959. "Speech and Brain Mechanisms". New York: Atheneum Press.

Schlepppegrell, Mary. 2000. "Age and Language Learning", *ERIC Clearinghouse on Languages and Linguistics Washington DC*.

Seliger, H. 1978. "Implications of a multiple critical period hypothesis for second language learning" in Ritchie (ed.) 1978.

Stern, H. 1983. "Fundamental Concepts of Language Teaching". Oxford University Press.

Wagner, J.?? "Second Language Acquisition and Age"