

# Age factor in second language acquisition.

By

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The field of second language acquisition has been widely investigated since the second half of the past century. It established its features on the basis of the first language studies. Soon, a sharp distinction between first language acquisition and second language acquisition became clear. These studies covered the concept of CLA, how L2 acquisition takes place and what variables affect this complex process. The term “SLA” has more than one definition according to the perspective of different researchers. However, we can conclude from (Ellis 1994; Krashen 1981; Nunan 2001) and others that this concept refers to the consequent steps that happen to the learners during acquiring or learning the second or foreign language, whether directly or indirectly. The steps are not stable all the time, on the contrary they vary due to changeable or fixed factors, yet language acquisition may happen with or without them. Also it is impossible to control all the variables to guarantee perfect acquisition. Our concern here is examining the age factor as an influential one, and providing information on its relations with other factors. The related findings may lead to suggestions, if studied more, this could lead to changing in the current policies of teaching the second language in many educational systems.

Everyday observations clearly tell us that not all learners are equal in their language acquisition. Moreover, they do not even follow the same pattern when acquiring it. Learners vary from each other with respect to their behaviour in educational situations. This gives indications about the possible output that may come out, though input may be the same and the aims are pre-determined. It is then a matter of individual differences. They have been categorised into three aspects according to Ellis (1994). The first set shows the learners’ beliefs concerning the learning of a language, such as their aptitude or learning strategies. 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.

There has been the assumption that children are better than adults in learning the second language. This led several researchers to examine the effect of the age factor. It is worth pointing out that the behaviourists were the first pioneers in language teaching and their methods prevailed for a long time. When they considered language learning, they saw it in the same light as any kind of learning and dealt with it as a matter of habit. "Practice makes perfection" was the principle on which they based their methods in teaching. This became clear in their focus on repetition and imitation. Another aspect of the behaviourism implications on teaching is their increased concern on teaching structures. They introduced pattern drills to teach structures. However, we notice that children do not just imitate or follow a given pattern. On the contrary, they produce completely new sentences based on the structures previously taught. Equally, Chomsky (1959, cited in Mitchell and Myles, 2004: 32) suggested that children learn the language by applying the rules they already have in their minds to the new words or sentences they meet. This usually results in wrong predictions especially in grammatical exceptions, so it is not mere imitation or repetition. They can learn the language using their natural inclination to discovery, which mostly leads them to generalise what they know to what they do not until they move to the next developmental stage (Mitchell and Myles, 2004). Consequently, they suppose that children should be always guided by the teacher to avoid making wrong acquisition because of their over-generalisations. This idea is opposed by Aitchison (1989, cited in Mitchell and Myles, 2004: 61) who argues that direct teaching does not work with children and has very little effect because they seem to have a rejecting reaction towards being corrected directly in their errors. It is noted that they tend to repeat most of the mistakes which they have made before, except for few learners who responded positively. In my opinion, this complete dependence on the teacher stifles the trait of discovery implanted naturally in children. The topic is still open for discussion, though each party tries to justify their claims. It seems far of reach to get a decision when it is related to human beings.

The period of the 70s witnessed a major shift in the study of L2 acquisition. 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.

### **The critical period hypothesis:**

Penfield and Roberts (1959) and Lenneberg (1967) were the first to introduce such a hypothesis, claiming that language acquisition happens almost effortlessly and easily at a point in time around puberty. This period is critical because after it, a learner's acquisition of a native-like accent seems far of reach (Brown, 1994: 53). This hypothesis gained support by many researchers, Macnamara (1973, cited in Singleton, 1981) mentions that "babies pick up their mother tongue with what seems like great ease, and young children in suitable environments pick up a second language with a little trouble, whereas adults seem to struggle ineffectively with a new language and to impose the phonology and syntax of their mother tongue on the new language". In the same vein, Scovel (1969, cited in Brown, 1994: 54) introduces the term "brain plasticity" as a cause of language acquisition for children. This term refers to the flexibility of a child's mind that enables them to acquire language effortlessly and easily, according to this hypothesis. Many questions have been raised since then to investigate this assumption and whether children perform better than adults in all aspects of language acquisition. Classroom observations truly show us that children are better acquirers of the language than adults but not as effortlessly as they claim. Here language acquisition is looked upon from the aspects of "competence" and "performance"; the former refers to the language systems of grammar, vocabulary and phonology, while the latter to their production and comprehension, Chomsky (1965, cited in Brown, 1994: 31). To reach a decision about that, both the existing neurological and psychomotor studies should be reviewed.

The human brain is the most complicated part of our body, the part which includes many puzzling secrets and one of these is how humans acquire languages. Mitchell and Myles (2004: 13) draw our attention to see the human mind as one single unit with different kinds of skills and knowledge processing. Yet, it consists of two parts and each part is responsible for managing specific functions. The left hemisphere is responsible for operating the intellectual, logical, and analytic functions, while the right hemisphere operates the emotional or social needs, Brown (1994). This way, language functions seem to be located in the left hemisphere and in case of any damage to it, language deficiency will mostly appear as a result. This is supported by several experiments which show that, though it is not impossible to learn the language in case of the left hemisphere damage, still some deficiencies may appear. Willemin and Richardson (1994, cited in Marinova-Todd, Marshall and Snow, 2000) reached a conclusion from a study they made,

showing that young learners benefit from the left hemisphere advantage in acquiring first and second languages while adult learners tend to use their right hemisphere in SLA. Scovel (1969, cited in Brown, 1994) claims that the brain plasticity is responsible for acquisition in children and this case of plasticity ends around the age of puberty. This indicates that the native-like accent can be only reached if language learning starts during early childhood, a conclusion that supports CPH. On the other hand, it is true that the brain is two parts but one unit at the same time and this means that the right hemisphere also has a role to play in SLA. Obler (1981, cited in Brown, 1994) implies that the strategies which the learners use for language acquisition are run by the right hemisphere. In combination between the functions of both hemispheres, Douglas (1994) points out that the aspects of performance and competence happen in parallel between the two parts in a highly intermingled process.

The psychomotor ability is responsible for controlling the speech muscles, consequently the level of its accuracy. This gives the advantage for children to acquire the authentic pronunciation. Children surpass adults in having the native-like accent because their articulation muscles are still in the formation and development phase just like practising aerobics, it has to start from childhood, while adults have already got full shaped muscles, Douglas (1994). This idea, which also backs the CPH, leads to the conclusion that children outperform adults, when we are discussing native-like accent acquisition.

Several later studies presented either much support or objection to the finding that only children can acquire a native-like pronunciation. Asher and Gracia (1969, cited in Patkowski, 1990) refer to a study in which 71 Cuban immigrants were tested in pronunciation after five years of arriving in San Francisco. The results sustained the CPH notion that “the younger the better”. None of the subjects, who ranged from 1 to 19 years old, could acquire a fully native-like accent. Paradoxically, Neufeld (1978, cited in Ellis, 1994: 486) conducted a study involving twenty adult English native speakers. His focus was to examine whether they can acquire the native-like Chinese or Japanese accents or not. The results showed that some of them could reach the desired level. Another study of the same kind attempts to prove that under the correct conditions, adults can get the native-like pronunciation. Ioup, Boustagui, Tigi and Moselle (1994, cited in Marinova-Todd, Marshall and Snow, 2000) made a similar study on two women native speakers of English who were married to native speakers of Arabic in Egypt. The subjects were in their twenties but because of their desire, motivation and the surrounding environment, both women could achieve native or near nativity in the Arabic accent. Another opposing opinion to

the CPH is that, in contrast to their claim, children do not learn the language effortlessly. Contrastingly, more effort is spent with them than with adolescents or adults. These previous studies try to stop the ongoing fast movement of the CPH, whose supporters reply that very few cases could reach this level of native-like accent after puberty. A related term was introduced by Lamendella (1977, cited in Marinova-Todd, Marshall and Snow, 2000) to sit in between the two opinions, which is the “sensitive period”. This suggests that language may be acquired better during childhood but it is not impossible later.

The previous findings tend to strengthen the assumption of the existence of a critical period but again this depends on what is meant by language acquisition. It is by no means only the accent; it includes aspects of grammar, vocabulary and syntax in addition to pronunciation. If children are better in pronunciation acquisition, do they perform better in the other aspects as well? Krashen, Long, and Scarcella (1979) argue that adults have a point over children in that they show more progress in the early stages in syntax and morphology. This mostly is due to their cognitive ability. A research done by Snow and Hoefnagel-Hohle (1978) supports this concept. The subjects of this study were native English speakers of different levels who were exposed to learn Dutch as a second language. After a set of tests in pronunciation, auditory discrimination, morphology, sentence repetition, sentence translation, sentence judgement, vocabulary, story comprehension, and story telling, the results showed that adults outperformed children in all aspects except in pronunciation. Interestingly, over a one-year time, children have equalled and even got better results than adults in these tests of morphology and syntax. This made Krashen, Long, and Scarcella (1979) conclude that if we look at language acquisition in a short time, then adults get better results. However, if we look at it from the quality and long-run perspective, the results tend towards the children’s side. Ellis (1994) reached almost the same conclusion but more specifically, that during the initial stages, adults are better in that they are faster and more comprehensive especially in grammar. On the other hand, children may appear slower in the beginning but they have the ability to attain the native-like accent; they are better on the long run.

Yet, starting to learn the second language in childhood does not mean that they will automatically acquire the native-like accent. Payne (1976, cited in Preston, 1989) conducted a study in which young children of eight years old arrived in Philadelphia but they could not reach the exact pronunciation. Researchers examined similar cases and found out that there are other factors which may strengthen or weaken the effect of age upon language acquisition. As

mentioned previously, some factors may lead to the SLA despite the age problem, such as the high motivation or a suitable environment. On the other hand, social and educational factors are seen as effective ones in this process. Similarly, Schumann (1975, cited in Preston, 1989) points out that the difficulties which adults usually face may be because of social or psychological factors appearing in this age. Preston 1989 concludes that one of the social factors is the age-grading, which means that each age group has their own language or words which they give up when growing up to the following stage and then acquire their language as well. Another factor is the social class which people belong to. A study by Labov (1966, cited in Preston, 1989) shows a distinctive difference in the language used by each age group according to their social class. Moreover, in relating the age factor to intelligence, no clear evidence is found that language acquisition for children is related to their level of intelligence. Even those who start learning late usually catch up with those who start earlier (Mitchell and Myles, 2004). A clear example of this is Albert Einstein who had problems in speaking in his early childhood, and then he moved quickly into the developmental stages and showed high skills later.

### **Practical implications**

The 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 characterise each group. Starting from the children, he mentions:

- Children are more interested and curious to learn the language. This gives them a starting point to set off.
- Children acquire the language indirectly and this involves introducing games and quizzes of which they learn the language. “Children at L2 primary levels acquire knowledge and language skills associated with different abilities through educational games” (Agudo Sánchez, Holguín and Tello, 2007)
- They have got a short span of attention, so that when designing the tasks, they should be set into short periods. These tasks have to be sequential and relate to each other.



- They seek help and guidance from the teacher but this should not be understood as being teacher-centred classes. It just means that the teacher should be a monitor and a guide more than an instructor.
- They show positive reactions to the meaning rather than structures. Hence, the communicative approach is one way of introducing the language to children.

Adults are also believed to be acquiring the language but differently. Their previous background makes it difficult for the teacher to present his/her lessons in the same way. Moreover, games and quizzes are not suitable and sometimes not even acceptable with older learners. Lawrence (2000: 34) states that adults may have unfavourable experiences concerning learning, so that they do not have the high motivation level of children. Ausubel (1964) refers in his old article that children do not have the same frustrating experiences or emotional blocks which adults may have. This requires establishing a good relationship between the learners and their teacher. Adults show interest and enthusiasm towards learning in the beginning. However, they may lose them due to their fear of being examined or embarrassed. The teacher in these situations should work on techniques that lower the anxiety atmosphere inside the classroom. Adults can think in a more complicated fashion due to their cognitive abilities (Harmer, 2001: 40). Consequently, Foss and Reitzel (1988, cited in Young, 1991) suggest that students should write down their fears about learning the language, so that they know that it is normal to have worries about learning because everybody has them. Generally, the teacher should be creative in selecting the techniques that lower the affective filter in his/her classroom.

## Conclusion

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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