



Adult And Child Learning Second Language Differences

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ABSTRACT

Second Language Acquisition (SLA) is one of the debatable topics regarding to speed and effectiveness in adults or children foreign language learning. There have been several researches to solve the issue; however, the results are different and contradicting. In this research two volunteers participated in three staged survey which showed children's priority in acquiring foreign language in a short period of time.

KEYWORDS

Second Language Acquisition (SLA), non-native English speakers, native language, Critical Period Hypothesis (CPH), adults and children learning second language.

INTRODUCTION

Second Language Acquisition (SLA) is a procedure of acquiring a foreign language after being able to speak in a native language. Native language (L1) is obtained unconsciously while second language (L2) is learnt after L1.

Speaking in L1 is one of the skills for both adults and children. It is mostly believed that children enrich the vocabulary faster; moreover, they reach native-like pronunciation and pick up language unconsciously. On the other hand, adults learn a second language generally by a

detailed explanation of grammar rules. One more reason why children learn a language quicker than adults is that adults try to use complex structures and varied range of vocabulary to express their opinion, while children utilize simple language and forms to communicate. According to researches by Mohammad Reza Oroji and Azam Ghane younger learners acquire the language without grammatical explanation while older ones need to be explained the rules directly. Nevertheless, some linguists believe that adults learn a second language faster and better when comparing to children. Snow (1983) considered that adults learn are better in learning a second language than children. In the research, she observed 52 English participants between the ages of 3,5 and 55 years old who were learning Dutch in the Netherlands. Having compared test results on storytelling skills between younger and older learners, the age didn't influence significantly.

Overall, several factors cause to adults' and children's foreign language input that should be taken into consideration while comparing them. This case study focuses on language learners' age differences. The aim is to find out which group of people, adults or children, learns a foreign language better and faster.

LITERATURE REVIEW

Critical Period Hypothesis (CPH) is one of the principal theories in the second language acquisition which separates adults and children in learning languages. According to Eric Lenneberg (1967), children acquire a second language better than adults. He developed the theory of the Critical Period Hypothesis which

says that a certain age is the best time to acquire a language like a native speaker. The researcher proved that children's brain works better in learning languages because of its plasticity which means their brain creates neural pathways better. Lenneberg believed that the critical period of age was between the ages of 2 till 13.

Another researcher Potkowskiy (1980) observed 67 non-native English speakers and recorded 5 minutes of their speech. As a result, participants who started learning the language before the age of 15 made better results than those who came to the USA after the age of 15.

Moreover, Hyltenstam (1992) analyzed 24 Spanish and Finnish speakers who were learning Swedish as a second language. Besides, he studied Swedish native speakers also. He found that learners who started studying language after the age of 7 didn't make mistakes as the native speaker did. On the other hand, there was a repetition of the same errors between the learners of Swedish who started before age 6 and native speakers.

Although all these experiments above show that children acquire language better than adults, however, the existence of CPH hasn't been proven and it is under debate. There was another research proving that CPH doesn't relate to everyone. Some adults are able to reach native-speaker language skills in both grammar and pronunciation.

According to the research of Rod Ellis (1997) an English woman, Julie started learning Arabic at the age of 21. Although she began acquiring a foreign language late, she was able to speak like native Arabians after living 26 years in Cairo.

Another case study was also showed CPH doesn't influence in acquiring a foreign language. Having left the school at 15, Japanese artist Wes began visiting Hawaii and learnt English by communication. Ellis (1997) states that "Wes, then, is an example of a "naturalistic" learner – someone who learns the language at the same time as learning to communicate in it" (p 6). It means the English atmosphere helps learners to acquire a second language. Wes's English was poor when he first came to Hawaii; nevertheless, after communication with people, he was able to progress his language skills. Eventually, Wes had native-like grammar skills and was able to express his opinion in English at the age of 33.

These two studies demonstrate that environment and desire may make one successful language learner. Gursoy (2011) holds the view that communication with natives leads to successful language learning and social, cultural or economic interaction difficulties causes to being an unsuccessful one.

According to researchers, older people learn a second language better under control as they already have schematic linguistic knowledge which helps them to build complex grammatical structures; in addition, while learning a language they focus on punctuation and spelling much better than children. Nonetheless, while learning the structure of their native language, children have to develop new skills in another language. While according to Schmidt (1990) language structure is significant for adults, DeKeyser (2000) states that for children structure is not important.

Moreover, according to Lenneberg (1967), Children's' brains work better than adults'

because of plasticity. That is one of the reasons why they tend to acquire new vocabulary faster than adults. Although children's brain works better in getting new information, adults learn structure easily and quickly. One of the next factors that influence on the process is "motivation". Adults are mostly encouraged to get better jobs or study abroad which means they have a strong purpose, while children learn mostly for pleasure.

Therefore, this case study is intended to show the difference between adults' and children's language learning.

Learners' Profile

Subjects of the study are relatives: a grandmother and a grandchild.

Guli (a real name has been changed) is 56 years old adult. She is a housewife. Her native language is Uzbek and she can speak Russian. At school she leant German as a second language; however, she remembers very little. She wants to learn English to communicate with people abroad. Her son lives in London; a few years ago when she visited her son, she did not understand anything in the street. After coming back she decided to learn English. She started learning English at the age of 53 and studied very hard for one year; however, now she doesn't have much time. She did self-study form the book "English for kids" which was designed for learning to read and translate from English to Russian or vice versa. Now she knows a few words, is able to translate simple sentences and can give some information about herself. During her study, she mostly enriched her vocabulary and translated sentences from Russian to English or from English to Russian. She didn't study tenses

separately. Her level of English is A1. She is motivated to learn English in order to communicate with native speakers when she goes to London, which means that she has integrated motivation. She is a very sociable and extravert person.

Sevinch (a real name has been changed) is 8 years old. She is Uzbek; however, studies in 2nd grade Russian class at school. She learns English at school; in addition, time by time she practices with her mother. Her mother wants Sevinch to learn English at an advanced level; nonetheless, Sevinch is not so much interested. At home, she sometimes enjoys listening to nursery rhymes and watching cartoons in English. She is aware of an alphabet; furthermore, she is able to read some words and understands simple instructions as her mother sometimes speaks in English. On the other hand, she has difficulties to express her opinion in English as she doesn't want to speak in a foreign language at all. Although Sevinch is not interested in learning English, she makes good progress in her study. She acquires a new theme very quickly and easily; furthermore, she gets around 96 points from tests. She does not understand entirely the advantages of learning English. She is an introvert person.

RESEARCH DESIGN

To investigate the research question 3-staged pre and post-tests were designed. Pre-test involved stage 1 and stage 2, while stage 3 was used for checking subjects' knowledge as a post-test. The tools used in the research are a questionnaire, oral interview, and multiple-choice questions.

Stage 1

The researcher used a questionnaire to find out participants' attitudes toward English and the reason for learning a foreign language. The questionnaire involved 10 items about learners' personal information. The response to opinion poll showed that these two participants were different not only according to their age but in personality also.

Stage 2

In addition, there was an oral interview to find out students' knowledge of the present simple; moreover, it was used to check subjects' speaking level and ability to respond to questions. Participants were given some questions and their responds were recorded.

Then both participants were taught individually and separately for a week. For this research, the grammar-translation method was chosen and participants were taught "present simple tense". Materials were taken from the book *Essential Grammar in Use* (Murphy,1994) and they were adapted. Units 5, 6, and 7 of the book were utilized to teach; after each lesson, there were exercises, tests, and translations to check participants' comprehension.

Stage 3

At the end of the one-week course, the researcher gave a post-test to see how well they learnt covered materials. Post-test checked their knowledge of present simple tense.

Data Collection And Findings

The research question of the case study examined to identify the speed and differences between adult and child learning English. The results of the data showed that there was a considerable distinction between two different aged learners' acquiring a foreign language.

There were 10 personal questions in the questionnaire which included data related to age, nationality, language and educational qualification, the purpose of learning English, number of visits to English speaking countries, studying English with peers and personality type.

Both of the participants are females, Uzbek and can speak Russian. It is visible that participant 2, Guli is much older than participant 1, Sevinch. Answers to question 6 reveal that Guli is educated in the field of medicine, while Sevinch is only a 2nd-grade schoolchild. The responds to the questionnaire showed that these two subjects are completely different in terms of motivation and time to spend on learning English. Guli's has been learning English for 3 years with long breaks; moreover, she has not been studying for the last year intensively and forgot some previously gained knowledge. Guli aims to communicate with people in London as she has been there once. Sevinch mostly learns English as her mother makes her study; nevertheless, sometimes she has integrated motivation when she links English with her cousin in London. She has been listening to English songs and enriching vocabulary since she was three. Nonetheless, five years of study was not serious since she studies for one month and then takes a 3-month break. Both participants

have never attended any English courses. Guli is an extrovert, while Sevinch is an introvert.

The next tool, an oral interview was designed to find out participant's level of speaking and knowledge of the present simple. The interview covered 8 questions.

Both of the participants understood questions and could give logical answers; nonetheless, there was a difference between their replies. While Guli was trying to give full answers, Sevinch was short. For instance, responds to the second and fifth questions:

Guli: "I am 56 years old", "I have 7 sisters and three brothers".

Sevinch: "I am 8", "one brother".

Even though Sevinch could not express some ideas in English, she was very confident. She easily switched into Uzbek in order to answer. On the other hand, it was somehow difficult for Guli to speak in English as she tried to remember some words. In addition, she intended to answer only in English.

Sevinch is very motivated to listen to nursery rhymes and enjoyed to sing one of them. In the song she used present simple form unconsciously; however, she didn't understand the structure. Guli mentioned that she does not listen to any songs.

Both of them used "to be" form in their speech instead of the present simple. For example, while Guli said "I am like apples", Sevinch replied "I am school". These problems show that both learners do not know to use present simple form properly.

Oral responds in the interview showed that Guli had some problems in her pronunciation, whereas Sevinch had more native-like speech. Guli made mistakes in stressing vowels properly. Sevinch sounded like natives especially when she sang a song.

After finding out their attitude and level, they were taught 3 forms (positive, question and negative) of present simple tense for 10 days. During the lesson, the teacher first explained the topic in Uzbek, and then gave some exercises based on the theme. Then participants were given 10 multiple-choice questions and 10 sentences to translate. Moreover, there were some new words to learn which were used in exercises.

During the study, Guli enjoyed classes. She liked precise and direct explanations; in addition, she learnt by heart almost all new words. She made progress, especially in translating sentences from Uzbek into English.

1st participant Sevinch had difficulties in concentrating to study since the lessons were conducted mostly by giving a direct explanation and involving translation from L1 to L2. She faced some difficulties in learning new vocabulary also. She did not progress well during a 10-day course.

After finishing the course, participants were given one hour for 10 multiple-choice questions and 10 sentences to translate from Uzbek into English.

Guli finished the task earlier. Her test result was excellent since she translated all sentences correctly with minor mistakes in the usage of prepositions, article, third form singular in question and negative sentences.

Furthermore, she gave 9 correct answers out of 10 multiple-choice questions.

On the other hand, Sevinch did not make good progress. She couldn't translate 4 sentences at all and translated 6 sentences with mistakes in spelling; moreover, she was not able to translate sentences fully. She did not follow the rules in translating as she omitted auxiliary verbs "do and does" in question and negative forms. In addition, Sevinch forgot to add "s" at the end of the verb while speaking about 3rd person singular. Regarding multiple-choice questions, it is visible that she gave 4 correct answers. During the exam, it was visible that Sevinch couldn't understand the covered topic sufficient enough and didn't learn new words.

CONCLUSION

Krashen et al., (1979) claimed that adults learn morphology and syntax of a foreign language faster in a short time in early stages, whereas children get native-like fluency in a long time. This small-scale study also proved that adults are able to acquire grammar well in a short period. Furthermore, they enjoy learning morphology and syntax of a second language since they connect their previous knowledge with the rules of a foreign language. However, children sound more closely to native speakers. It is easy for children to acquire the correct pronunciation mainly if they drill nursery songs; moreover, they enjoy it.

This small-scale research on adult and children learning language shows that adults might progress better in learning the grammatical structure of a second language than children do. There is a great possibility that older learners use their previous schematic

knowledge and compare two languages. That might be the reason why the grammar-translation method is useful for them. However, children learn better by repeating and socializing with their peers.

This small-scale study is narrow as it involved only 2 subjects and one method; furthermore, the duration of the course was also quite short. In the future, this research topic should be learnt in a longer period with more participants by using at least 2 teaching methods.

In conducting a lesson to adults and children, teachers should approach differently. Lessons for adults should be more straightforward; moreover, older learners should be motivated to give more ideas as they already have some schematic knowledge on certain topics. On the other hand, children prefer learning a language by repeating. As they do not have much background experience on different themes, teachers should give some knowledge as well.

Both adults and children are able to acquire language well by using different and appropriate methods and techniques. These findings of this small-scale study might be useful in teaching a language to 2 different age groups.

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