

# Exploring Factors Influencing Children's Learning of English as a Second Language

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**Abstract.** Learning a second language, especially English, has become increasingly important in today's globalized world. Children who learn English as a second language (ESL) often face unique challenges and opportunities. This paper examines the influencing factors of children learning English as a second language, specifically focusing on motivation, age, gender, and family background. By reviewing existing research and theories, the paper aims to provide a comprehensive understanding of how these factors interact and impact children's language learning journey. The analysis emphasizes an increasingly vital role of motivation in SLA, the advantages and limitations associated with different ages, the potential gender differences in learning styles, and the role of family background in creating a supportive or hindering learning environment. The paper concludes by emphasizing the importance of recognizing and addressing these factors in order to enhance children's experiences and outcomes in learning English as a second language, and suggests strategies for educators to tailor teaching methods, provide age-appropriate materials, foster motivation, and involve families in the language learning process.

**Keywords:** Second Language Acquisition; Child Language Development; Influencing Factors.

## 1. Introduction

The process of learning a second language is intricate and multidimensional, especially for younger learners. A child's ability to acquire and become proficient in English as a second language can be greatly influenced by a variety of circumstances. This essay aims to explore the four main factors—motivation, age, gender, and family background—that influence children's SLA.

Motivation serves as a driving force that pushes children to engage actively with the language, persevere through challenges, and strive for improvement. Age brings inherent advantages and limitations, with younger learners often demonstrating greater plasticity in language learning. Gender, although less conclusive in its impact, suggests potential differences in learning styles and approaches between boys and girls. Last but not least, family background, including linguistic environment, socioeconomic status, and parental involvement, creates an environment that either supports or hinders language learning. To support successful and customized language learning experiences for kids, educators and parents must have a thorough understanding of these elements and how they interact.

## 2. Internal Factors

### 2.1. Language Learning Motivation

#### 2.1.1 The Role of Motivation in Children SLA

Researchers often define motivation as the desire and attitude to learn a certain language and how it relates to the final result [1]. "The reasons underlying behavior" [2] or "the attribute that moves us to do or not do something" [3] are two definitions of it.

Motivation has a significant influence in SLA, according to many academics. [4][5][6]. In order to foster children's motivation for language learning, for example, Horning and Brown recommend that teachers modify their teaching strategies. Dörnyei and Schmidt assert that motivated children who participate actively in language learning activities can achieve higher proficiency and acquire more language skills. High-motivation students are more likely to attain superior SLA scores,

according to Stephen Krashen's well-known Affective Filter Hypothesis [6]. This means that the more emotionally children learn a language, the more their language abilities and competency will be strengthened.

### **2.1.2 The Relationship between Motivation and Children SLA Outcomes**

It has been widely acknowledged that children's motivation plays a critical role in their acquisition of second languages (SLA). Scholars such as Dörnyei have highlighted the significance of motivating elements in shaping learners' attitudes and success in second language acquisition. Numerous studies have demonstrated a link between motivation and the success of second language acquisition. Pintrich and De Groot found a substantial relationship between cognitive performance and motivation [7]. The most effective way to predict language performance was through self-regulation, self-efficacy, and test anxiety. A person's belief in their capacity to successfully complete assignments and achieve final goals in a particular area is known as self-efficacy. Intrinsic value captures the inherent interest and perceived importance that individuals associate with their academic pursuits. Test anxiety represents the emotional and cognitive distress experienced by individuals in testing situations. Conversely, the author speculates motivation might not be an influential factor in SLA in terms of children learning. This is primarily due to the law of children's development and mandatory English tests, and whether this applies to language learners of different ages or to those who do not face mandatory language tests remains to be explored.

Additionally, Dörnyei and Ushioda noted that there are two primary categories of motivation: instrumental and integrative [8]. While instrumental motivation is motivated by pragmatic considerations like achieving academic or professional objectives. Therefore, the learner's desire to join the target language environment is the basis of integrative motivation. In the context of children's SLA, integrative motivation has been found to be particularly influential. Youngsters with greater levels of language competency are typically those who are driven to acquire a second language for the purposes of social engagement and cultural exploration [9]. Furthermore, it has been demonstrated that motivational elements like parental support and a positive atmosphere are crucial in helping kids become motivated to learn a language [10]. Studies have additionally demonstrated that intrinsic motivation, the state in which kids are motivated by curiosity, is especially advantageous for language acquisition [11]. Extrinsic motivation, such as external rewards or pressure, can also play a role but may not be as long-lasting or efficient [12].

## **2.2. The Role of Age in Child SLA**

### **2.2.1 Critical Period Hypothesis (CPH)**

This term first put forth in the context of language development by Penfield and Roberts, postulates that there is an optimal time window for learning a second language, typically between the ages of 2 and 12 [13], when the brain is highly plastic and responsive to language input [14].

The CPH in SLA has been supported by evidence from several research. For instance, a distinguished study which conducted by Johnson and Newport discovered that people can almost become native speakers when they acquire a second language prior to adolescence, whereas those who acquired it after puberty had trouble pronouncing words correctly and using grammar correctly [15]. In a similar vein, Birdsong found that early adopters of second languages scored higher in syntax and pronunciation than later adopters [16]. Asher & Garcia's demonstrate that children who learn a second language early on typically have greater pronunciation and fluency, further bolster the CPH [17].

Although the CPH has had a significant impact on SLA research, it has also been under heavy fire. A primary criticism is the absence of a generally accepted definition for the "critical period." In addition, there are those who believe that the decline in SLA abilities before puberty can be due to crucial elements like cognitive load, motivation, and language exposure, rather than an innate biological constraint [18]. Furthermore, studies like those by Bialystok and Hakuta have demonstrated that even late second language learners can achieve high levels of proficiency, albeit

with different learning strategies and cognitive processes [19]. This suggests that while early exposure may facilitate SLA, it is not a prerequisite for successful language learning. Recent research has explored the role of individual differences in SLA, acknowledging that the critical period may vary across children [14].

### **2.2.2 The Young Advantage Theory**

The advantages of early SLA are further emphasized by the Young Advantage Theory. In the realm of second language acquisition, this notion has been extensively studied and explored, especially in connection to young children learning English as a second language [6]. The question of whether being younger really offers a clear merit when it comes to competence, pronunciation, and grammatical accuracy has been supported by a number of studies. For example, DeKeyser noted that younger students revealed more talent for picking up second language grammatical structures [18]. Children are naturally curious and have a strong capacity for imitation, which aids in language learning [20].

Lenneberg proposed a crucial period for language acquisition in his seminal work, arguing that biological factors constrain the ability to learn language effectively after a certain age [14]. Subsequent research has sought to validate or refute this hypothesis, with many studies providing evidence for SLA in a critical period, particularly in relation to phonological and grammatical development.

Several studies have reported that younger learners exhibit greater proficiency in areas such as pronunciation and grammar. Take a study conducted by Long as an example, children who began learning English at an early age were more successful in acquiring native-like pronunciation than those who started learning later [21]. Similarly, research by Birdsong suggested that early exposure to a second language leads to better grammatical outcomes [16].

Some other studies highlight cognitive advantages that young learners possess. For instance, DeKeyser suggests that children's immature linguistic systems enable them to adapt more flexibly to new language structures, whereas adults may struggle with transferring habits from their first language [18]. Moreover, children's capacity for implicit learning, where language rules are absorbed without conscious awareness, is thought to be more pronounced than in adults [22].

Social and emotional factors also play a pivotal role. Young learners often exhibit less anxiety when learning a second language, which can enhance their enthusiasm to communicate [23]. Additionally, children's immersion in school settings or playgroups can facilitate rapid language development through constant interaction and practice due to the fact that English is the primary language of communication in these scenarios .

Even though the critical period hypothesis is central to the young advantage theory, it is essential to illustrate that the Young Advantage Theory is not without controversy. Some studies indicating that older learners often outperform younger learners in particular areas of second language learning, such as vocabulary learning strategies [24]. Meanwhile, other researchers also argue that while young learners may have a deep grasp of certain aspects of language learning, senior learners can still be fluent in a second language by relying on explicit instruction and motivation [10].

Furthermore, the personal differences, including motivation, learning strategies, aptitude, etc. are emphasized as crucial factors that can outweigh the benefits of early age [25-26]. These variables may influence the extent to which the young advantage is manifested, suggesting that the theory may not be universally applicable.

## **2.3. The Role of Gender in Child L2 Acquisition**

### **2.3.1 Gender Differences in Child SLA Outcomes and some Potential Social Factors**

The field of linguistics and education has been hotbed for researchers to discuss gender differences in language acquisition. Gender can play a significant role in sexual orientation, especially during childhood, according to several studies. Some researchers argue that girls tend to outperform boys in language learning tasks, particularly in verbal abilities and grammatical accuracy [27]. The benefit

may stem from several factors, such as biological factors, societal expectations, and educational experiences that motivate girls to engage more actively in communicative activities [28]. The gender gap is often traced back to socialization factors, with girls are often urged to participate in activities with more communication that help them improve their language skills [26].

Biological factors, such as hormone levels and brain structure, have been implicated in gender differences in language learning. Research indicates that girls tend to have more developed language-related brain regions, which may contribute to their enhanced language abilities [29]. Additionally, girls often receive more encouragement and support for language-related activities from an early age, which can further foster their language development.

Children's language learning experiences are shaped by socioeconomic expectations and gender roles. Girls are typically socialized to be more communicative and expressive, which aligns with the communicative nature of language learning [30]. This societal emphasis on communication may motivate girls to engage more actively in language learning activities, ultimately leading to better outcomes.

Educational experiences, including classroom dynamics and teacher interactions, can also influence the gendered nature of SLA. Teachers may have different expectations for boys and girls, which can impact their learning opportunities and outcomes [31]. For example, teachers may provide more opportunities for girls to engage in language-related tasks, reinforcing their language skills and confidence.

In the context of ESL classrooms, teachers' perceptions and expectations can also influence gender differences in language learning. Research indicates that teachers may have preconceived notions about gender-based abilities, which can affect their teaching practices and interactions with students [32]. For instance, teachers may provide more opportunities for girls to participate in classroom discussions, further enhancing their language skills. Furthermore, the significance of motivation and self-efficacy in ESL learning cannot be disregarded. Language learning is associated with higher levels of motivation and self-efficacy among girls, which positively correlates with academic achievement [7]. This finding highlights the need for teachers to foster motivation and self-efficacy among all students whatever boys or girls.

Nevertheless, what is worth mentioning is that these findings are not universal. Some research has found no significant gender differences in L2 English acquisition [33]. Factors such as individual learning styles, teaching methods, and cultural context may also play a crucial role in determining the extent to which gender affects language learning outcomes [34]. Evidence illustrates that gender factors can positively impact children's L2 English acquisition, however, the extent of this influence is still under scrutiny. It is necessary to conduct additional research to fully comprehend the complex interaction between gender, individual differences, and environmental factors that influence children's language learning.

### **3. External Factors**

#### **3.1. Impacts of Family Environment in Child L2 Acquisition**

##### **3.1.1 Linguistic Environment**

The linguistic environment refers to the language and communication patterns within a family setting. This family environment can greatly promote children's language development, particularly when learning a second language [35].

Research conducted by Lightbown and Spada emphasizes that children whose parents actively engage in their language learning through conversations, stories, media, and other sources exhibit better linguistic outcomes [10]. This engagement can manifest through reading together, practicing conversational skills, or providing linguistic support at home. Moreover, parents who choose a variety of methods promote children's learning process, such as reading English books together, engaging in conversations, and encouraging language practice, enhance children's motivation and confidence [36].

Such involvement fosters a conducive learning environment that encourages language experimentation and risk-taking, crucial for effective ESL acquisition.

According to Cummins, children from bilingual families often exhibit cognitive advantages, including enhanced linguistic awareness and problem-solving skills, which facilitate ESL learning [37]. These advantages stem from the children's exposure to multiple languages within the family context, promoting linguistic flexibility and adaptability. The language used at home significantly impacts children's L2 acquisition. Bilingual households where English is spoken regularly alongside the native language offer children more opportunities to practice English. This linguistic diversity enriches their language experiences and promotes language transfer skills [38].

However, the linguistic factor can also pose challenges. If English is not actively used at home, children may face difficulties in acquiring fluency. The family linguistic environment, including the availability of books, educational toys, and technology, plays a vital role in children's L2 acquisition [39]. Research by Genese also suggests that language barriers between parents and children, especially when parents are not proficient in English, can hinder ESL learning. This communication gap may lead to reduced opportunities for language practice and feedback, which are essential for language development.

### 3.1.2 Socioeconomic Status (SES)

Family SES is a multifaceted concept that includes income, education, and occupational status. It serves as a foundational aspect influencing access to resources and opportunities.

Studies have consistently shown that children from highly skilled families have a greater chance of having access to educational resources, which can enhance their language learning experiences. However, children who live in lower SES families may face barriers to such resources, limiting their exposure to English and opportunities for practice. This disparity can hinder their ability to practice and refine their English skills, impacting overall proficiency.

In addition, research also indicates that children from higher SES families tend to have more exposure to English through books, media, and experienced teachers, while lower SES families may be concentrated in areas with inferior educational facilities and resources. These opportunities foster language development by providing diverse linguistic input and interactive contexts.

More significantly, parents with higher education pay more attention to education of young children, especially in language. Lower SES parents, due to work demands or limited educational backgrounds, may struggle to offer similar levels of assistance.

## 4. Conclusion

In conclusion, learning English as a second language with regard to children is profoundly influenced by several aspects, with motivation, age, gender, and family background standing out as particularly important. Motivation serves as a crucial driving force that pushes children to engage actively with the language, persist through challenges, and strive for improvement. Age brings its own set of merits and limitations, as younger children often exhibit greater plasticity in language acquisition, while older children may face different learning barriers. Gender, though complex, suggests that societal expectations, stereotypes as well as different learning styles and approaches between boys and girls can influence second language learning outcomes. Eventually, family background, including domestic language environment and socioeconomic status, creates a foundational support system that can facilitate or weaken language learning.

To enhance children's second language acquisition, it is vital to emphasize the significance of these factors and implement various initiatives to tackle these problems effectively. This includes fostering motivation through engaging and meaningful activities, leveraging early language plasticity through targeted instruction tailored to different age groups, adopting gender-sensitive teaching methods to cater to diverse learning styles, and creating supportive family environments that encourage and reinforce language learning at home. By implementing these strategies, educators and parents can

work together to create an optimal learning environment that nurtures children's natural curiosity, fosters their linguistic abilities, and ultimately unlock their full potential as multilingual individuals.

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