A Study of Students Learning a Second Language Early in School

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Abstract. With increasing international communication, the importance of foreign language learning is generally increasing, and there is a trend toward teaching foreign languages at younger ages. However, the question of whether and, if so, what effect age has on second language acquisition, especially the acquisition of pure speech, and what age is optimal for language acquisition has become a hot topic of debate among educators, but no definitive conclusion has been reached to date. This paper studies students learning a second language early in school. The critical period theory of second language acquisition, the effects of various age groups on second language acquisition, and the connection between age factors and second language acquisition are all discussed in this paper. Based on theoretical research, the strengths and weaknesses of second language learners in different age groups are analyzed and compared, and reasonable educational systems and teaching strategies are developed for this purpose.

Keywords: Age Factor; Second Language Acquisition; Translation; Teaching.

1. Introduction

One of the key variables influencing individual variations in second language acquisition and translation is age. The relationship between age and learning a second language, however, is hotly contested. There is a tendency toward teaching foreign languages to children at a younger age as the relevance of learning a foreign language often increases with the growth of worldwide communication. However, the question of whether and how age affects second language acquisition, which age is the best age for language learning, and whether earlier is better for second language acquisition, has become a hot topic of debate among educators, but so far there is no definitive conclusion. In order to improve students' foreign (or bilingual) language proficiency, many countries have lowered the age at which students learn a foreign language. This approach is consistent with neuroscience research on the age of onset of second language acquisition in bilinguals. Studies have shown that early bilinguals have similar patterns of bilingual brain processing to the first language and native monolingual speakers, while late bilinguals tend to have expanded brain areas and increased levels of activation in bilingual processing. Early second-language speakers are more likely to acquire a second language level close to that of native speakers. Exposing learners to a foreign language at a younger age is an effective approach. Chinese is the language that will benefit from the lower age of foreign language education, so reaching out to younger learners and helping foreign countries to solve the problem of teachers teaching Chinese to younger learners should be an important part of the international promotion of Chinese. The Chinese teaching community in China should strengthen research on teaching younger children and establish a training mechanism for teachers of Chinese for younger children, in order to follow the development trend of foreign language education and promote the international promotion of Chinese.

In order to build a scientific approach to teaching, this paper investigates the fundamental ideas of the critical period hypothesis as well as the impact of age factors on second language acquisition and translation.

2. A General Description of Second Language Acquisition

A second language is, broadly speaking, any language other than one's native or first language. The term "acquisition" denotes that the learner stresses the meaning above form and that language use is an accidental process that results from natural feelings or reasons [1].

3. Major Theories of Age Factors Influencing the Second Language

3.1. Critical Period Hypothesis

The "critical period" hypothesis states that language acquisition occurs naturally and effectively. It is believed that the optimal age is within the first ten years. This hypothesis is based on two assumptions: (1) children's language has a different theological basis than that of adults, and (2) children outperform adults in all aspects of second language acquisition. The validity of the former remains a question, but the validity of the latter has been challenged by later research.

3.1.1 First appeared

The critical period, which is referred to as the stage when an organic individual is most sensitive to specific external stimuli, was originally introduced in the realm of biology. The crucial period theory for language acquisition was drawn from Penfield & Roberts' (1959) Brain Plasticity Hypothesis regarding the clinical appearance of aphasic individuals [2]. They contend that language acquisition and the brain are intimately related, and that language development is optimum between the ages of five and ten. During this time, without outside assistance or teaching, humans can simply and swiftly pick up a language in their natural environment; the left and right hemispheres of the brain, however, carry out separate tasks and may experience lateralization as adolescence sets in. The present critical era for language was provided by Lenneberg (1967), who also accepted and expanded upon Penfield & Roberts' perspective [3]. The current key period for language acquisition, according to Penfield & Roberts, is from the age of two through adolescence (10–12 years), when natural language development can take place. Lenneberg (1967) adopted and refined this theory.

3.1.2 The relationship between age of onset and acquisition effectiveness

The age factor and the critical period hypothesis are inextricably linked. The relationship between the age of onset and the efficacy of acquisition is really taken into consideration in empirical investigations on the validity of the Critical Period Hypothesis. The crucial period hypothesis asserts that age is a key factor in the acquisition of second languages and was established from the research of mother tongue acquisition.

3.1.3 No critical period for second language acquisition

But there is also a lot of evidence to support the idea that there is no critical period for second language acquisition. There are many real-life individuals who have also achieved native proficiency but who have only begun to learn a second language as adults. Brown argues that a very famous example of this is the celebrity politician Schwarzenegger, who did later achieve native proficiency in English, but in fact, he did not. Osterhout et al. used brain imaging to find that individuals did not learn English until they were adults. Abutalebi summarised neuroimaging studies and found that when bilinguals reach a certain level of proficiency, the differences between child and adult subjects narrow, and a portion of the brain area will be shared by both languages. In addition to proficiency, learning ability also significantly affects the effectiveness of second language acquisition in adults, and factors affecting second language acquisition include age, with both summary and learning ability decreasing with age. Another important factor is the socio-cultural context, which cannot be ignored.

3.2. Cognitive Style

Depending on whether the impact is good or negative, cognitive growth has an impact on the translation and acquisition of second languages. With adolescents having undeveloped cognitive

abilities and adults having relatively mature cognitive abilities, the process of cognitive growth is continually altering. Despite having some understanding, young students rarely employ languages in that sense. They see language as a means of conveying thoughts [4].

3.3. Emotional Factors

It has long been held that emotional adjustments are what ultimately lead to children's greater performance. According to David Elkind (1970), the beginning of formal activity causes emotional changes. As people age, their emotional richness increases, which in turn increases the importance of emotional elements in second language acquisition [5]. Emotional factors are directly associated with second language acquisition and translation.

4. Advantages

According to the author, there are numerous advantages to having kids start learning a second language at a young age. The more youthful, the better. The greater the acquisition and the closer it comes to the level of a native speaker, the earlier the age of acquisition. The acquisition of phonology is better the younger the age at which the second language is used. The activation of learners' native vocabulary at a young age of acquisition is facilitated by the use of semantic starters and form-based starters. Numerous similar research has provided data that suggest bilingualism improves the brain's so-called executive functions. Children who are taught a second language grow up to be more accepting of social and fundamental differences, according to a recent Concordia University study.

5. Opposing Views

Some scholars are in denial that the age at which second language acquisition begins affects the final level of acquisition. The acquisition of a second language in adulthood can be as close to the level of a native speaker as possible.

Some studies have not fully considered other factors affecting second language acquisition levels in their analyses. Therefore, there are counterexamples of children who are not acquiring a second language at a high level and adults acquiring a second language at a near-native level in second-language contexts, to refute the conclusion that the earlier the age of onset, the better the eventual acquisition.

5.1. Counterexample Experiment

5.1.1 Birdsong’s experiment

Twenty students were chosen for the test by Birdsong (1992), whose level was comparable to that of native French speakers and whose first language was English. Using a grammatical judgement test, the 20 native French speakers were used as control variables. The findings indicated that most adult learners of second languages who picked up French could perform at the level of a native speaker on this task [6].

5.1.2 Iroup et al.’s experiment

Iroup et al. (1994) utilised Julie, a British woman, and Laura, an American woman, as subjects. Julie and Laura were both married to Egyptian men and had moved to Cairo after their marriages. Neither had studied Arabic before. Through oral tests, accent recognition tests of various local Arabic dialects were conducted. accent recognition tests, grammatical judgement tasks, translation tasks and fingerspelling tasks. The participants' acquisition of Arabic was found to be very low. Two subjects were found to have acquired Arabic at a level close to that of their own language level [7].

5.1.3 Birdsong & Molis’s experiment

Birdsong & Molis (2001) used native Spanish-speaking American immigrants as their subjects to duplicate Johnson & Newport's (1989) experiment. The study, which revealed that bilingual post-

adolescent immigrants to the United States might likewise acquire native-speaker fluency in English, employed the same experimental materials and techniques [8,9].

6. Foreign Language Education at a Younger Age and Teaching Chinese as a Foreign Language

China's economic development and increased global power have led to a greater emphasis on relations with China. As the most spoken language in the world, more and more people are aware of the new opportunities that learning Chinese offers. Chinese is likely to be chosen as a language of instruction by education authorities in some countries. In the face of the new development of international foreign language education, what does the teaching of Chinese as a foreign language need to do to meet the demand for Chinese language teaching abroad?

Chinese is recognized as one of the world's most difficult languages to learn, and learners who are exposed to the language at an early age have the best chance of achieving a high level of proficiency. This is also in line with the global development of foreign language education. Therefore, international promotion of Chinese should focus on younger learners.

Due to various conditions, including national conditions and regulations, international promotion of the Chinese language has not yet reached younger learners. Most of the overseas Confucius Institutes that promote Chinese as a foreign language cooperate at the university level, targeting adult learners as university students. There are very few Chinese language teaching programs for primary and secondary school students. Therefore, the globalization of foreign language education at a younger age provides both opportunities and challenges for teaching Chinese as a foreign language.

Chinese is the language that benefits from the globalization of foreign language education at a younger age. This situation is most evident in countries where English is the native language. In these countries, Chinese can become one of the languages of instruction in foreign language education for younger students as a second language. For example, the U.S. National Security Language Program's elementary and secondary foreign language instruction programs accounted for most critical language programs funded by the program in 2006 and 2007, and between 1997 and 2008, the percentage of Chinese language instruction in elementary school foreign language programs increased from 0.3% to 3%. With the increase of Asian immigrants, the Australian federal government established a program to fund the teaching of Asian languages in primary and secondary schools, and Chinese was one of the four Asian languages funded [10].

Therefore, the international promotion of Chinese should increase the coverage of younger learners, and the Chinese teaching community in China needs to grasp the direction of foreign language education in various countries, strengthen the research on teaching for younger children, and help solve the problems encountered in teaching Chinese abroad [11].

7. Conclusion

In fact, self-learning benefits all age groups. Children have a stronger memory and a bigger advantage in vocabulary before adolescence, although adults have a higher level of cognition and a better understanding of semantics than children.

Since immigrants are immersed in a second language context, there is a difference between the learning environment for second language learners in a second language setting and that of classroom learners; nonetheless, classroom learning requires the construction of a language environment. The majority of language students in China continue to study English in traditional classroom settings. Teachers should consider the real age of the pupils in the classroom while developing the curriculum and teaching methods, without placing an undue amount of emphasis on this factor. Additionally, it's critical to foster a positive learning atmosphere in the classroom by encouraging students to connect with one another and teachers to teach as much as possible in English. Additionally, English language instruction needs to be changed in order to lessen the detrimental effects of utilitarianism and test-

taking on students' acquisition of the language. The new curriculum should place less emphasis on grammar and vocabulary and more emphasis on teachers' development as language users as well as providing students with high-quality language input.

Foreign language learners themselves must master the best learning techniques, pursue their own interests, put forth the necessary effort, and establish a language environment in their daily lives. They must also shed the limited perception that English is only a subject for exams and come to understand that it is a tool for communication and a way of thinking that can advance their development and provide access to the rest of the world. At the same time, Chinese English language learners can use online resources to raise the quality of their language input and advance their English.

The field of second language environment should be expanded in the future for empirical research on the impact of age of onset on second languages acquisition level, such as by examining the Chinese acquisition level of native non-Chinese minorities in China and the Japanese acquisition level of immigrants to Japan. Furthermore, the relationship between learners' foreign language acquisition and age of onset should be the main point of attention rather than the second language environment.

People can infer the significance of age considerations in influencing second language acquisition and translation from reading and studying a substantial body of literature. The critical period hypothesis is still a concern in the learning of second languages. The critical period theory is still a contentious topic in second language learning. The timing is right for learning a second language, but not for translation. It is a favorable time for learning a second language, but not a guarantee. The more typical findings for age and second language acquisition are: 1) The issue of learning speed: in the beginning, adult learners have an edge, particularly in grammar, but kids may gradually catch up to them; 2) Children have better pronunciation than adults do, coming closer to the native level of the second language; 3) In terms of linguistic potential and aptitude, children are more linguistically capable and competent than adults.

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