

Differing Views on the Age Factor in Foreign Language Learning

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Abstract

There have been debates on the right age to start learning a foreign language, especially, English. A great number of researchers have revealed evidence to support the notion, 'the younger to start, the better'. In contrast, others argue and advocate for implementing instruction of English a little later in life. Studies also have revealed that other factors play important roles in this, varying from naturalistic and instructed second language learning settings, lengths of exposure, initial age of learning as the beginning of significant exposure, affective factors, individual factors, and classroom factors. So far, there has not been a definitive finding asserting the right age or the right factors to start learning a foreign language which has resulted in a consensus on this matter. This paper intends to show different viewpoints toward the controversy over the 'Age Issue' as well as looks into other factors that cause effective learning in foreign language learning. In addition, the author shows a couple of findings concerning another factor not related to the 'Age' factor in Thai educational setting context such as students' motivations and beliefs. All issues and factors mentioned in this paper are meant for novice teachers to see which issues or factors fit with their context, so they can design their teaching approaches appropriately.

Keywords: critical period hypothesis, foreign language learning

1. Introduction

Second Language Acquisition (SLA) has received its attention from all parties involved in the educational field since the 1960s resulting in the massive amount of studies on the theoretical implications of observed language behavior. Furthermore, there are numbers of conferences and journals devoted to the studies of SLA with different perspectives and foci. Currently, the field of SLA is still within the scope of interest of researchers and there are enormous opportunities and depth in terms of the variety of topics yet under investigations (Hulin & Xu, 2014).



The development of SLA has been traced back from the theory of Behaviorism by Burrhus Frederic Skinner (1974), Universal Grammar by Noam Chomsky (1986), Five Hypotheses by Stephen Krashen (1982), and Output Hypotheses by Merrill Swain (2000), to Interaction Hypotheses by Rod Ellis (1999), and the following are brief summaries of the development of SLA.

1.1 Behaviorism

Two prominent researchers focused on Behaviorism theory and their research had a great impact on the Second Language Acquisition (SLA) field. John B. Watson (1913) relates theories ranging from psychology to science in which a behaviorist views behaviorism through the lens of the scientific method and investigation of predicting and controlling behavior. That means he studies human behavior and learning based on scientific inquiry and perspectives ignoring traditional experience from anthropological perspectives concerning the human mind and cautiousness. He believes that the learning is a result of stimulus, response, and reinforcement. After Watsonian behaviorists, the most well-known behaviorist is B. Frederic Skinner (1904–90).

Skinner focused on scientific explanations and reasoned that the way of scientific behavior was based on truly specific explanations. In short, psychology should be treated as a science and be studied within scientific constraints. Behaviorism is primarily concerned with observable behavior, as opposed to internal events like thinking which was argued by anthropologists, and behavior is the result of stimulus and response controlled by the scientific method (Baum, 2005).

1.2 Universal Grammar

In contrast with behaviorism theory, Noam Chomsky (1986) argues that a child is able to learn some aspects of language in certain situations when they are not presented with any linguistic models. This is because children are innately equipped with Universal Grammar (UG). Chomsky argues that UG is a special device called Language Acquisition Device (LAD) built in a human brain and its function is to facilitate the human to learn a language quickly and unconsciously, especially learning a first language. In other words, the UG approach characterizes the structures and processes the child brings to the task of first language acquisition. The relationship between UG and SLA is that the language properties consist of general rules and principles which apply to all grammars of other languages (Hulin & Xu, 2014). In short, UG is the theory which suggests that a human is born with a language acquisition device which facilitates them to learn a language without being explicitly taught.

1.3 Five Hypotheses

Regardless of behaviorism and cognition, Krashen (1982) argues that language acquisition concerns meaningful interaction in a target language in which the speaker is not only careful with their form of utterances, but also with the messages they are conveying and understanding. Therefore, Krashen (1982) offers five main hypotheses in second language acquisition theory:

1. For the acquisition-learning distinction, Krashen (1982) distinguishes between acquisition and learning. For acquisition, it is an acquired process where a learner acquires their first language which needs natural communication and an informal situation. For learning, it is a process of learning a language consciously in a formal situation such as in a classroom.
2. For the Natural Order Hypotheses, it is found in both language acquisition by adults and children in an orderly fashion. That means, they tend to acquire certain grammatical structures early and others later. For example, in English morpheme, the progressive marker 'ing' and the plural marker 's' are acquired first whereas the third singular marker 's' such as 'He lives in New York.', and the possessive 's' such as 'John's hat' are typically acquired later.
3. For the Monitor Hypothesis, it explains the relationship between acquisition and learning. Acquisition is the process to initiate utterance while learning acts as a monitor or an editor to see whether the utterances are correct or not. In addition, there are three types of individuals using monitors differently: First, the monitor over-user is careful with all the grammars and rules of a language. Second, the monitor under-user prefers not to correct any grammars after utterances. Third, the optimal monitor user uses monitor appropriately.
4. For the Input Hypothesis, which can be regarded as the single most important concept in second language acquisition theory today, it is the state when a learner understands through hearing or reading input language which contains structure that is one level beyond their current level of competence. This process is called 'Comprehensible Input' which belongs to level 'I (as input) + 1 (as a beyond level)'.
5. For Affective Filter Hypothesis, which shows how affective variables relate to the process of second language acquisition, Krashen (1982) proposes that learners with high motivation, self-confidence, and a low level of anxiety are better at acquiring a target language.

1.4 The Output Hypothesis

Swain (2000) states that an output is the action of producing language in speaking and writing when a learner encounters a gap in their linguistic knowledge. She also argues



that the output pushes a learner to understand language more deeply than the input does and may stimulate the learner to progress from linguistic comprehension to complete grammatical processing needed for accurate and correct production.

1.5 The Interaction Hypothesis

The definition of interaction is conversational modification. This means it is seen as involving both intermental and intramental activities where speakers, whether natives or nonnatives, are able to realize that their utterances are correct or incorrect during communication; for example, they corroborate well in direct and indirect forms of feedback, comprehension check, clarification requests, topic shift, negotiation of meaning, repair of communication breakdown, and repetitions. This will promote a learner in acquiring a second language (Ellis, 1999).

Learning a foreign language involves a number of variables and complexities. It is true that a learner can achieve mastery of the foreign language learning, but there must be some factors causing the learner to achieve that level, one of which is 'age'. However, age is intersected with a number of variables and complexities resulting in a number of different views in SLA research. That means there is a popular belief that children are better at acquiring a second language than adults because of their brain flexibility. In contrast, there are research revealing that adults are superior to children because their fully functional brain is able to handle more difficult knowledge and intensive experience. Later, unrelated to the brain, there are studies revealing other factors that have an impact on effectiveness in learning a second language such as motivation and interest (Abello-Contesse, 2008).

I am aware that this issue is hardly a new debate for SLA and EFL researchers. Although there has been much research done on age-appropriateness and contributing factors, there is a lack of consensus on a definitive roadmap for teachers to follow in terms of a preparatory age or a single influencing factor. My research reveals that the questions that have not been answered for almost half a century and are still being debated are the following:

1. Is it better to start learning a foreign language at a younger age?
2. Is it better to start learning a foreign language at puberty?
3. Or are there factors that lead to learning a foreign language effectively?

Therefore, this paper intends to show different viewpoints toward the controversy over the 'Age Issue' as well as looks into other factors that enhance effectiveness in foreign language learning. In addition, the author shows a couple of findings that 'age' is not a factor in Thai educational setting context such as students' motivations and beliefs. All issues and factors mentioned in this paper are meant for novice teachers, interested in

second language acquisition, as a brief summary of the controversy over the age issue and the paper pinpoints that there are other factors supporting effective learning.

2. Viewpoints supporting ‘the Younger, the Better’

Most beliefs trust that younger children are better at acquiring a second language than adults based on the fact that a child’s brain functions have more ability to absorb more information and learn new things as a progress of development growth. This ability of children’s brains to acquire a new language easily is called ‘Critical Period Hypothesis’ (CPH). The linguists who support the CPH believe that brain plasticity and flexibility in children are the factors for fast and unconscious learning of both first and second languages. Therefore, all kinds of learning must take place at this stage; otherwise, it will be too difficult when the brain becomes inflexible in adulthood. (Palea & Boștină-Bratu, 2015).

Ahmed (2008) posits that the critical period is a biologically determined period of life, mainly about puberty, when a language can be acquired most easily, but if it is beyond this stage, it will become difficult to master it. Within the critical period, learning a language is done in a natural way through much exposure to it without formal instruction; as a result, the learning will occur unconsciously and rapidly. This is in line with Scovel (1988, as cited in Palea & Boștină-Bratu, 2015) suggesting that if a learner begins to learn a second language after the age of 12 years, they will not be able to reach native speaker level phonologically, but only acquire a native competence in morphology and syntax instead within the age of 15 years. In addition, other studies have supported ‘the Younger, the Better’ idea. For example, there is a research revealing foreign language speakers’ fluency and accuracy by selecting 67 foreign language English speakers who had been in the USA for at least five years. The foreign language speakers were selected from speakers of mixed non-English L1 languages, their performance in interviews were recorded, and native English speakers were asked to rate their fluency and accuracy. As a result, those arriving before the age of 15 performed as native-like or nearly native-like (Patkowski, 1980). Other research studies on Chinese- and Korean-speaking learners of English who lived in the USA for five years focused on ‘Grammatical Competence’; the finding shows that those arriving before seven years of age performed as native-like, but those arriving after the age of seven performed progressively less well. In short, the studies mentioned above confirmed that those in the process of acquiring a second language within the age of 12 years are still able to reach the ultimate attainment in terms of phonological and grammatical competences, but if they go beyond the age of 12 years but are within 15 years, the learner is still able to acquire morphological and syntactic competence. If the age goes beyond that, it will be impossible for the learner to reach the ultimate attainment (Johnson & Newport, 1989).

3. Viewpoints supporting ‘the Later, the Better’

The linguists supporting this view argue that children should not be given any input at the early stage; rather, they should be allowed to learn anything including their first language naturally. In addition, foreign language learning is not considered a natural learning. It involves full concentration and functions of a human brain, so the linguists suggest that the children should wait until their brain is fully developed, and all kinds of learning including a foreign language can take place with high possibility of successful results. Kindergarten students, school students, and university students are totally different in terms of brain development. The higher the level individuals move to in their schools, the better they are at learning difficult subjects. For example, most high school students study Physics, Biology and Chemistry when they are in high school level. These subjects are very difficult and complex; therefore, the high school students are better prepared than the secondary school students (Ahmed, 2008). To support ‘the Later, the Better’ idea, there is a study revealing that in Tswana tribes of South Africa, at least 24 languages are spoken among these people. Within this culture, members in each tribe must marry others in another tribe who speak different languages. The result shows that they are able to communicate via each other’s languages at some points (Ahmed, 2008). Another study from Snow and Hoefnagel-Höhle (1978) shows that CPH is not related to a learner’s second language acquisition. They studied 51 native English speakers studying Dutch as a second language, who were divided into five groups of different ages for a period of one year. All subjects were studying Dutch at school or at work without any or little formal instruction. The subjects were tested with components of pronunciation, morphology, syntax, and vocabulary at intervals. The result reveals that the subjects aged 12-15 years old were the fastest learners and the slowest learners were aged 3-5 years old; therefore, this study fails to support CPH. In short, learning a new language at a later stage is very beneficial when the brain has become fully functional.

4. Viewpoints supporting ‘Other Factors’

Contrasting the views of the Younger, the Better, and The Later, the Better proponents, adults may seem to acquire a new language more poorly than children, but they have other skills to compensate for and fill in this gap. Unlike children, they are able to organize and manage their learning plan based on their experiences, skills, and knowledge with motivation and interest to enhance their learning more effectively (Palea & Boştină-Bratu Bratu, 2015).

Other researchers have been cautious about taking one side over the other, so they chose to compromise and offered other factors; for example, factors of naturalistic and instructed second language learning settings, lengths of exposure, initial age of learning

as the beginning of significant exposure, affective factors, individual factors, and classroom factors.

The naturalistic and instructed second language settings play a crucial role for a learner's ultimate attainment referred to as native-like proficiency or the final product of a second language. The naturalistic second language setting is the learning through immersion in a second language environment whereas the instructed second language setting is a formal learning in a classroom. Carmen Muñoz's research (2008) reveals that children are better acquirers of a target language than an adult. When the children are in a naturalistic environment being exposed to authentic language, as a result, they have intensive experience in acquiring a second language unconsciously. In contrast, the children take more time in learning a target language than adults when they are in a formal or instructed second language setting. That is because the children are confined within a form of official language in a classroom and there is a need for them to adjust to an instructed learning environment which takes much longer than it does for adults. In other words, it is because of the differences in input in both learning contexts. However, significant exposure to a target language in a naturalistic second language setting can also occur for both children and adults and it will make an impact on the ultimate attainment for them as well. That means if they are significantly exposed to varieties of speech acts over a wide range of situations and topics, and get opportunities to participate in social second language settings, they will be able to reach the ultimate attainment (Muñoz, 2008). In addition, the length of exposure also affects the learner's ultimate attainment. For a naturalistic second language setting, Krashen et al. (1979) and DeKeyser (2000 as cited in Muñoz, 2008) reveal their evidence that the length of exposure for a learner to reach the ultimate attainment should be within five to ten years of arrival in the target language environment; otherwise, the effect of the ultimate attainment will diminish or disappear. Meanwhile, the instructed second language learning will take around five or ten years for later starters to acquire second language proficiency depending on the factors of hours of instruction and exposure to the target language.

Factors other than CPH of a foreign language learning concerning age are quite varied; for example, motivation, anxiety, self-confidence, attitude, learning styles and many more (Bista, 2008). These factors should be the ones indicating the success of a foreign language learning. These have been supported by another group of linguists and researched by many other researchers as well. The following are those supporting this view.

The language faculty in children and adults are just the same. What differs is 'affective factors' such as low self-esteem, confidence, and social distance. He also suggests that children learn a foreign language better than adults because when they have more time to play around in a real situation, then they learn the foreign language unconsciously (Ahmed, 2008). It is difficult to say whether a critical period (which according to Paradis (1999)



ranges between 2-13 years of age) really happens by giving a different view, “it is much more difficult to predict knowledge or ability in any of the other areas of communicative competence (syntax, cohesion, sociolinguistics, etc.) based on age of acquisition” (Archibald, 2005, as cited in Bista, 2008, p. 12).

In other words, an individual’s factors are the key success to SLA; for example, the L2 classroom modified input, modified interaction, and learning environment in second language learning context. Moreover, there are other important factors such as health, classroom practices, and age-related learning styles in foreign language learning. In addition, older adults learn a foreign language for professional purposes such as using it in a target language working environment, getting promoted in a career, and using in a business context. On the other hand, children learn a foreign language for only specific reasons such as moving to other countries or learning it because it is in a school curriculum. It has been observed that children and adults do not always get the same quality and quantity of language input in both formal and informal learning settings; therefore, it is difficult to pinpoint how these variables work as a filter or barrier in the learning process of the young and adults (Bista, 2008).

A number of educational conditions are also factors causing difficulty in foreign language learning. First, there are not sufficient qualified teachers who specialize in teaching a foreign language. Second, the teachers are not properly trained for teaching, for example, English as a foreign language. Third, there are still misconceptions as to who would be the better teacher between a qualified non-native teacher and a native teacher. Fourth, the teaching method is based on a teacher-centered approach rather than a student-centered approach. Lastly, students in most foreign learning classes have mixed levels of proficiency.

5. Foreign language learning in Thailand

Thailand not been colonized, Thai is the sole official language for communications throughout the country. When new technologies and the adoption of the Internet were embraced in the country and resulted in transitions in terms of business, education, sciences, and technological progress, English became the important language to deal with these changes (Wiriyachitra, 2002). As a result, the Thai government realized the need to have Thai citizens become proficient in English, so they passed a law on education to increase the number of international schools and allowed Thai students to attend these schools. Thai parents who could not support their children to attend international schools or pay for their children’s private education were still guaranteed 15 years of free education. With this educational scheme, Thai students are able to study English at as early as the pre-elementary level because it has been made a compulsory subject (Fernquest, 2012). However, despite studying English for 15 years in schools starting from the pre-elementary level, Thai students are still ranked amongst the lowest on

English proficiency (NIETS, 2011, EF English Proficiency Index, 2011, as cited in Kitjaroonchai & Kitjaroonchai, 2012).

When examining what factors are responsible for this problem, the studies from Kitjaroonchai and Kitjaroonchai (2012) and Suwanarak (2012) are in line with the view supporting 'The Other Factors' mentioned in the previous section. Based on the findings from Kitjaroonchai and Kitjaroonchai (2012), a motivational survey and open-ended questions from 137 Thai students aged between 18-24 illustrate that students' motivation was the factor to be able to find an ideal job in the future easily. The findings from Suwanarak (2012) show that students' beliefs and preconceptions about learning English affect the way students learn English. That means, from the study of the 220 students participating in the questionnaire and individual interview process concerning beliefs, strategies, and achievement in English learning using the framework of Beliefs About Language Learning Inventory (BALLI) by Elaine Horwitz (1987, 1988, 1999), the result showed that students who rated themselves as a high achiever recognized the value of learning English; in particular, it was useful for academic success, communications and better career. Therefore, they were eager to learn English and ensured their achievement goals in learning English were met. In short, what effects Thai learners' low second language acquisition, especially English, is mainly involved with students' motivations, beliefs, teachers' low English proficiency, heavy teaching loads, larger class of approximately 45-60 students, insufficient native speakers, and inadequate classroom equipment and educational technology. All these factors influencing whether Thai learners progress well in English accord with the viewpoint that supports 'The Other Factors'.

6. Conclusion

So far, there have been three different views regarding the critical age period of English learning. The first view believes that young children can learn anything including a foreign language during the development of their brain because of their flexibility and plasticity of their brains. Another viewpoint trusts in an adult's fully developed brain which is more ready for learning things such as difficult subjects: Physics, Chemistry and Biology, including a foreign language. However, in contrast to an individual's brain development, a third viewpoint believes in other factors such as inner predispositions, social environment, and educational factors which either contribute to or hinder the success of foreign language learning. Given these three views, there have been a number of linguists and researchers trying to prove the efficacy of their choice of view by conducting a number of studies. However, over the past forty years, there has been no consensus reached or proof offered on what age or which factor is the best one leading to success in learning a foreign language. Recollecting my own experience as a language learner in Thailand, I believe that the factors related to a learner's fully functional brain together with significant exposure to the target language and motivation have greatly impacted



the effectiveness of learning a second language. On average Thai students are involved in formal education for 15 years; however, many cannot construct simple sentences and have limited knowledge of English grammar. Larger classes with approximately 45-60 students can easily cause learners to become passive in their learning. Many schools also have insufficient teachers, especially native speakers, and inadequate classroom equipment and educational technology. All of these can result in the lack of motivation. However, many students who are independent learners may find ways to improve their English outside of classrooms. Since Bangkok is a cosmopolitan city, it is easier for youngsters to find opportunities to communicate with foreign friends and have more exposure to using English. In this case, regardless of age, some are keener than others to self-study and make themselves available to learning.

7. Recommendations

Although there have not been any research evidence pinpointing what age or which factor is best for learning a foreign language, we have seen some problems related to foreign language learning, especially, the educational factors mentioned in the viewpoints supporting 'The Other Factors'. Therefore, well aware of the fact that it may not be applied to every school context, I would recommend the following to solve these educational problems because these recommendations at least serve as some guidance for those wishing to apply them in their school settings.

First, the Communicative Learning Teaching (CLT) approach is an option to replace traditional teaching methods such as grammar translation and audio-lingual methods. According to Richards (2006), CLT is known for how to use language for a range of different purposes and functions. It is also known for when to use formal and informal speech. CLT's characteristics can enhance students' communicative competence by learning through task based-activities and this will shift learning from teacher-centered to student-centered. CLT can help solve problems about passive students. However, teachers implementing CLT in their curriculum should tailor the approach to match their pedagogical context to ensure it does not conflict with the cultural context of their teaching environment. The reason that this solution is proposed is that characteristics of CLT match Krashen's (1982) theories of input hypothesis, monitor hypothesis, and natural order hypothesis mentioned in the introduction.

Second, the teachers' enhanced foreign language proficiency, for example in English, and cultural training for both non-native and native teachers may help students learn a foreign language effectively. Whether the teachers are native speakers or not, the quality of the teachers is important. They must possess both linguistic and socio-linguistic competence. In addition, teachers should encourage learners to speak in the second language, not force any students to talk, try not to remove tension during a communicative phase, seek what interests students and bring it as a topic of discussion or learning, and

correct students' mistakes professionally and discreetly (Palea & Boștină-Bratu Bratu, 2015).

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