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CRITICAL AGE HYPOTHESIS IN SLA PROCESS

Abstract: Learning a second language is a linear process. The theories in learning any language seem to be the same, still its implementations result in different prove. Second language acquisition process has its factors that affect on input. One of those factors to be dealt with is age. Critical Period Hypothesis is viewed as a neutral rule pertaining to language learning process. Second Language Acquisition process functions variously with different age learners. If some scholars prove that young age group learners are more able to acquire a foreign language at a professional level, the others believe that the learners at their old age are also able to acquire it well. The given article is aimed to prove the learners of a young age group are more prone to show high language proficiency level than adult learners, whereas adult learners who have reached puberty are less able to acquire foreign languages at a proficiency level. The focus group is chosen as for a young language learner candidate, the other is for an adult learner. The observation-based research took place in the language learning center where two learners of different ages were taught under the same conditions, and with the same teaching methods and techniques.

Key words: critical age, language acquisition, second language acquisition, critical period hypothesis.

Language: English

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Introduction

Science entails diverse directions in its field ranging from natural to exact. Individuals' demand in one sub-field of science – learning languages waxes day by day. In the Republic of Uzbekistan a great emphasis is put on learning English as a second language since the first president of Uzbekistan I.A.Karimov (2012) signed a decree “On measures to further improve of foreign language learning”, whether being the youth or old, everybody is attending to self-development in second language acquisition.

The objective of the study is to identify at what age it is acceptable to start learning a second language. The feature to be proven is what age is an efficient age to major in acquiring a foreign language. The object of the case study is comparing learning processes of two different age group learners and the subject per se is proving which learner succeeds in acquiring a

second language. An overwhelming majority of researches have been done and proven by many linguists and scientists pertaining which age gives a great possibility to succeed in learning a second language. The given research is based on observing and teaching a 10-year old learner with 22-year old learner, relating to the concept “Critical Period Hypothesis” in general. The given small-scale research deals with possible constraints each age level faces in the second language acquisition process, the outcomes prompt what age is endorsed to learn a second language as well as suggesting some possible ways of overcoming language learning constraints each learner of different age groups confronts.

The actuality of the given topic lies in the fact that learning and acquiring a second language at a proficiency level is impetus for all. Albeit, the desire to learn is not sufficient, a number of restrains exist in

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comprehending a language, on a par with it, some effective factors occur in different stages of age level restricting ones to learn or acquire language as learners succeed in learning. There is a saying that learning has no limits, notwithstanding language acquiring process is limited from biological perspective. The given small-scale research is done in a number of lessons devoted to finding out the exact rationale and justification why learning after puberty comes onerous.

Literature review

Critical Period Hypothesis has been a major concern for all, leading to deeming whether to believe there is a timetable for learning or everyone regardless one's age is able to learn a second language at ease that has been giving prompt to researchers to seek for science on the same topic longitudinally. Accordingly, EsimGürsoy (2011) highlighted that second language learning process ought to take place before puberty taking into account some features that support this view as weakening of brain plasticity and reorganizational capacities of it. As it is biologically evident, a human's neurological system in brain has its limits to acquire certain information, inasmuch as being the most sensible part of human body. As well as this, Snow and Hoefnagel-Höhle (1978) stated that "second language acquisition will be relatively fast, successful, and qualitatively similar to first language only if it occurs before the age of puberty" (p. 1114). Nowadays, parents are more concerned about their children's future and giving them to additional language courses. In turn, adults are also passionate about learning languages. Albeit the listed views are similar, Birdsong (1999) asserted that belief in upcoming failure of adult language learning might lead to misapprehension of the evidence that of the result of different learning experience. Succeeding in second language learning or not may be also contingent upon personality in some circumstances, though. Besides, Seright's research (1985) showed that adults' aptitude deteriorates as they become older. The reason is the deterioration of brain functioning to access certain number of information to be remembered. In turn, Singleton (2007) associated causes of failing in acquiring language with neurobiological issues. This is what happens with older people not only with the brain, but also with other organs functioning feebly. Admittedly, Moskovsky (2001) stated that "the Critical Period Hypothesis in essence contends that the ability to learn a language is limited to the years before puberty after which, most probably as a result of maturational processes in the brain, this ability disappears" (p.1). Many researchers' works on Critical Period Hypotheses define the probability of being able to learn English before puberty to be more feasible rather than commencing language learning after the puberty.

Learners' profile

Learning process of a second language for different age groups differ much. For the case study to conduct, a 10-year old learner and 22-year old one were chosen. Both of them are eager to learn English for various purposes. A school boy (learner A), who is 10 years old, does well at school. A girl, learner B, who is 22 years old, studies at college. Both of them speak Russian that is a first language they have been taught at school. The boy mentioned he has a passion for English at school, because most lessons were based on games and activities in the form of competitive games, whereas the girl asserted she had not been taught properly at school neither she did not use to be fascinated in learning foreign languages nor anyone motivated her to learn languages, that led to losing interest in learning languages overall. Both of the learners are bilingual learners as they are both Uzbek and first language at their school has been Russian. The boy stated motivation for learning English like doing additional language courses beyond school hours was to have intriguing lessons as they did at school, as well as getting the most active pupil in his class, and as his peers, who are better than him at English, he desires to be at the same level as they did. Besides, his hobbies are playing football and reading books in Russian. These chosen learners have been taught by the author for fourteen days at language center named "Brainstone academy". The boy, learner A, stated he desired to learn English is due to his brother who prompted him to learn languages by speaking English at home. The girl, who mentioned the reason why she wanted to learn English is because of her career goals to enter high educational institution, that is considered as learning English for academic purposes. Apparently, she is passionate about English songs and English culture, the reason why English is essential part of her study is a desire to visit foreign countries and study there. Notwithstanding, she never thought about learning English at her early ages when she was studying at secondary school, but when it was time to major in one profession, she chose English language to master. In accordance with the queries on what their faint and potent sides in their personality and nature of learning were, learner A associated with his over interest in watching television programs, while learner B connected it with her lethargy.

Research design

As an initial step for conducting the small-scale research, the questions were devised for interviewing the learners A and B so as to identify in depth how far they are passionate about learning English and to clarify what might seem negative as a hindrance in their learning process. The questions were not based on Yes and No questions, but mostly based on broad answers, which are divergent in meaning and structure, that is named as open-ended interview

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demanding no other right or wrong answers. The interview was conducted in L1 so that the learners lack background knowledge at all. Choosing interview as a method in research methodology is appropriately-chosen step “one” as it identifies all about learners’ general interest in language learning or in any field pertaining to one particular topic of questions. The questions of the interview were all partially personal questions connected to learning English language, after obtaining the answers from the respondent it would be evident whether they want to learn English or not.

The next step concerning the design is to conduct a written questionnaire (Learning style inventory) based on identifying what kind of learning style they have. The key reason why the given learning style “questionnaire” is chosen for the second step is that in accordance with identified learning style, a teacher chooses what kind of teaching methods to choose from. Otherwise, conducting lessons is useless unless there is awareness about using particular techniques from a teacher’s perspective. The questions are similar to one another differing only in meaning, in order to answer the learners tick where the space is shown with what they agree, if not, they do not tick. The last step is to take a test from the two learners on passed grammar topics: the questions will be on “to be”, “there is/are”, and how they managed to learn new English words off by heart. According to the results shown after conducting the research, whether learning a second language at early ages or old, it would be transparent which age level is appropriate for raising aptitude for learning languages. The skeleton of how research takes part is as follows:

1. Interview
2. Questionnaire
3. Experiment (pre-, while-, post- activities on grammar)

Data collection and analysis

The outcome of the research design is reflected in the following steps of the analysis of the research. Turning to interview details, eight questions were given in a step-by-step order to find out the weak and strong sides of each learner and their general interests in English language. The second question was given for clarification of the length of language learning process according to their schedule in education that gave the acquit explanation of how long they had been learning English. Following so, when asked the learner A, the challenges in learning a second language for him were on making up sentences and question forms of sentences in written and oral form. From the gained answer, it is outlined, due to young age factors affecting on critical thinking ability, the learner A is not able to connect words which are the cause of not knowing sufficient number of English words and grammar for it, as he is young enough, he

was not able to answer as desired according to a concrete question. The learner B stated she learned English at school on a weekly basis set on governmental school curriculum, but she cannot remember any of the English at all then because of inattention to lessons and laziness to learn languages, she admitted to start learning English from the age of 22 then. The obstacles she faces in the learning process is to learn grammar rules off by heart, she mixes all grammar rules with any grammar rule that leads to misunderstanding of one particular theme effectively. The last fact already illuminates learning grammar rules do not assist her to understand the context without which teaching a second language considers to be inconsistent for adult learners. As was stated in the source “...there is a support for the argument that ‘earlier is better’”. This support, found in the critical period hypothesis literature is based on the claim that biological and maturational factors constrain language learning beyond a certain age.” (ReVel,2004). Inversely, the learner B was not concerned about grammar rules, but he did not associate the challenge of learning with any particular aspect inasmuch as his ability to accept information is effective. The question on in what ways it was facile to learn English, learner A posited he prefers pictures associated with any theme, whereas learner B opts to learn by watching English movies, being unaware of other aspects to consider other than watching films. In the teaching process every learner’s preference for a teacher’s attitude is dissimilar, if learner A – 10-year old boy prefers friendliness from a teacher’s perspective, the learner B-the adult learner prefers either friendliness and stringency as well.

Turning to the results of questionnaire, it was apparent both learners’ learning styles were visual, so the textbooks to choose from was “Round-up 1” by Pearson Longman. To be clear for both learners under the research the book “Round-up 1” was chosen. The explanation behind is that the book “Round-up” is mostly based on broader explanation of grammar topic with visual pictures that are of significant importance to consider. With regard to the experiment that lasted for five days, different consequential results of two learners are evident in a number of cases in the teaching and learning process. In teaching process one of the teaching methods chosen for appropriateness is a Grammar-translation method to facilitate learning process of learners that they demand explanation of L2 into L1.

The first lesson was conducted on the topic “Plural and singular nouns”, the detailed explanation of the rules as putting “an” where there is vowel sound, and putting “a” before consonant sounds were shown and written on the blackboard. The 10-year old boy (learner A) participated being active while doing exercises orally, while the 22-year old girl (learner B) did not do as the learner B in the teaching process. When it was asked from the learners the other day as

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what article should be put before the word “umbrella” learner A answered correctly, whereas learner B was still confusing whether “u” is vowel or consonant sound. While explaining the cases were “an/a” or the ending “s” writing on the blackboard, the learner B gave the example for the plural form of the word “book” as “sbook” instead of giving the correct version as “books”. On the contrary, however, learner A responded correctly. Both learners were taught in Russian that is their L1. The explanation to the learner B why “sbook” was incorrect was associated with Russian grammar rules as “books” in Russian is translated as “knigi” but not “ikniga” putting the last letter at the beginning does not obey the rules at all. In accordance with it, learner A did not confuse and did not face any difficulties with the usage of plurality, but when it was the turn to write the plural form of irregular plural nouns, the young learner made mistakes, while the adult learner B made fewer mistakes, that can be the reason for having strategic competence in the learning process.

Apparently, in a step-by-step order of conducting lessons, the theme on “to be” was the following stage of the experiment. As was explained that the verb “to be” has different formation with each pronouns, after the explanation and while doing exercises, learner B made far more mistakes than the learner A, while learner A did all the tasks with few mistakes to be made. The mistakes of the learner B were not careless as mixing all the forms of “to be” with all the pronouns not caring about whether it was plural or singular. When given the question whether the sentence structure “she teacher” was right, the respond maintained to be “yes”. Even though the sentence structure of English language was the stable order of three parts of speech “Subject+Verb+Object”, she did not accept “am, is, are” as verbs yet, the learner A made sentences using “am, is, are” without any mistakes not confusing any of the pronouns with the correct usage of “to be” verb form. Regardless of the misunderstanding of the grammar theme “to be”, the adult learner – learner B did not manage to complete the task on “Demonstrative pronouns” even after several consolidations of the theme; the given context was “What are? – They are planes” learner B answered incorrectly as “what are they?” instead of “what are those?” (Longman, 2010, p.24). Given the question why not to use as it was given in the instruction what words to put, learner B said not to understand the difference between “they” and “these”/ “those”. In contrast, learner A did the task in a right way with the help of pictures shown and as he asserted to understand and comprehend learning materials with visuals. Each language learning process of two learners vary in various drillings based on several grammatical topics. On the one hand, when given the task to fulfill that was on correct writing of pronouns while dictating, the young learner made mistakes

where two vowel sounds written together as “you” and the sound of the letters “th” was confused with the letter “z” in “they” and demonstrative pronouns “this, that, those, these” with “z” every time. On the other hand, the adult learner-learner B managed to write making not as many mistakes as the learner A. The adult learner was not able to answer appropriately the questions on pronouns as: teacher asks “Lily is a beautiful girl. Lily – who is it, he or she or it”, the answer was ambiguous not knowing which was correct to choose from; whereas, the young learner manages to answer orally not even making one mistake to define who is he, who is she when given the question from the teacher’s side. In some research sources the rationale behind why children are best learners was explained in a number of cases, one them was observation that results in learning casual relationships and ability to interfere from the observation pertaining to fast memorizing of certain features explained in the learning process (Lucas et al., 2014).

According to the consecutive observation and experiment, learning process of the adult learner seems as she is acquiring English language features in the process, albeit she gets perplexed when it comes to the appropriate choice of the right option to circle or find the right answer. For instance, the topic on grammar was “Can”, the usage and its structure within the sentence were clarified from the teacher’s (author’s) side. The question was “can you swim?” to both learners in a written way, learner A’s answer was “yes, I can”, the adult learner-learner B was still mixing all the auxiliary verb forms in usage, obviously her answer uttered as “yes, I am”. Before conducting the lesson on “Can”, ambiguity lied in the fact that the auxiliary verb “are” of “to be” verb was used for all personal pronouns, yet it led to misunderstanding of certain language features in depth. One of the cases of what the reason for not revising homework, the adult learner associated with having no time to do the tasks, that is a sign of why her learning process does not yield positive results. Evidently, these types of features of learner B were obvious during the lessons in contrast with learner A, who was eager to learn and drill becoming engaged in any activities in learning process. After passing and explaining all the grammar rules the learners were given to read a song based on consolidating numbers, types of vegetables and the difference between singular and plural nouns to sing. First of all, they were asked to listen attentively, after that to sing the song alongside the recording played on in order to imitate native like pronunciation, which is given in the chosen book. Observing the learners, learner A illuminated a higher initiative rather than learner B to engage in the activity, whereas instead of singing the song, the adult learner did not initiate only keeping silence. According to Galmiche (2014), “elusive emotion of shame does not benefit learners to succeed in language learning causing long-term

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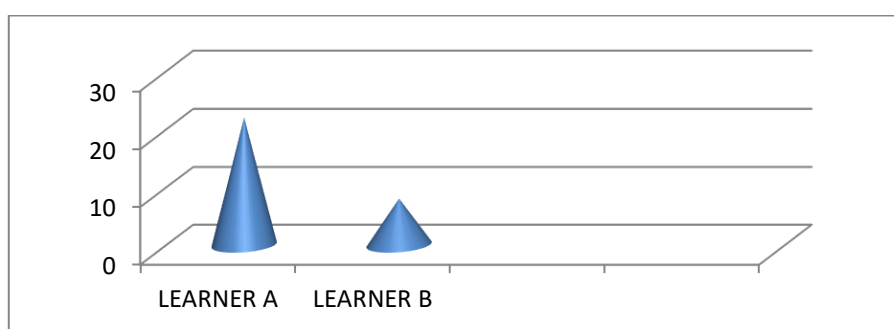
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disengagement, limitation of the potential language input.” Ergo, there is a time frame to acquire a second language and comprehend the language learning process per se. However, most children never feel any awkward circumstances unlike adults in the learning process.

The fourth day of the experiment lasted with the learners in the same classroom teaching together. After several lessons covered with them, they were given a small number of exercises from the chosen textbook “Round-up 1” on the topics they covered, the pages are 21 and 22. According to the results obtained, learner A indicated high score making slightly a few number of mistakes within the time set equally for each learner. For the first exercise which is on putting

“am, is, are”, learner A completed well with minor mistakes as he did not put the apostrophe (‘) with short forms of auxiliary verbs. In contrast, learner B did the exercise confusing all the auxiliary verbs with one another; instead of writing “is” before the word “English”, the preposition “in” was chosen that is not asked in the instruction which is one of external information of word combination heard or seen somewhere else as she answered. In the exercise seven, learner A wrote in a right way, whereas learner B gave quite short answers not following the grammatical rules fixed during the systematic lessons. The total number of right answers should be 25. The ratio of how the two learners of different ages comprehended a second language in their aptitude:



Pic.1.

Conclusion

Regardless what age or in what phase of language acquiring ability a person is, individuals' demand for learning a second or any foreign languages is waxing as there is a great emphasis is paid to language acquirers in any field of science. There are three phases of time frame for learning a second language: before puberty, at puberty and after puberty, the case study dealt with the two learners of different age groups who were at their before and after puberty.

A number of researches have been done by scholars and linguists to come to conclusion of which age group learner is able to learn and who is not according to time when they started learning a second language; one alleged that it was better to learn at young ages, whereas the other asserted it is a reasonable age to learn a language at old ages. The scholars EsimGürsoy, Snow and Hoefnagel-Höhle, Birdsong, Singleton, Moskovsky and the others contributed much to proving what age is an acceptable age for language learning, the failure why adults fail to acquire and learn a second language was associated

with weakening of brain plasticity, neurological issues and maturational processes at the brain.

Having analyzed all the details of theoretical and practical significance of the praxis within the case study, it might be concluded that adults are not able to learn a second language at proficiency level unless they never experienced language barriers before puberty. The reason for that conclusion might be their weakened attention span, the lack of metacognitive strategy as giving analysis for one's own studying, planning of what should be done to learn quickly as it is proven in the given case study. Children, on the other side, are more likely to learn foreign languages easily in any circumstances and regardless of their fascination in the language per se, as they possess good language learning ability, good function of their brain and motivation to learn from outside if given. According to the small-scale research, it was apparent that learner A (a 10-year old boy) succeeded to learn and accept all the information as considered rather than learner B (a 22-year old girl). Considering all findings and analysis, an acceptable age for acquiring a second language is inevitably a young age before and while puberty over “after puberty”.

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Appendix I

Questions	Learner A	Learner B
1.Hello. What is your name?	Isfandior	Sitora
2. Are you interested in English?	Yes, I am	Yes, I am
3.How long have you been learning English?	From First Year at school	I did not do English seriously
4.What do you find interesting in learning English?	Names of things	To talk to my friends in English
5.What is difficult for you in the learning process?	To give questions in English	To learn grammar rules off by heart
6.What helps you most in learning English? (songs, films, videos, narratives, texts)	Pictures	Watching films
7.What do you do not like from a teacher's perspective? (swearing, stringency, softness, friendliness)	Friendliness	Friendliness and stringency in balance
8.Are you able to do your homework in English without any assistance?	Yes, I am.	Yes, I am

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