

## هل سن المتعلم سبب حيوي في اكتساب اللغة الثانية؟

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### الملخص باللغة العربية

هذا السؤال الذي مازال الباحثون والعلماء والمعلمون يحاولون إيجاد إجابة له ، ونحن جميعنا نلاحظ الأطفال وهم يكتسبون لغتهم الأم بكل جدية ويسر، اللغة الأولى هي اللغة التي يكتسبها الشخص منذ ميلاده ، واللغة الثانية هي اللغة من العادة يتعلمها الفرد بعدها. فاللغة الثانية هي لغة لم تكن اللغة الأصلية للشخص ، ويعباره أخري فهي اللغة التي تأتي بعد اللغة الأم، فالكساب اللغة الثانية يمر عبر خطوات وإجراءات ومراحل لاكتسابها ، ومن أجل أهميتها فإن اختيار العمر المناسب له دور أساسي في العديد من الدراسات التجريبية

ويبدو أنه كلما كان العمر مبكرا للطفل في الشروع لتعليم اللغة الثانية كلما كانت النتائج أفضل وبأن تكون لغته قريبه من لغة الناطق الأصلية لها . إن البالغين يتعلمون اللغة الثانية في فصول الدراسة وفق جدول وزمن محدد الأمر الذي يعرضهم إلي العديد من الصعوبات وأحيانا الفشل ، وهذا راجع إلى أن تعلم لغة جديدة يحتاج إلى وقت وجهد ومهارة وعزيمه . الأمر الذي قد يكون ميسورا للبعض وغير ميسور لغيرهم.

والحقيقة المعروفة بأن الأطفال الصغار يتعلمون اللغة الجديدة بشكل أسرع ومرن من البالغين ويكون نطقهم للغة أقرب من المتكلم الأصلي لها.

لقد أثبتت العديد من الدراسات بأن التعلم بعد فترة المراهقة أصعب من المرحلة التي قبلها . لذلك فإن هذه الورقة البحثية تسلط الضوء على الزمن المناسب للسماح لأطفالنا بالشروع في تعلم اللغة الثانية والتقنيات المصاحبة التي تستعملها من أجل تحقيق أفضل النتائج .

## **The Suitable Age to Learn a New Language**

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### **Introduction:**

#### **Does age matter for the ultimate attainment of second language acquisition?**

This is a question that researchers, scholars, and teachers are still sorting out. We have all have observed children acquiring their first language easily and well. First language is a language that someone acquires from birth and a second language is a non-native language usually learned at a later stage. Second language refers to any language that is not a person's native language. In other words, it is a language that comes after mother tongue. Second language acquisition is the process of acquiring a second language. Due to its importance, the optional age for this process has been the subject of many empirical studies. It would seems for many reasons that the younger the child starts acquiring his second language, the more likely that he will reach a native-like proficiency. Yet adults learning a second language particularly in educational setting can meet great difficulties and sometimes failure. This is because learning a new language takes time, skill, and determination, and may be easier for some than others. It's a known fact that kids learn a new language faster than adults, and they can achieve native speaker levels with more ease. Many studies revealed that learning after a critical period is harder than before it (see Hutchcroft, 1981; Dean1992, Harmer 2007; Tudor 1996). This paper sheds lights on the suitable age in letting our children start learning second language and the techniques may be used in order to obtain good results.

## **Learning a second language**

A second language is not a native language in a country but is used as a medium of communication among people who know that language. It is generally used along with the native languages for different purposes and has official status or a recognized function within a country that a foreign language has not.

A foreign language is one which is taught at schools as a school subject or at a senior level for the purpose of giving the learner a foreign language competence that he may use in one or several ways (see Al-Ashab 2013).

English is being introduced to younger children in many countries around the world. It is important to know how young learners learn a foreign language and the most suitable age of letting them learn it. It is also important that teachers of young learners should have the ability of understanding their learners' attitudes capability of achieving and practice the target language. The growth in teaching English to young learners has not been universally endorsed, but the assumed benefits of an early start are controversial (see Nikolov, 2009a; Pinter, 2006). However, there is no consent among researchers towards learning language neither L1, nor L2 due to the fact that human being's behaviors are not always the same. Many theories, towards have been emerged to clarify how does a child learn a language and how they believe towards the way of learning. There is a range of argumentative based on how, when, why learning language such as behaviorism theory, cognitive theory, natives' theory, interactional theory. Children do not start speaking their mother tongue straight away. This is also to confirm that second language learning and development are not so simple and straightforward, and cannot take place in the



absence of interaction and communication (see Cummins 2000; Mitchell, et al. 2013).

### **Learner's Age:**

All researchers agree that the earlier a child starts learning as second language, the better, some researchers claim that the window of learning a second language extends through puberty. But, they all agree that agree that it is much harder for a child beyond puberty to learn a new language. As studies show, at birth the baby brain has an unusual gift; it can tell the difference between all 800 sounds that exist in all languages. This means that at this stage infants can learn any language that they are exposed to. Gradually, as studies proven, babies figure out which sounds they are hearing the most so, they begin to narrow down the range of sounds to those that they hear around them.

During their early years, children acquire and understanding of occurrences, behaviors and objects and acquire basic sciences skills of observing, questioning and investigated known as process skills. It seems that there are some reasons that the younger the child starts acquiring his/her second language, the more likely that s/he will reach a native- like proficiency. The first reason for this assumption is what is known as the critical period hypothesis. The critical hypothesis (CP) claims that natural language acquisition is available to young children, but it is limited in older adolescent and adults. According to cognitive view, early exposure to second language is extremely advantages in that it focuses of the innate ability for language learning that all children seem to have. As evidence to this, they indicate that except for few cases almost all children learn at least one language, and in most cases two

languages with little teaching from parents or other individuals (see Murad, 2006; Paradis, 2004).

Young learners under the age of 18 can still show great skill at mastering the grammar of a new language, but things start to get more challenging beyond this point. This may indicate that learners over 18 years may not reach the level of proficiency that the native speaker have. However, Nikolov (2009) points out that the best time to learn a new language with native-speaker proficiency is by the age of 10. Children under 10 can more easily absorb information and do extremely well in the new language

Moreover, neuropsychologists also support the claim that the period of optimal language learning is coincided with the period of neurological development. The decline of procedural memory for language forces late second language learners to rely on explicit learning, which results in the use of a cognitive system different from that which supports the native languages (see Paradis 2004). Therefore, when people deal with choosing the suitable or the best age for second language learning, it would appear that the earlier start the better chance to learn it.

In the conclusion, different life stages give different advantages in second language learning. Babies have a better ear for different sounds; as toddlers can pick native accents with astonishing speed. While adults need longer attention spans and crucial skills like literacy that allows them to continually expand their vocabulary. One thing for certain is that it does not hurt to learn a second language at any age and in any time.

However, Cameron ( 2001:16-20) reported that in studies of immersion language learning , younger children between seven and eight years seem to pay much attention to sounds and prosody



rather than older children of twelve to fourteen years. Children in general are less able to give selective and prolonged attention to features of learning tasks than adults. This may indicate that adults are better in understanding grammar and salient cues of their first language and also pay particular attention to items of second language vocabulary that they are familiar with. This presents that young children are better in pronunciation and vocabulary than adults who are better in grammar and understanding features of language analysis.

Cameron also added that teachers and teaching methods influence the speed of learning a second language as he stated (2001: 16) “There is mounting evidence from foreign language learning contexts of the influence of teaching method on what is learnt”.

It is important to mention here that adults learn language in a different way of children do. This is because at least adults have already mastered their first language. Which means that their minds are engaged with their mother tongue. Moreover, the motivation and needs of adults are different from young learners. Because both of them (needs and motivation) are crucial factors in learning and can make fast progress possible. However, adults like children, are sensitive to criticism, and teachers have to find ways to encourage learning and develop the self-image of the students which will necessarily involve correction, but not distress the students which will help to overcome the problem (see Sidwell 1987; Jordan et al. 2008)

### **The importance of language**

It is clear that people are using language to communicate with each other. Therefore it is important for everyone to learn or acquire a language and children should learn and maintain their first or native language. Because they use language in order to communicate with others to establish relationship and sense of what they are talking about. Learning to speak in the mother tongue is very important for a child's overall development. According to Finch (1999: 22) states that, "we use language for an almost infinite number of purposes", while Miller (2003:80) points out that "Moving from one country and culture to another poses many challenges to one's sense of identity and identification". This is because people in everywhere need and use of the languages are usually quite different and also vary according to different situation and different places.

Many researchers believe that for the most practical goals language development and intellectual go hand in hand through the child's capacity to use language in a wide variety of methods that his ability to think, to reasons and reuse his experience develops. Language development is the process by which children come to understand and communicate language during growing up. They develop language at very rapid speed and the stages of language development are universal among human beings. Language development reflects the growth and maturation of the brain. (see, Ellis:1997-2015;Harmer: 2007).

However, children may encounter enormous difficulties during their journey of learning a foreign language and a considerable number of their difficulties are based on their language errors. These difficulties are serious and complex when the errors are



difficult to recover from the children's performance i.e. fossilised errors are more difficult to be eradicated from the child's performance and need much time and focus to be corrected. Nevertheless, errors are natural in learning languages and many researchers agree that making errors is common to all learners. In order to help children learn a foreign language and overcome some errors. They need time and practice if they want to become capable of producing better quality TL in their communication. This may indicate that children's errors need to be corrected because correction provides support to learners to master the FL or SL.

### **Second Language Development**

This is concerned about the developmental level of L2 or the target language a learner has reached and the age here may play an important role under the developmental level. It is important to mention here that a learner of a second language has already L1 or mother tongue. Learning to speak or produce a foreign language is acquiring the ability to express oneself in different sounds and different words through the use of different grammar. Any sounds, words or items of grammar may or may not have corresponding item in the native language and these corresponds may have meanings or content which are similar to, or different from, those of the other language (see Seaton 1982).

It is important to concentrate that language is developed through time and according to exposure to it in different situations in natural life or through classroom interaction. People acquire a second language in different rates due to some factors which may speed up the development of language such as, personality, aptitude, attitude, motivation. Learner motivation makes teaching



and learning immeasurably easier and more pleasant, as well as more productive for learners and teachers.

Young learners of second language should be encouraged and motivate them in order to develop their learning of second language. They are socially integrated with the target language and develop sufficient contacts with the target language speakers to enable them to acquire the target language.

Young learners are totally different from adults in all life aspects, and language acquisition is not excluded and teachers should treat them with a special care. Children have a distinct prospective of learning context and they have dissimilar attitude towards the environment around them. Children like fun and moving around because they are not able to keep sitting on their desks for long period of time.

### **Teacher's role**

A good teacher's art is the ability to adopt a number of different roles inside the classroom depending on what their students are doing (see Harmer 2007). A teacher needs to play different roles in teaching activities. His/her roles vary according to the type of activity, for example, he/she acts as a controller when works for grammar explanation and other information presentation. But this role may be changed when the teacher presents an activity where students are working together cooperatively on a project. In this the teacher needs to be prompter, encouraging students, pushing them to achieve more, feeling in a bit of information or language to help them proceed. Teachers should be familiar with various techniques equipments and technology of teaching a foreign language and choosing activities. As Cameron (2001: 179) mentions that "I have suggested that teachers should critically



evaluate the quality and the language learning potential of stories before using them in the classroom”. Teachers should select the activities which are suitable for the age of learners. Cameron (ibid: 198) summarized the following processes that can help learning rather than noisy activity as:

1. careful choice of theme to involve all children
2. detailed planning, using brainstorming and web;
3. linking content with activities and discourse types;
4. pre-planned organisation of materials and activities;
5. teacher and class together deciding on guiding questions’ that structure activities;
6. building in choice points’ where children are guided in making decisions over direction, activity or timing;
7. management of classroom activity and use of resources;
8. attention to amount and type of language use during activities;
9. regular monitoring of each child’s involvement and success in activities and language use, by teacher and children themselves;
10. use of final products to motivate and involve all children.

It is also important that the teacher of a second or a foreign language should be familiar with what s/he teaches due to the fact that L2 learning differs from L1 learning in that the majority of learners fall by the wayside before they get to a high level. An important element in L2 success appears to be how learners are treated and the environment in which they are learning (see Cook: 2001). It is also crucial that a teacher should love his/her job and feel happy in their students’ progress.

### **Summary and conclusion**

As it is presented by the majority of researchers that age is by no means crucial to L2 learning itself, it is also important to

distinguish between adults and children in learning language. This may impulse the teacher to take student's age into account and how long the learners are going to be studying the L2. If they intend to spend many years learning the second language, they might as well start as children rather than as adults. However, if the learners are going to learn the second language for a few years and then drop it, it is better for adults (see Cook 2001:135). Children work hard to make sense of what teachers ask them to do if they are motivated and supported learning. This is also indicates that at particular ages students prefer particular methods for example; teenagers may dislike any technique that exposes them in public; role-play and simulation are in conflict with their adolescent anxieties. This is the same case with adults if they are taught with childish activities or technique.

However, this paper shows that the early starting learning the second or foreign language is the best but this doesn't mean that adults couldn't learn the FL or SL. Learning a second language varies from person into another according his/herself, attitude and circumstances. Although researchers encourage the starting early of learning SL but we encourage learning any language when some body find a chance.



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