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THE ROLE OF AGE IN SECOND LANGUAGE LEARNING.

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Introduction

Age has long been one of the most discussed variables in the field of second language acquisition (SLA). The way learners' biological, cognitive, and social development interact with language learning has raised key questions among linguists, educators, and psychologists. While it is generally believed that younger learners acquire pronunciation and fluency more naturally, adults often progress faster in grammar and vocabulary due to their mature cognitive systems and learning strategies. The relationship between age and language learning, therefore, is not a simple matter of "younger is better," but a complex interaction of brain development, motivation, exposure, and learning context.

The aim of this paper is to explore how age affects second language learning, to examine the theoretical background behind the issue, and to present small-scale research findings illustrating how learners of different ages perform in various aspects of language acquisition. Understanding this relationship can help teachers and curriculum designers develop more effective, age-appropriate teaching methods and learning environments.

2. Literature Review

The role of age in second language learning has been interpreted through several key theoretical perspectives. One of the most influential frameworks is the Critical Period Hypothesis (CPH) proposed by Lenneberg (1967), which suggests that language acquisition is biologically constrained to a certain period in life—typically before puberty—when the brain exhibits greater neural plasticity. During this period, the ability to acquire language, especially phonology and syntax, is believed to be more efficient and natural. Once this period ends, language learning becomes more effortful and less likely to result in native-like proficiency.

Oyama (1976) and Patkowski (1980) provided early empirical support for this hypothesis, finding that learners who began learning a second language before adolescence achieved near-native pronunciation and grammatical accuracy. Johnson and Newport (1989) conducted a seminal study showing that performance in English grammar among Korean and Chinese immigrants declined steadily with

increasing age of arrival. These studies reinforced the idea that early exposure is beneficial for implicit and natural language acquisition.

However, later research has questioned the strict interpretation of the CPH. Bialystok and Hakuta (1999) and Birdsong (1992) argued that adults are capable of achieving high levels of proficiency under the right conditions, particularly when motivation, exposure, and instruction quality are high. Adults' developed cognitive skills, such as metalinguistic awareness and explicit learning strategies, allow them to compensate for the decline in brain plasticity.

Krashen's (1982) Affective Filter Hypothesis also highlighted the role of emotional and psychological factors that interact with age. Children, for instance, tend to learn languages with less anxiety and self-consciousness, while adults may face affective barriers such as fear of making mistakes or social embarrassment. Lightbown and Spada (2013) further emphasized that social context and quality of input are equally important, suggesting that young learners thrive in immersive environments, whereas adults often depend on structured, formal instruction.

In addition, sociocultural theories such as Vygotsky's (1978) concept of the Zone of Proximal Development (ZPD) point out that language learning is also shaped by social interaction and mediation. Younger learners benefit from guided interaction with peers and teachers, while adults may require collaborative and problem-based learning opportunities to internalize language effectively.

Overall, the literature reveals that while younger learners may have biological advantages in pronunciation and fluency, older learners possess cognitive, emotional, and strategic strengths that can lead to equally successful outcomes.

3. Research Design

The present study employed a comparative qualitative research design to investigate how age affects second language learning outcomes among three distinct age groups. The study was conducted in a private language institute that offered English as a second language (ESL) courses.

Participants:

Thirty participants were selected using purposive sampling, divided equally among three groups:

- Group 1: Children (8–12 years old)
- Group 2: Adolescents (13–18 years old)
- Group 3: Adults (25–40 years old)

Research Questions:

1. How does age influence pronunciation, grammar, and vocabulary acquisition?

2. What types of learning strategies and motivations are common in each age group?

3. To what extent do cognitive and affective factors interact with age in language learning success?

Instruments:

Data were collected through classroom observations, semi-structured interviews, and short language tasks, including a pronunciation test, grammar quiz, and vocabulary recall activity.

4. Data Collection and Findings

Data Collection Procedures:

Over an eight-week period, all participants attended two 90-minute English sessions per week. Observations were made during classroom activities involving speaking, listening, and writing. Each learner completed an oral interview for pronunciation analysis and a short written test for grammar and vocabulary assessment. Interviews were conducted to gather insights about learning experiences, challenges, and motivational factors.

Findings:

1. Pronunciation:

The children's group displayed superior ability in reproducing English sounds and intonation patterns. Their speech was more fluid and closer to native-like pronunciation. This finding aligns with Oyama (1976), suggesting that early learners retain greater phonological sensitivity.

2. Grammar and Vocabulary:

Adult learners scored higher in grammatical accuracy and vocabulary use. They tended to analyze rules consciously and apply them correctly in writing and speaking tasks. This supports the claim that adults benefit from developed cognitive and analytical capacities (Ellis, 2008).

3. Motivation and Affective Factors:

Adolescents showed the highest level of motivation, particularly when using interactive technologies such as games and videos. Adults were motivated by personal or professional goals, while younger learners were more motivated by curiosity and fun activities.

4. Learning Strategies:

Children learned primarily through imitation and play. Adolescents combined repetition with peer collaboration. Adults used structured approaches such as note-taking, self-assessment, and grammar exercises.

5. Overall Performance:

Each group demonstrated specific strengths. Children were better at pronunciation, adolescents at communication and motivation, and adults at grammatical competence. However, adults often struggled with listening comprehension and spontaneous speaking due to anxiety or fear of errors.

These findings confirm that age does not determine language learning success alone; rather, success depends on how learners' cognitive, emotional, and social characteristics interact with their learning environment.

5. Conclusion

The study concludes that age plays a significant but multifaceted role in second language learning. Younger learners benefit from high neuroplasticity and implicit learning abilities, allowing them to acquire pronunciation and fluency naturally. Adolescents bring strong social motivation and adaptability, while adults leverage cognitive maturity, metalinguistic awareness, and goal-oriented learning strategies. Despite age-related biological constraints, adults can still achieve high proficiency through sustained motivation, quality instruction, and rich exposure.

The findings suggest that language teaching should be age-sensitive. Teachers working with children should emphasize play-based and communicative methods. For adolescents, interactive and collaborative tasks that build motivation are most effective. Adult learners benefit from explicit grammar teaching, goal-setting, and autonomy in learning. Recognizing these differences can make instruction more inclusive and effective for all age groups.

Future research could explore how duration of exposure, sociocultural context, and bilingualism interact with age to affect long-term retention and communicative competence.

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