

Is Age a Crucial Factor When Learning a Second Language?

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Abstract:

It has been widely accepted that the only best time to learn a second language is early childhood, the so-called “critical period” that lasts until the child is 10 years old. Many scientists explained it as after puberty the human brain becomes less functioning when it comes to learning new languages.

The experiment was carried out on a feral child, Genie, a girl who had been isolated in a small room without access to normal human development for as many as 14 years. When she was found, she couldn't not only speak but also cry or produce any sound. She was not able to use her speech organs. After many years of hard work by Genie and linguists, she managed to achieve great results for her case. Although she did not reach the normal level of English proficiency, she could then understand what was told to her and knew how to express her thoughts. This case has destroyed the myth that children are not able to learn a language successfully after a critical period. They, in fact, can, but with some differences in learning.

Various factors, besides age, can influence the language learning process. These factors include self-regulation, psychological and social factors, language immersion, individual's natural ability, and even geographical location.

Young and adult learners differ in their language acquisition ways: children often learn intuitively and unconsciously through playing and interaction, while adults tend to rely on memorization and visualization strategies. Despite children's generally more productive and efficient learning outcomes, adults can learn languages faster due to their focus and commitment, though children typically excel in areas like accent and pronunciation.

Keywords: Puberty, critical period, feral children, language immersion, language acquisition, self-regulation, phonetic and phonological aspects.

The widespread opinion that adults cannot learn a language

The opinion that languages are better perceived when the one learning it is as young as possible has been commonly shared among people for many years. Scientists believe that there is a critical age for learning a second language, which finishes after the puberty of a child. This idea was first suggested by the Canadian brain surgeons W. Penfield and L. Roberts in their book “Speech and Brain Mechanisms” (1959), says Carmen Muñoz [2]. Penfield said that the high time to learn a second language is when a child is between 4 and 10. The evidence of their studies shows that feral children, or children who suffer from social isolation, experienced an inability to learn a language after the critical period.

The research with a feral child learning a language from zero

However, the case of the girl called Genie, who lived in total isolation until she was 13 years and 7 months old, proves that the ability to learn a language was not impossible after puberty, but it was incomplete [2]. When Genie was first hospitalized, she could not speak, cry, or produce any vocal sounds, as it is said in the article “THE LINGUISTIC DEVELOPMENT OF GENIE [6]. The girl seemed to have very little control over her speech organs. Apart from not speaking, she exhibited significant impairments in muscular control during chewing, swallowing, and other similar activities. After years of practice on her language skills, the results of language comprehension and grammar skills showed that her vocabulary was significantly greater than that of other children at the same stage of language development. Her ability to quickly learn new words and add them to her long-term memory was impressive. Overall, even though Genie suffered in tragic isolation and had heard no human language for almost fourteen years, she managed to show remarkable results in her linguistic development [6].

Factors that impact our language acquisition

The fact that feral children can learn a language to a certain extent, increases the possibilities that normal people after maturity, or even adults, can succeed in learning a language. Both young children and grown-ups can learn a new language, but it happens at different levels for them. In her article, Tatyana Woodall mentions the words of Lourdes Ortega, a professor of linguistics at Georgetown University. According to the professor, adults tend to have more self-regulation and are more focused when they want to learn something, which makes them better learners at everything. The researcher also believes that there are factors other than age, such as language immersion, a person's natural ability, linguistic experience, and the frequency of the lessons, that influence how people can learn a language. Professor Ortega says that regardless of the learner's age if there is no language immersion, one will not be able to learn a new language at all [7].

Moreover, the statistics show that while only 20 percent of people in the U.S. can speak another language apart from English, as many as 59 percent of Europeans are able to speak at least a second language. Therefore, a factor like geographic location also plays a significant role there [7].

The type of language that a person is schooling is also important. The closer it is to one's mother tongue, the easier and faster the learning process finishes. For example, it can take approximately 24-30 weeks for native English speakers to learn Spanish, German, or French, because these languages are quite similar in grammar and vocabulary [7]. On the other hand, if someone whose native language is completely different from the cultural background of the language they are studying, the learning process can take up to 44 weeks. An example of this case can be English - Chinese or Russian - Indian languages.

Age alone isn't the only factor that affects children and adults' learning of second languages. It is possible to conclude that age-related factors encompass cognitive, educational, social-psychological, and neurological factors that will impact language learning directly. Indeed, age has

its role in determining the way of language acquisition in children and adults. However, factors such as motivation, the opportunity for studying, the amount of time to practice, the language learning environment, and social and psychological influences have a considerable effect on eventual language performance [7].

The difference between young and adult language learners

The first difference that has been noticed between the two categories of learners is the way of acquiring a language. Young learners are capable of learning a language more intuitively and unconsciously, so they often absorb language systems through playing games or communicating between peers, which brings them excitement. They adapt to a new language without the need for dictionaries, apps, or other resources. In contrast, adults tend to acquire a language through memorization or visualization methods that are appropriate for them, says Tatyana Woodall [7]. To achieve great language performance and grammar understanding of a second language, adults often employ the learning strategies of their first language, which young learners usually do not do. However, adults often feel insecure about their language skills and avoid speaking to people of that language because of the fear of making mistakes and being judged by others. It is also hard to force adults to sit down and force them to do their homework, as well as the inability to dedicate enough time to practice due to personal problems often prevents adults from learning a language successfully.

According to Ruyun Hu, another difference between learners is that second language acquisition is improved with age and time, which, in turn, means that people who learn a language later may be more efficient than young learners in their childhood [3]. The experiment showed that even though the majority of children experienced more successful results in second language learning than adults, they were not always quicker [5]. It, therefore, can be concluded that adult people tend to learn their second language faster, although children do so more efficiently and successfully. It means that even though it may take children more time to perform a new language with success, their results will be much greater.

Ruyun Hu explains that children are better than adults only in some areas of second language learning, which are a more native-like accent or pronunciation, and communication skills. In other words, children at an early age can adapt to phonetic and phonological aspects of a language more easily because they often learn languages implicitly through exposure and interaction than adult learners do [3].

Memory and cognitive skills are other striking differences between language learners. It is supposed that children have high neuroplasticity, meaning their brains are more adaptable and better at creating new connections. This, in turn, can facilitate faster and more effective language learning for children. They are quick at absorbing information and adapt to new language forms easier than adults. The significance of memory for young learners and analytic abilities for older learners has been observed to differ [1]. Adults often possess a strong semantic memory, or the ability to remember facts and concepts, which can help them understand and use language. However, acquired information is held only temporarily, so adults will need to practice and review it from time to time. Generally, young children have excellent episodic memory, memory of events, and are capable of remembering and reproducing language patterns with ease. If one is learning a language at the teenage age, although they may not achieve native-like fluency as easily as young children, adolescents still have high neuroplasticity and can achieve proficiency with focused effort and practice.

One benefit of schooling a new language as an adult is the fact that older people have better and more developed cognitive resources, such as problem-solving skills and experience, which can help

in language learning. Adults usually have more experience of working with grammatical structures of their first language, so adapting to aspects of a new language may be easier for them.

General strategies for learning a language for both young and adult learners

According to David Singleton and Lisa Ryan, individuals who start learning a second language in childhood usually tend to reach a higher level of proficiency in the long run compared to those who begin learning the language at a later age [4]. The main purpose of teaching a second language at an early age should be to arouse children's interest in learning new languages rather than teaching complex grammar and vocabulary. Until recent years, Uzbekistan's school programs heavily relied on the grammar-translation method, mainly because entrance exams to universities consisted of reading passages and grammar questions. This approach led students to concentrate extensively on mastering English grammar to gain university admission, often neglecting developing speaking skills. However, this way of learning a second language can be so uninteresting and tiring for young children that some of them end up with giving up learning languages at all. Recognizing the importance of real-life communication over grammatical accuracy, the government has shifted its focus. New educational policies now emphasize teaching speaking skills and critical thinking from the early stages of schooling. Therefore, it is crucial to introduce fundamental communication skills to children before the age of 10. Encouraging them to express their own ideas freely, even if they make mistakes, fosters effective communication among their peers, and prepares them for real-world interactions.

Young learners are more prone to learning a language than adults or adolescents, as evidenced by the literature review on the Critical Period Hypothesis and age-related factors. But individuals have different abilities when it comes to language, including language aptitude, second language instruction, teaching strategies and materials, self-consciousness, and personality, says Ruyun Hu in her article "The Age Factor in Second Language Learning". According to Ruhun, childhood is the best period to acquire a second language, therefore, it is better to start teaching it from school and make children discover new languages at an early age [3].

Conclusion

While *the critical period hypothesis* suggests that younger language learners have a natural advantage in learning a second language due to the benefits of starting early, it does not imply that older learners cannot achieve fluency in a new language. From my personal experience, I have found that learning a language later in life can sometimes be more beneficial. When I started studying English at the age of 16, I had already missed the so-called "critical period" for language acquisition. Nevertheless, through dedicated effort, persistence, and self-discipline, I achieved an advanced level of English proficiency in just four years. Although my skills will continue to develop over time, I did not think that I had ever encountered significant issues with pronunciation or communication during that period. I believe I studied English with greater consciousness and awareness than younger learners typically do. As an English teacher, I observed that children often struggled with retaining new vocabulary and grammatical structures, partly because their intentions to learn the language were less serious or they did not understand the necessity for languages. Adult learners, by contrast, usually approached their studies with a sense of high responsibility and motivation, which allowed them to master the material more quickly.

Therefore, I can conclude that young learners are not necessarily always superior, but they often do achieve impressive results in second language acquisition. While children may excel in certain aspects of a language, such as developing a native-like accent, adults typically learn languages more quickly due to their greater focus, motivation, and self-awareness. I know many adults who started learning languages late enough and evidenced great achievements in not only one but several languages. Everyone can learn a second language provided that they possess enough self-discipline

and dedicate enough time for practicing every day. Learning new languages is never too late; it ultimately depends on the individual's motivation and the factors that have been stated in this article.

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