

THE IMPACT OF AGE FACTOR ON GRAMMATICAL AND PHONETIC SKILLS IN ENGLISH LANGUAGE LEARNING

Tolibjonova Munavvar Qobil kizi

Student of Uzbekistan State World Languages of University,
English Philology

tolibjonovamunavvar1@gmail.com

Supervisor: **Boymurodova Feruza Ziyot kizi**

MA International Education Senior English teacher
Uzbekistan State World Languages University,

Boymurodovaferuza555@gmail.com

Abstract: This article investigates how age influences the development of grammatical and phonetic skills in learning English. It is based on the Critical Period Hypothesis (CPH) and examines whether learners of various ages show different levels of proficiency in grammar and pronunciation. The findings indicate that younger learners often acquire pronunciation more effortlessly, while older learners can attain grammatical proficiency under specific conditions. This study integrates theoretical perspectives with recent empirical evidence to provide a comprehensive understanding of age-related factors in second language acquisition.

Key words: age factor, Critical Period Hypothesis, second language acquisition, lateralization, grammar, accent development

Introduction

Second language acquisition (SLA) has become a key area of research in both linguistics and psychology, shedding light on how individuals learn and use languages beyond their mother tongue. The demand for bilingual and multilingual abilities has increased significantly due to globalization and rising migration trends. SLA is not a straightforward process; various factors such as age, motivation, ability, and exposure play crucial roles in determining learning outcomes (Ellis, 2008). Among these factors, age is particularly contentious and has been the subject of extensive study. The debate centers on whether younger learners have a unique advantage in acquiring a second language, as suggested by the Critical Period Hypothesis (CPH). While it is widely accepted that children often achieve native-like pronunciation more easily than adults, the extent to which age influences other aspects of language learning, such as grammar and vocabulary development, remains unclear. Furthermore, much of the existing research focuses on the advantages of younger learners, often overlooking the potential for adults to reach high levels of proficiency under optimal conditions.

Importance of the Study

Understanding how age influences second language acquisition holds both practical and theoretical importance. By recognizing age-related differences, educators can develop effective teaching strategies tailored to various student groups. Information regarding the best timing for language instruction can assist policymakers in making informed decisions about resource allocation and curriculum development. This study aims to challenge or enhance existing theories, such as the Critical Period Hypothesis (Birdsong, 1999), thereby contributing to a deeper understanding of human cognitive development and language processing.

What is actually Critical Period Hypothesis?

The Critical Period Hypothesis suggests that there is a specific timeframe during which both first and second language acquisition occurs more effectively in children compared to adults or adolescents. This concept refers to the general observation that language competence tends to

decline as individuals age and are exposed to a language. The hypothesis was initially proposed by Penfield and Roberts in 1959.

Ellis also notes that there is an optimal period for natural and efficient language acquisition, after which the brain's ability to process language diminishes (1986). Lenneberg (1967) introduced the term "lateralization" to describe how puberty marks a time when the brain's language-processing capabilities become localized in the left hemisphere, coinciding with biological changes in humans. This indicates that children's brains are more adaptable for language learning than those of adults. Krashen suggested that this lateralization process is typically completed by the age of five (1973). However, Lamendella (1977) contended that this timeframe might be overstated and proposed the term "sensitive period" instead, suggesting that the potential for mastering a language can still exist beyond the age of five.

The differences in grammatical structure learning between children and adults

Young children possess highly adaptable brains, allowing them to quickly absorb new information, including grammatical structures. Since their brains are still developing, they can easily adjust to new linguistic inputs. Additionally, children learn through play, songs, and interactive activities, making the process of language acquisition enjoyable and experiential.

Although adults can still learn new languages, their brains are less adaptable. This reduced plasticity makes it more challenging for them to grasp new grammatical structures, particularly those that are quite different from their native language. However, adults have more advanced cognitive skills, which enable them to comprehend complex grammar rules and analyze language patterns. They can leverage their existing knowledge of languages to facilitate understanding and vocabulary acquisition in the new language.

When it comes to making mistakes, children's grammatical errors often reflect a natural process of rule formation, such as overgeneralizing regular verb forms. For example, a child might say "goed" instead of "went," showing their attempt to apply a learned pattern. In contrast, while adults may struggle with more intricate grammatical structures or nuances, their mistakes are frequently influenced by their native language. They may transfer rules from their first language, which can lead to consistent errors.

The impact of age on phonetic acquisition and accent development

Age also plays a crucial role in phonetic acquisition and accent development. Younger learners are generally more attuned to the subtle sounds of different languages, allowing them to distinguish between phonetic details that older learners might struggle with. As a result, they often achieve more accurate pronunciation and a native-like accent, largely due to less interference from their first language. In contrast, older learners face greater challenges in acquiring a new accent after adolescence. However, they can still succeed in learning a new language if they are highly motivated and use effective strategies.

Moreover, brain plasticity declines with age, making it harder for older individuals to learn new phonetic distinctions. Younger brains are more adaptable, which facilitates the learning of new sounds. Research suggests that older learners tend to rely on explicit learning methods, which may not be as effective for mastering pronunciation compared to the implicit learning processes that are common in children.

Conclusion

In summary, age plays a crucial role in the development of grammatical and phonetic skills in English language learning. The Critical Period Hypothesis suggests that younger learners are

more adept at acquiring language naturally, resulting in better pronunciation and grammatical accuracy. While adults may leverage their cognitive strengths, they often face challenges such as fossilized accents. Understanding these age-related differences can guide educators in tailoring their teaching methods to support learners of all ages effectively, ultimately enhancing language acquisition outcomes.

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