

THE FACTOR OF AGE IN SECOND LANGUAGE LEARNING

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ÖZET

İkinci bir dil öğrenimindeki etkenlerden biri de öğrenmenin yaş durumudur. Ses organları çocuklukta esnek olup telaffuzu taklit etmeye daha yakındır. Yetişkin öğrenciler ise mantık ve okuma yetilerini daha ustaca kullanabilirler, dikkatleri kolayca dağılmaz ve kısa süreli bellekleri daha, uzun çalışma alışkanlıkları daha yoğundur. Buluş çağındakiler ise duygusal açıdan daha yoğun olduğundan kendilerini güvenli hissettikleri ortamda daha başarılı olurlar.

SUMMARY

Age is one of the factors in second language learning in childhood the vocal organs are quite flexible which help children be better in pronunciation, adults, on the other hand, can utilize their reason and reading skills efficiently. They have longer attention span and they have good short term memory, their studying habits are well-established. Adolescents become more successful when they feel secure as they are prone to be sensitive and emotionally intense.

The age of the second language learner may be a relevant variable. There is a critical period for first language acquisition related to neurological and cognitive maturation. However, the older second language learner may have certain factors in his favor which contract the disadvantage resulting from missing an early start. He is more cognitively mature, has a longer attention span, and longer short term memory. Many second language learners have been taught in school to reason and use reading skills. As a result, adult learner tends to equate language with vocabulary.

Bugelski (1971, p:149) stresses that the learner's background now has to be taken into account. Some things will be easy for him to learn because he already has the neural connections. Other things will be difficult because he has inadequate or even wrong connections aroused by stimuli the teacher is manipulating. Here we have the explanation for the fact that some children learn some things with ease and others with difficulty. Some things have been learned before, at least in part, still others may have improper neural reactions associated with them, still others may have virtually no neural foundation background and hence must start like all primitive learning from scratch.

CHILDREN

Bugelski (1971,p:314) alleges that children have been learning a second language with great ease since the spoken word become an instrument of communication. No programs, no methods, just learning takes place. This is a pedagogical fact that needs confirming: languages are learned not taught, and children learn language much faster and easier than grownups. They pronounce foreign sounds perfectly and they remember more. At the age of six, or thereabouts, the child has just completed successful experience in the learning of his own language. At this age he can easily apply the procedures, known to himself, that served him so well in the learning of his own language to a second language.

A child functions by instinct. He reacts naturally and spontaneously to stimuli. There is no veneer of fear, doubt, prejudice, and perception to thwart, distort or blunt his perceptions. There is no analysis, or rationalization to confuse him. He merely responds directly and immediately. He goes through no long process of mental translation or interrogation.

The child accepts the second language on faith, the faith of a child. He believes in his teacher. He does not question her ability. Nothing is impossible for him, for he has no reason to doubt his own ability. He has no record of failure to dissuade him from what he sets out to do.

Contrary to too much popular opinion, languages are not learned in the head. One can learn grammar and memorize vocabulary with the head, to be sure, but neither of them constitute a language. Languages are learned with heart and love. If a second language is to be learned at all, the process must be a living emotional experience. The doors of the heart must be opened and love must be allowed to embrace the new language, and the heart of a child is bigger than yours and his love permits no comparison.

A child's organs of speech are flexible and adaptable: his ear is keen and discerning. In addition, every child is a born actor, an exhibitionist ever ready to strut his stuff. He is a natural imitator willing and able to produce and show off.

Repetition, so indispensable for the learning of a language is the soporific, the drug that dulls the senses of adults. So with the child this is valid. Repetition is an integral part of his life, which is a rhythm, a cadence, a monotony. It is the stimulating pattern of his daily life.

Bugelski (1971 ,p:317) indicates that a child approaches a foreign language in a state of grace and purity, a clear and uncluttered mind. He brings no prejudices or preconceptions to bear on the new experience. He does not allow his own language to color or condition the new one as grownups do. If he had been made to learn grammar to learn his own language, he never would have learned to speak at all. It seems terribly unfair to expect a child or anyone else, to do in a foreign language what they could not even do in their own language.

Children are equipped physically and emotionally to make their way through this learning experience to a degree which is amazing. They conquer the obstacles with an ease, but this ability decreases year until the child has reached his late teens when it reaches its lowest level. Unfortunately, that is when we usually begin to teach them a foreign language.

Young children do not know how to read or write at the time they are learning their mother tongue,

second language learners do. Young children are surrounded by the language, second language learners in the normal classroom situation are not. Young children are highly motivated to learn the language in order to communicate with their family and friends. Second language learners may not have a rather complete knowledge of the world around them.

ADULTS

Some people think that the best time to begin studying a foreign language is in childhood and that the younger you are, the easier it is to learn another language. There is little evidence that children in language classrooms learn foreign languages better than adults (people over age 15) in similar classroom situations. In fact, adults have many advantages over children, better memories, more efficient way of organizing information, longer attention, spans, better study habits, and greater ability to handle complex mental tasks. Adults are often better motivated than children: they see learning a foreign language as necessary for education or career. In addition, adults are particularly sensitive to correctness of grammar and appropriateness of vocabulary.

Rubin and Thompson (1982, p:5) hold that age does have some disadvantages. For instance, adults usually want to learn a foreign language in a hurry, unlike children who can devote more time to language mastery. Also adults, have complex communication needs that extend beyond the mere ability to carry on a simple conversation. Adults need to be able argue, persuade, express, concern, object, and explain. Because most adults do not like to appear foolish, they often deny themselves opportunities to practise for fear of making mistakes. Adults have also more trouble than children in making new friends who speak the foreign language.

One example usually given to support the notion of children's superiority as language learners is their ability to pick up an authentic accent. It is usually observed that children of immigrants learn to speak the language of their adopted country without an accent, whereas their parents rarely do. It is also observed that even adults with high need and motivation, such as diplomats, rarely learn a foreign language without retaining some of their native accent. In a sense, the same is true in sports: to learn well the complex coordination of the hundreds of muscles needed to play tennis, swim, or figure skate, a person has to start young.

The best time to learn a foreign language is when your need is clearest and you have sufficient time. If you are strongly motivated to study a foreign language, and if you have the time to do it the best time to begin is now.

Perceptual development depends essentially on exposure to the patterned stimulation of the early environment...It is rare that an adult learns a language so well that he can pass in every respect as a native. One's ear for the rhythms and nuances of speech must be acquired early. The eminent neurosurgeon Wilder Penfield, (1971) declares that for the purposes of learning language, the human brain becomes progressively stiff and rigid after the age of nine. The person who acquires a second language is unlikely to speak without an accent.

It is a common opinion that we learn with greatest facility during our childhood and youth. Good memory is associated with childhood and forgetfulness with adulthood. During the past twenty years, however, a number of such studies have been made so that we have actual evidence to interpret.

The studies by Powell (1971) are of two types. One type of investigation consists of giving intelligence tests to adults who cover a wide range of ages. The other type of investigation consists of testing the ability of adults of different ages to learn a foreign language. The results are conflicting although most indicate that there is some decline in both mental ability and learning ability. The decline generally observed up to the age of fifty is steady, after that age the decline increases. Some results indicate that certain abilities particularly vocabulary and general information increase with age whereas others such as memorizing spoken directions, translating sentences according to a code decline with age. On the basis of all findings, it may be concluded that adults in their twenties and thirties can learn much more and decline in learning ability has been observed for people in their thirties and older, but this decline is caused not by actual loss of learning capacity but by rustiness or lack of practice.

Borger and Seaborne (1976, p:100) prefers the learning skills of adults:

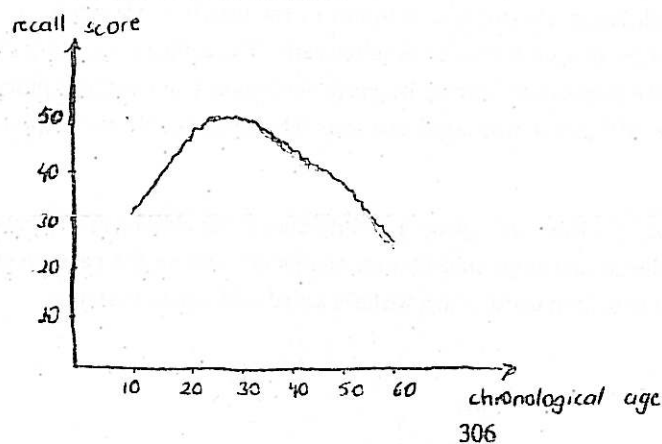
"The essential difference between the learning skills of young children and adults are related to the number and complexity of central responses that are available for a given stimulus. Stimulation for adults is almost always more meaningful than it is for young children. Typical adult learning requires on y one or very few trials while infant learning is usually slow and stumbling. Adult lerning is faster because stimuli activate brain processes of limited extent and less stability and association is more difficult.

There are cases in which adult patients have retained a high degree of intellectual functioning after suffering injuries to the brain which in young children would produce serious and permanent deficiencies in cognitive ability. The development of intellectual ability depends on the brain in in a way in which intellectual functioning of certain types does not."

On the other hand, John A. McGeoch (1974, p:529) maintains that there is no relation between age and immediate recall:

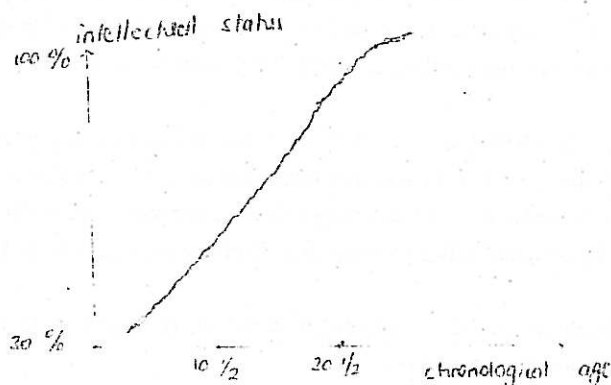
"Research on the rates of learning of individuals and immediate recall shows that over the years of youth and early maturity there is not so much difference. The maximal performance is reached at Chronological Age 23. 5 from this point curve falls. The difference between the scores at any two ages is very small. Although the performance of the oldest group is equal to that of subjects slightly past the age 12, the decrease from CA 42 onward is larger. The total curve rises to a peak in the early twenties, then falls slowly until fourties then rapidly to the middle fifties.

It is probable that such details of method as time of exposure or frequency of repetition are also effective condition.



What Boyd McCandless says on the intellectual growth is quite different from McGeoch (1974,p:226):

"Figure 7.1 reveals that somewhat more than 40 percent of mature intellectual status has been reached by 10 1/2 years of age and that growth from then on is progressively slower. No more intellectual power is added after 19 1/2 years of age, although of course individuals can add almost limitlessly to personal skills of all sorts. There is evidence to indicate that intellectual growth continues longer for the bright and superior, and stops earlier for subjects of low intelligence."



ADOLESCENTS

In this article, I would like to spare a section under the subheadline "adolescence" which is a time of heightened emotionality resulting from the complex interjection of a variety of factors. It starts from the beginning of the teen years. Most authorities, such as Powell, agree that adolescence begins with the advent of pubescence, which indicates the begins of physiological changes. These changes in height, weight, tissue and endocrine functions are universal demonstrations of the genetic nature of pubescence.

Although pubescence is primarily a genetic phenomenon it is nonetheless affected by environmental factors. Climatic conditions, socioeconomic factors and nutrition have a close relationship with the onset of puberty age.

Most people apparently think of adolescents and their problems in general rather than specific terms. The mention of this word seems to conjure up a picture of a high-strung, inconsistent, unstable individual

But many of the abnormalities are only in the eyes of adults. What often seems to adults to be serious behavior disturbances may be relatively common activities in adolescence and are far less serious to the adolescent than the adult may assume.

In this period, the pupil becomes more vulnerable and sensitive, so everything related to him seems to bother him. It should also be reemphasized that many of the problems of adolescence are not caused by biological factors, but rather are united with puberty by cultural circumstances and the influences of the social environment. Cobb (1954) found that boys' wishes are more "in the direction of personal achievement and self-aggrandizement", whereas those of girls tend to more "in the direction of social and family relations and personal characteristics". These are socially oriented goals based on the individual's cultural experiences.

The teen-ager is supersensitive about his appearance. He seldom realizes how he actually looks to others. It is how he thinks, he looks, and how he feels about it that counts. The adolescent's acute sensitivity and self-awareness make any change in his body a small crisis. It is important to belong to, to be like everybody else since they feel insecure in this period.

With increasing age and increased familiarity with the social milieu, the adolescent becomes increasingly confident. Although he still wants approval and acceptance, he is no longer as willing to submerge his personality as he formerly was.

As he becomes increasingly self-confident, he may even seek attention more than he seeks approval. In some cases he may even behave in a manner frowned on by his peers if such behavior will give him the kind of attention or recognition he seeks.

As the adolescent becomes more and more an individual, he seeks the approval of the adults around him. Although young adolescents are perhaps more concerned with peer approval, the older teenager wants approval from both peers and adults. They worry about being successful in their studies. Such worries and anxieties center in mastering their lesson, obtaining good report cards. They want to be well thought of by their fellow students.

If a teen-ager has a complex or a problem it is difficult to teach him unless he overcomes it. If a pupil has an inferiority complex, the first thing to do is to give him more success, praise for sincere efforts, special recognition for achievement. It is not easy to overcome complexes but sympathy and understanding will help. One may also have a superiority complex which prevents clear thinking for emotions and feelings obstruct ideas or guide them illogically.

A pupil who has good native intelligence and good health is more likely to get along with less friction and difficulty than a child of lower intelligence and poor health.

It is evident that those who lack social skills are excluded from the very kinds of social participation in which skills might be developed. Generally, the drop-outs are personally and socially maladjusted individuals. They represent a group of children who are physically unattractive, poorly groomed, lacking in social know-how, shy, withdrawing and unhappy.

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