

Foreign Language Learning at Early Age; Is it Really Urgent?

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Abstract

This presentation discusses issues on children learning a language or languages other than their mother tongue. Although there has been much research done, there are differences in opinions and still a great deal remains to be understood. This paper tries to examine this issue from various perspectives. For instance, whether there is a particular stage a language is better learnt or not; this is very much debatable since there are two contradictive arguments. The discussion about learning of language other than mother tongue which, referred to as age-related issues will be followed by discussing more specifically the issue of learning a foreign language at an early age. Then this paper will also elaborate learning a foreign language at an early age from psycholinguistic, socio-linguistic and pedagogic arguments. Furthermore, this paper will put forward arguments in regards to affordability of implementing foreign language learning at early age.

Keywords: *FLL, young learner, early age, affordable education.*

INTRODUCTION

The issue of how children learn a language or languages other than their mother tongue has been debated for decades (Finocchiaro 1964, Freudenstein 1979, Stern 1967, Littlewood 1984, Clyne 1986, Singleton 1989, Kuhl 2011, Plonsky 2011). When is it best to begin to learn a foreign language? The answer to this question is not straightforward since there are so many factors involved. The history of language learning shows that there has been a change of emphasis as to when language learning is first introduced. In the 1950s and 1960s the introduction to foreign language learning was at an early age, then it transferred to adults or adolescents with little concern for primary level in the seventies, and after that, from the late 1980s till now, it is back to the early age language learning (Brumfit *et al* 1995). Some say that it is best to start to learn a language other than the mother tongue at an early age (Penfield and Roberts 1959, Finocchiaro 1964, Lenneberg 1967, Harley 1986, Singleton 1989, Halliwell 1992); others

say that adolescents and adults have better achievement at learning languages (Olson and Samuel 1973, Neufeld and Schneiderman 1980, Genesee 1981, McLaughlin 1981, Krashen, Scarcella and Long 1982, Tough 1995). Although there has been much research done, there are differences in opinions and still a great deal remains to be understood. This paper tries to examine this issue from various perspectives. For instance, whether there is a particular stage a language is better learnt; this is very much debatable since there are two contradictive arguments. The discussion about learning of language other than mother tongue which, referred to as age-related issues will be followed by discussing more specific the issue of learning a foreign language at an early age. Then this paper will also elaborate learning a foreign language at an early age from psycholinguistic, socio-linguistic and pedagogic arguments.

AGE-RELATED ISSUES

When is it best to begin to learn a foreign language? The answer to this question is not straightforward since there are so

many factors involved. Two contradictory opinions exist. The history of language learning shows that there has been a change of emphasis as to when language learning is first introduced. In the 1950s and 1960s the introduction to foreign language learning was at an early age, then it transferred to adults or adolescents with little concern for primary level in the seventies, and after that, from the late 1980s till now, it is back to the early age language learning (Brumfit et al 1995). Some say that it is best to start to learn a language other than the mother tongue at an early age (Penfield and Roberts 1959, Finocchiaro 1964, Lenneberg 1967, Harley 1986, Singleton 1989, Halliwell 1992); others say that adolescents and adults have better achievement at learning languages (Olson and Samuel 1973, Neufeld and Schneiderman 1980, Genesee 1981, McLaughlin 1981, Krashen, Scarcella and Long 1982, Tough 1995) and therefore it is more effective to start learning a language at a later age.

Some studies in this area as mentioned previously have identified the strengths of learning foreign languages in adulthood such as McLaughlin (1981:29) who suggests that “adults are more skilled at planning, monitoring, and integrating speech into the real-time flow of information; they also have a more elaborate conceptual repertoire and more extensive previous learning than children”. This statement is supported by key writers in the psychology of second language learning, such as Bialystok and Hakuta (1994:80), who suggest that older learners and adults make more rapid progress than younger learners.

To support this contention, McLaughlin (1981) also cites Fathman and Precup’s claim that more speech planning occurs in adult learners of English compared to children (adult learners of English monitor their speech more by comparison with children). Krashen, Long, and Scarcela (1982) argue that “adult learners

perform better on measures of morphology and syntax than children”. All of these studies suggest that adult learners show better performance in learning foreign languages when they are exposed to grammar and lots of exercises while children do not. My experience in learning English is similar to this case. I first learnt English at a later age and at that time learning English means learning all the structures and doing many exercises. And it works for me, in some extent, because I can understand when people talk to me in English and I am now able to write academic papers in English.

Another advantage adult learners have is a set of formed cognitive skills and strategies that should make the foreign language learning task easier (Crystal 1997). Those skills, such as the ability to memorize, imitate, and use dictionaries, as well as the ability to read and to write, give much support to adults in learning foreign language.

Those who support learning foreign languages at an early age such as Stern 1963, Finocchiaro (1964), Littlewood 1984 and Clyne 1986 believe that children appear to have greater advantages in language learning than adults. Stern (1963:26) argues that they have a capacity for the acquisition of new speech mechanisms which the adult no longer possesses to the same extent. Hence, children are more successful in learning foreign language than adolescents or adults.

Another reason why it is important to start a foreign language program early is that the earlier the start, the more can be absorbed (Clyne 1986:13). This means that the period of language learning program will be longer. The longer the sequence of study the more likely learners are to develop reasonable facility in language skills (Finocchiaro 1964:4). Some research has shown that teaching foreign language earlier gives better results than later. For example, testing in

America in 1987 showed that students learning a foreign language before grade 4 did significantly better in language skills and culture than those who started at grade 7 or later (Brown 1994:165).

Regarding teaching English in primary school, Halliwell (1992) states that “very young children are able to understand what is being said to them even before they understand the individual words”. At this age, children have “both conscious direct learning and subconscious indirect learning, or ‘acquisition’ which help them internalise a new language” (Halliwell 1992). These findings suggest that teaching a foreign language in the early stages enables students to achieve greater proficiency.

Singleton (1989) expresses a number of reasons for teaching English as a foreign language at primary level. He does not rely solely on the claim that this is the best time to learn language but rather addresses the broad and long term impact on the nation. His reasons are as follows:

- a) the need to expose children from an early age to an understanding of foreign culture so that they grow up tolerant and sympathetic to others. This reason, I believe, is shared by both Indonesia and Thailand, who wish to build relationships with other countries in the world with whom English is the only tool of communication, in its capacity as an international language;
- b) the need to link communication to the understanding of new concepts. Both Indonesia and Thailand are struggling very hard to develop their respective nations. English is needed to learn new scientific and technological concepts and other knowledge;
- c) the need for maximum time available for the learning of important languages - the earlier you start the more time you get;

- d) the advantages of starting with early second or foreign language instruction so that later the language can be used as a medium of teaching; this is suitable for the recent long term plan announced by the Indonesian government to use English as a medium of instruction in formal education for certain subjects.

To summarize, learning language at an early age according to Brumfit (1995), is better in the sense that brain is more adaptable before puberty than after, that children have fewer negative attitudes to foreign languages and cultures than adults, that children’s language learning is more closely integrated with real communication and that children devote vast quantity of time to learning compared with adults.

Although the debates between these two contradictory opinions are still on-going, in this discussion, I am not going to argue that younger learners are better at learning languages than adults. On the other hand, although there is much research which shows the advantages of the older learner in terms of achieving higher levels of proficiency in most aspects of a second language than younger learners I will discuss the advantages of learning a language (in this case, a foreign language) at an early age. It is also based on the assumption that the longer students learn, the more exposure they will get, the better the performance they will achieve (Carroll 1975, Genesee 1988).

The discussion in the following subsection will employ the argument in psycholinguistics which can guide us to understand more about learning second or foreign language in regards to our inner capacity as human beings as well as the function of our brain where the learning itself takes place.

PSYCHOLINGUISTIC ARGUMENTS

In regards to psycholinguistic discussion, it is worthwhile to discuss the brain and its development. The brain is where learning takes place and the mind is where mental categories are related to linguistic categories; these are essential aspects of language learning beside the personal and cultural aspects (Bialystok and Hakuta 1994). Many experts agree that children's brains are designed to learn a language in a way that adult learners can no longer replicate, as noted in Bialystok and Hakuta (1994:52).

The critical period hypothesis (CPH) by Penfield and Roberts (1959) suggested that there is a critical period in language learning that terminates around 9 to 12 years of age, or at puberty. Penfield and Roberts express this as follows: "The time to begin what might be called a general schooling in secondary languages, in accordance with the demands of brain physiology, is between the ages of 4 and 10" (1959:255). They argue that this CPH corresponds with a period of neural plasticity where different areas of the brain are able to assume a variety of functions, including language. Lenneberg (1967) developed this CPH further. He believed that the critical period of language learning extends from 2 years of age until puberty. It means that the cognitive processes reach a state of "language-readiness" around the age of two and that this state declines in the "early teens". Thus, the CPH proposed by Penfield and Roberts emphasises general neurological plasticity while Lenneberg's emphasises hemispheric specialisation of functions. These studies suggest that learning languages especially foreign language is best performed at an early age when the brain is still flexible.

Many linguists such as Chomsky and Littlewood have argued that children are born with the so-called Language Acquisition Device (LAD). Therefore they can acquire foreign languages in the same manner as native speakers until

puberty when the LAD becomes less effective (Littlewood 1984:67). Having seen that there is a range of factors associated with the developing brain, there are also societal or external factors to consider, which have an indirect rather than a direct effect on second language learning (Ellis 1994:24).

A few studies show that second language learning takes first language acquisition as its starting point (Bialystok and Hakuta 1994). Thus, learners use their linguistic experience in acquiring the first language to learn a second language. It is therefore easier to learn a second language which is not very much different to the first one. According to Bialystok and Hakuta, one can learn a second language that is similar to one's native language more quickly than one that is very different (1994:85-86). Being able to speak like native speakers is one of the reasons why children are called gifted learners, as supported by Finocchiaro (1964), who states that childhood is the ideal period to acquire a language. This is based on reasons such as that their speech organs are still flexible, and there is a lack of inhibition which is typical for older learners and a willingness to communicate with their interlocutors without feeling under pressure. Stern (1963:11) offers similar arguments to the ones suggested by Finocchiaro i.e. that young children possess not only special powers of imitation, but also greater flexibility, spontaneity and fewer inhibitions than adolescents or adults. He goes further than Finocchiaro to emphasize that particular attention should be given to social and emotional factors in children's attitude towards contact with language, culture and people (p.25). A more extreme argument comes from Bialystok and Hakuta (1994) who state that no matter at what age before puberty or how quickly children learn a language, they can end up as fluent as native speakers. As well, at an early age, mental experiences which are obtained through

the senses such as via pictures, sounds, movements, and textures, play an important role in sensorimotor schemes (Jean Piaget 1937 cited in Bialystok and Hakuta 1994). Therefore we need to focus on all psychological factors that can influence children's learning of a foreign language if we want to have better achievement.

When young children learn a second or foreign language, it is apparent that there are individual differences as well as other problems (Fillmore 1979). However, as stated by Seliger (1988:19) "it has been observed that children, for the most part, are at least capable of acquiring another language completely when given adequate exposure and motivation". Motivation is a central factor in order to successfully learn any foreign language (Crystal 1997). With a strong motivation, learners of foreign language can gain better achievement. Brown defines motivation as "commonly thought of as an inner drive, impulse, emotion, or desire that moves on to a particular action" (1987:114). Gardner (1985:129) also argues "motivation is a major determinant of second language acquisition. He then continues the source of the motivating impetus is relatively unimportant provided that motivation is aroused". There are three levels of motivation as defined by Brown (1987:115-7):

- 1) *Instrumental motivation* refers to motivation to acquire a language as a means for attaining instrumental goals such as furthering a career, reading technical material, translation, etc.
- 2) *Integrative motivation* is employed when learners wish to integrate themselves within the culture of the second (target) language group, to identify themselves with and become a part of that society.
- 3) *Assimilative motivation* is the desire to become an indistinguishable member of a speech community, and it usually

requires prolonged contact with the second (target) language culture (added by Graham 1981 cited in Brown 1987).

Motivation may vary from each learner depending on what they want to achieve. For young learners, learning foreign language in school can be motivated instrumentally or integratively. When they grow up, if demanded by the situation, assimilative motivation may apply.

Attitude towards foreign language is also important in the successful language learning. As Halliwell (1992) said that attitudes such as confidence and risk-taking have a central role in language learning not only to motivate the children to accept the content but more than that. It is clear that attitude is likely to influence foreign language achievement.

Regarding this psycholinguistic argument, a number of terms describing the level of competence in the target language that the second language learner develops have been put forward by psycholinguists. The levels of competence learners may develop are classified into 'transitional competence' that expresses the idea that the second language knowledge system being developed by the learner is a dynamic one in a state of flux, constantly changing as new knowledge of the second language is added (Corder 1967), 'approximative systems' that captures the characteristic incompleteness of the learner's second language (Nemser 1971) and 'interlanguage' which refers to a unique grammar that does not belong to either the source language or the target language and that contains rules found only in systems resulting from second language learning (Selinker 1972). This is important to note as far as language learners development is concerned.

From the discussion of the psycholinguistic point of view, it is clear

that learning language other than one's mother tongue is better conducted at an early age in order to acquire better achievement in language proficiency as well as given longer opportunity to learn the language. This idea is of relevancy to the topic of this study which is foreign language programs in primary education.

Having discussed the psycholinguistic arguments as internal factors that influence foreign language at an early age, the next subsection will deal with the external factors which are embedded in the sociolinguistics arguments subsection under the heading sociolinguistic argument.

SOCIOLINGUISTIC ARGUMENTS

Cultural factors that influence language teaching need to be considered with regard to learning languages at an early age, as they vary from country to country. However, as far as foreign language learning in primary education is concerned, there are some characteristics shared by young learner as defined by Brumfit (1995) that young learners tend to be enthusiastic and with fewer inhibitions compared to older learners and because they are just beginning the schooling, the learning can be linked to their initial development of ideas and concepts by performing more physical activities to stimulate their thinking. At this stage, teachers have a major opportunity to mould their expectations of life in school (see Brumfit 1995). From a sociolinguistic point of view, young learners are very open in learning something new and ready to respond to their environment which also influence this process of learning.

Many studies show that learning in early childhood results in better performance in the language, especially in pronunciation. This is because children are not inhibited and keep on trying no matter how many mistakes they make. For example, Singleton (1989:109) pointed out that "as

far as pronunciation was concerned, the younger children aged 6-10 years old were given significantly higher ratings than the older group aged 11-15, ...". This is supported by another somewhat controversial result reported by an educational writer Noel Epstein (1977) in Bialystok and Hakuta claiming that children can learn English in a dazzling record six weeks (1994:51). This drove Bialystok and Hakuta to state that "children do, indeed, appear to be gifted language learners" (1994:51). However, even if this result seems somewhat unlikely, it is true that many results of research in this area show how amazing children are in learning a language compared to adults. A real example from my own experience is my only son. He was eight years old when he came to join me in Australia where I studied. He knew no English. After several weeks staying with me, he could speak English a little and gradually his English was improving as he went to primary school and had regular and close interaction with his classmates. In fact, conducive environment influences and supports learners to learn new language, as noted by Ellis (1994:12) in relation to naturalistic second language acquisition. Language is learnt through communication that takes place in naturally occurring social situations. Having no other choice except to speak the language of his friends, my son is able to build a relationship with his friends. Learning English also helps him in coping with many new situations he has come across since he arrived in Adelaide.

The external factors of learners do affect the language learning process especially if the environment provides a positive contribution. This means that the process of learning can be continued out of class setting because the language being learned is used in the society. However, in the case of English in where the target language is not spoken in the community,

such a contribution cannot be expected. This will be discussed in the next section.

PEDAGOGIC ARGUMENTS

Studies done in early language learning by experts such as Krashen (1981) Clyne (1986), and Ellis (1994) recognize two different contexts of learning language other than the mother tongue, i.e. situational and instructional learning. Ellis (1994:12) using slightly different terminology differentiates two distinct ways in which language is learnt: *naturalistic* and *instructed* language acquisition. *Naturalistic acquisition* refers to language that is learnt through communication that takes place in naturally occurring social situations, while *instructed* refers to learning via study with guidance from reference books or classroom instruction. In addition, other factors influence the acquisition of a second language. These factors can be categorized into external and internal factors which affect both naturalistic and instructed language acquisition. The external factors relate to the environment in which learning takes place, such as social and cultural aspects, while internal factors are inside the learners, such as attitude and motivation, which can only be observed from learners' outcomes (Ellis 1994). This issue has been addressed earlier in this chapter. It is important to be aware of these factors in order to achieve successful language learning. For example, Stern emphasizes that particular attention should be given to social and emotional factors in children's attitudes towards contact with certain languages (1963:13).

Since this study is about classroom practices, let us focus more on the instructed language acquisition of the classroom rather than the naturalistic language acquisition. There are many opinions as to what is best in classroom interaction. The current emphasis is on learning 'naturally' in a communicative classroom setting where the learners are

given sufficient opportunities to participate in discourse directed at the exchange of information (Krashen, Swain, Prabhu in Ellis 1994). Krashen claims that the communicative classroom may not be entirely successful but the immersion classroom has succeeded in developing very high levels of second language proficiency (cited in Ellis 1994).

A range of methods have been promoted for language learning such as traditional grammar translation method, audiolingual method, suggestopedia, immersion, total physical response (TPR). All these methods aim to help language learning process. For at least two decades, communicative language teaching (CLT) has been promoted for foreign and second language teaching (Wilkins 1976, Widdowson 1978, Littlewood 1981). However, none of these methods seems to have successfully fulfilled the expectations since people always keep trying to invent new methods to help language learning program (Krashen 1981) This implies that no single existing method only can be employed for a successful language program but a combination of several methods is required according to the goals of teaching. Other factors such as class size, time allocation, which will be addressed in chapter 5, also need to be taken into account. In primary school foreign language teaching, various of activities should be employed to attract children's attention. For example, Baldauf and Rainbow explain, "songs can be of particular value to the language teacher since they are ready-made sources of interest with enormous influence, particularly to the young. Songs help to immerse the students in the language, reinforce vocabulary, idioms and grammar, as well as introducing aspects of culture" (1992:85). Therefore, it is reasonable and acceptable that an excellent way to teach children a new language is through playing games, using pictures and songs, as they are readily

absorbed as well as being sources of motivation. However, it is important to note as well that besides appropriate methods and techniques, effective teachers can help learners to progress rapidly at any level of schooling. This is explained further in the next section.

From the previous discussion, it is clear that the value of teaching a foreign language in the early stages of education has raised controversy among the experts in applied linguistics. However, as mentioned earlier, there are strong psycholinguistics and sociolinguistic arguments for teaching foreign languages to young children prior to puberty. This is important to be taken into account if we deal with foreign language learning program at an early age. This consideration will help classroom practice to work well.

FOREIGN LANGUAGE LEARNING IMPLEMENTATION

Whether foreign language learning begins early or late, its success depends on designing an appropriate teaching program. Furthermore, it also needs the availability of funds because setting up a foreign language program is not a simple task. There are many factors which need to be taken into account in order to run such a program. A well-arranged plan, including clearly defined goals, curriculum, syllabus and materials, has to be determined. Such a plan, according to Rubin and Jernudd (1971), involves "future oriented, problem solving language change strategies that have been developed to meet particular language needs". This means that to have better results in the future, a plan needs to be prepared according to the national and societal needs, including the needs of learners.

Regarding the implementation of teaching English as a foreign language in primary school in the context of Indonesia, besides the goals of teaching, there are several

factors which need to be considered namely curriculum, personnel (teacher), learners, methods and materials, assessment and evaluation.

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