

**AGE FACTOR AND ITS IMPLICATIONS FOR TEACHING ENGLISH TO  
YOUNG LEARNERS**

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**ABSTRACT**

‘Age’ is one of the crucial issues in the field of child Second Language Acquisition (SLA). The Theories on second language acquisition and research studies point out both the benefits and drawbacks of introducing a second language to young learners. The findings of research have a profound impact on language policy decisions of educationist involved in child language learning. The article provides an overview of some of the theories pertaining to the issue of age in child SLA.



## **INTRODUCTION**

The appropriate age for introducing English as a second language to young learners still remains one of the perennial and as yet unresolved issues in the field of second language acquisition. Are younger learners better than older learners in acquiring a second language? Does early exposure to the Target Language (TL) yield better results? Do older learners out perform younger learners by acquiring second language better and faster in 'formal' learning situations? Are there 'multiple critical periods' (Long, 1990) for acquiring different aspects of language like pronunciation, grammar, syntax and morphology? Is there a strong link between environment and second language acquisition? Do adult learners' developed cognitive skills help them learn a second language better? It is not easy to provide an affirmative 'yes' or 'no' to these questions as evidence based on research studies offers conflicting results, which point out both the benefits and drawbacks of an early introduction. Even research studies that examine the significance of context and environment in second language learning produce mixed results.

Lenneberg, acknowledged as the 'father' of the Critical Period Hypothesis (CPH) (1967) claims the existence of a 'Critical Period' in relation to language



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acquisition, as beginning at age two and ending around puberty. The Hypothesis is based on the proposition that the child's capacity to acquire language is a 'genetically triggered, biologically driven process' that ceases around the age of puberty. Researchers who favor an early start claim that young learners are at an advantage as the brain is more adaptable before puberty, and that acquisition of language is possible without self-consciousness at an early stage (Lamendella, 1997). They bring out the distinction between the weaker and stronger versions of the CPH. The weaker version asserts that language acquisition will be efficient only if it begins within the critical period, and the sooner language acquisition begins after the period the more successful it will be. The stronger version, however, points out that the process of language acquisition does not continue beyond the end of the critical period even if it had begun within the period. Further research on this aspect questions the validity of the claim and points out that there are no clear grounds for believing that language acquisition cannot occur beyond the critical period.

Young learners are keen, enthusiastic, uninhibited, and can be easily motivated (Cameron, 2001) are some of the reasons cited to bolster the superiority of young learners in acquiring a second language. However, many research studies point out the superiority of adult learners in learning a second language.



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The existence of 'multiple critical periods' has been pointed out by Long (1990) who claims that there may be more than one critical period for learning different aspects of a language. The 'ultimate attainment', (refers to the outcome or end point of acquisition) or the outcome of L2 acquisition in pronunciation seems to be more sensitive to the critical period than that of grammar, morphology and syntax. The difference that exists in the nature of phonological acquisition and other aspects of language has led to the theory of 'multiple critical periods'.

Adult learners are at an advantage compared with that of younger learners in formal learning of grammar in instructional settings (Long, 1979). However, in the case of pronunciation, younger learners outperform adult learners. The superiority of adult learners was reiterated by the results of a research study, which concluded that adult learners have an initial advantage where rate of learning is concerned, particularly grammar and morphology (Ellis, 1994)

The results of morphology and syntax tests (Snow & Hoefnagel-Hole, 1978) revealed that old adolescents performed better than children less than 10 years old. Specific environmental factors play a crucial in the activation of certain linguistic development and there are no significant differences between the cognitive abilities of adult and young learners.

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The increase in the number of research studies, both in favour of, and against the existence of a 'Critical Period', points out the complex nature of the issue that is being discussed.

**Theories on Child Language Learning**

Some of the theories put forth by Piaget (1967), Vygotsky (1962) and Bruner (1966) show the inevitable link between the cognitive and language development in children. Piaget's theory reiterates that any kind of teaching can be effective only when the child is able to assimilate what is said and done, a concept he termed as 'learning readiness'. Teaching by asking questions and by demonstration can influence the intellectual development of children only when they are ready for it. Another aspect of his theory points out that children pass through a series of stages before they construct the ability to perceive reason and understand.

The issue of the nature of language and its effect on intellectual development has been discussed by many theorists. The views of Piaget and Vygotsky differ on this aspect. Piaget states that the structure of thinking, mental actions and operations are derived from action and not talk. Language exerts no formative



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effects on the structure of thinking. Vygotsky, on the contrary, points out that in the initial stages, speech serves a regulative, communicative function, and later it transforms the manner in which children think, learn and understand. The teaching and testing of oral skills to learners needs to be discussed against this theoretical frame work. The crucial role of speech in influencing learners' ability to think, learn and understand lays special emphasis on the significance of teaching and assessing the oral skills of young learners. The current second language teaching-learning scenario prevailing in government schools and government-aided schools needs to be examined in order to understand the practicability of implementing the modern methods of teaching, learning and of testing English as a second language to pupils at the primary level in a country like India.

Bruner (1966) emphasizes the role of language, instruction and communication in the development of knowledge and understanding. In this aspect, Bruner and Vygotsky express similar views. One of the core tenets of Vygotsky's theory is the 'zone of proximal development' (ZPD), which is defined as 'the distance between the actual developmental level as determined by independent problem-solving and the level of potential development as determined through problem-solving under adult guidance or in collaboration with more capable peers'. Vygotsky emphasizes the social nature of knowledge acquisition and points out that the human child is able to solve more complex tasks through collaboration.

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Influenced by the theories propounded by Vygotsky, Bruner introduced the concept of LASS (Language Acquisition Support System) and held the view that children's language and learning development take place through the processes of social interaction with an adult support and help component. The interactional partner provides a structure of framework, which Bruner referred to as 'scaffolding' (Brewster, 1991). The amount of parental guidance and support received by learners in the government schools is very minimal as most of them are first generation learners who belong to the most repressed sections of the society. The community with which they interact might not be very successful in providing the necessary 'scaffolding' for second language acquisition. Tickoo (2001) reminds us of the context in which these learners learn English and points out that 'the context has in it a large percentage of first generation learners who often find its discourse of "uncommon sense knowledge" several "difficult-to-negotiate" removes from their home-and-neighbourhood-based knowledge.' Peer help and interaction would, no doubt, make language learning a fruitful experience, but in this context, it should be observed that the learners almost share a common social platform.

These theories have had a profound impact on the second language curriculum, teaching methodology, and teacher training modules. The insights gained from the theoretical perspectives have led to the introduction and implementation of a

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child-centric curriculum and methodology, where the child's needs and interests are given paramount importance.

The importance of social interaction and genuine communication in Foreign Language Development has been stressed by Vygotsky and Bruner, paralleling the developments in Communicative approach to language teaching. The basic tenet of this approach is to provide genuine, real-life communicative situations for learners to deploy their language resources. Learners should be given an opportunity to use a wide range of language skills and in order to ensure this, teachers must include a variety of task types based on games, stories, and information-gap activities.

Based on the theories put forth by some of the exponents in the field of language acquisition, it can be inferred that young learners need to be provided with ample opportunities to learn a foreign language and there exists an inevitable link between language, instruction and communication in the development of knowledge and understanding of concepts.

**CONCLUSION**

Theories on child language learning and research evidence clearly point out the importance of providing young learners with quality 'input' essential for





**MJAL1:6 November 2009**

**ISSN 0974-8741**

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successful second language learning. The 'age' issue assumes greater significance in the present scenario as the number of young learners of ESL has been increasing throughout the world. The theoretical implications would have a profound influence on the language policy decisions pertaining to child language learning.

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**MJAL1:6 November 2009**

**ISSN 0974-8741**

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