

Recommendations on the Starting Age of Learners to Receive English Instruction with Limited Resources

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ABSTRACT. *This paper is written considering a particular situation where English is a second language and opportunities as well as educational resources for English learning are limited. With a aim to narrow down the most appropriate age for learners to begin English learning under such circumstances, this papers gives not only suggestions on the starting age of learning but also practical teaching instructions based on language learning theories and recent studies.*

KEYWORDS: *Starting age of learning; Second language acquisition; Limited language resources*

1. Introduction

When it comes to learner characteristics and second language acquisition, age is always a significant factor that takes effect. In many countries around the world, second language instructions are not given to students until elementary school, although in recent years some countries are making efforts to push up the starting date to kindergarten. This paper is written in terms of a particular situation where English is a second language, and opportunities for English education in secondary and post-secondary schools are limited. The question under consideration here is: when would be a more appropriate time for students to receive language instruction with such limited resources? According to researches on the relation between age and L2 acquisition, though it is generally believed that it is better for learners to receive language instruction at a comparatively early age, I suggest that it is more beneficial for learners in this specific learning condition to receive language education around the age of 14-16 at secondary school level. At the meantime they should be given more explicit pronunciation instruction so as to make up the deficiency.

2. Age and Second Language Acquisition

2.1 Critical Period Hypothesis: How Does Starting Age Affect Language Learning

One issue that closely relates to the starting age and language acquisition is the Critical Period Hypothesis, which claims that there is an ideal and limited time period to acquire language or else it would be difficult or even impossible for further language acquisition. Lenneberg (1967) supports it from the perspective of biology: he suggests that there is a particular process as the brain matures, when the process is completed, it would be difficult for the brain to take in new language. And he also points out that there is a critical period for second language acquisition, “automatic acquisition from mere exposure to a given language seem to disappear [after puberty]” (Lenneberg, 1967: 176). Although there have been quite a few controversies and revisions upon the CPH, it does in some ways indicates the correlation between the starting age and the capability of language acquisition. One of the most frequently cited research in this field is that conducted by Johnson and Newport (1989) on 46 native speakers from China and Korea who had immigrated to the United States for at least five years. It is noticeable that for the subjects who arrived in the States from the age of 6 to 17, a strong negative correlation (-0.87) is identified between their starting age of English learning and their English grammatical test scores, which means the earlier they begin to learn the language, the better can they handle the grammatical rules. Apart from this, a more thorough and lengthy study on the issue of age and second language acquisition besides pronunciation was also conducted by Patkowski in 1980, and he concluded that learners who had begun to receive second language education before the age of 15 are able to attain native-like proficiency of the target language.

2.2 Age and Insights of Second Language Instruction

Though the critical period hypothesis attaches much importance to the starting age of language learning, it is not equivalent to the belief that “The younger is the better”. Instead, researches and studies also demonstrate that older learners could be superior to young starters in certain aspects such as motivation (Bongaerts et al, 2000), rate of learning (Snow & Hoefnagel-Höhle, 1978) as well as cognitive skills. In Bongaerts’s investigation on late starters who succeeded in attaining native-like phonetic competence, he points out that all the older learners in the study were highly motivated. Advantage of late starters is also found in the study conducted by Catherine Snow and Marian Hoefnagel-Höhle in 1978 concerning the rate of language learning. The result indicates that among young children, adolescent and adult language learners who had been in a new language environment for less than a year, it was the adolescents who excelled in the given language tests and they seemed to be able to maintain the leading position even though younger learners were catching up. My point here is in considering the starting age of language instruction, age is indeed a significant factor. However, it does not mean language instruction is supposed to be pressed on students regardless of their learning environment, capacity, actual requirement etc. As Lightbown (2008a) suggests, the goals and background of teaching should be taken into account carefully.

3. Recommendations and Reasons

Generally, students attend secondary school within the age of 11 (12) to 16 (17), and then they can receive post-secondary education after 18 or 19 in colleges, universities, institutes of technology or other college-level institutions that offer post-secondary degrees. In many countries around the world, it is common that second language education is delivered to students since secondary school. However, given to that fact that the opportunities of language instruction are limited in the country under discussion in this paper, the general assumption- “The earlier the better” does not apply. If it is assumed that the students in this country also attend secondary school about the age of 11 or 12, then from the viewpoint of an English teacher, I would suggest that it is more beneficial for students not to receive language education in the first 1 or 2 years in secondary, but begin to receive English instruction around the age of 14 to 15 at secondary school level.

3.1 Why Not Earlier?

There is a particular reason why I think it is not an ideal option for students in this country to start learning English as soon as they get into secondary school. In terms of my personal teaching experience, when I was giving lessons to junior students around the age of 12-13 in middle school, it appears that they can pick up the correct pronunciation and grammatical rules easily, but mostly by imitation and mechanic drills. It is not uncommon that they do well in class but fail to pronounce the same word accurately or illustrate the grammatical rules the other day. Even now, sometimes I still have students come to me and make complaints about how hard it is to learn English. According to my observation and understanding, what accounts for their learning difficulties is that their logical thinking and the ability of generalization are not yet well developed. They are still making efforts to adjust themselves to secondary school life and study at this transition period (the first year of secondary school). What I mean is that many of them do not have the awareness of another language system, so they are not able to generalize and internalize the knowledge they are exposed to. Though some of them do manage to excel in the exams through a good number of training and drills on vocabulary and grammatical rules.

What is more, the goal of learning should also be taken into consideration concerning the starting age of learning in this country. Due to the limited educational resources and instructional hours of English, it is highly possible that the students will not have many chances to gain adequate input or use the language in actual communication. If the learning objective is to achieve native-like competence or communicate accurately and fluently with the target language, then receiving language instruction at an early age maybe a more advantageous option. However, under the specific condition being discussed in this paper, the goal for the students’ learning is not to achieve a native-like pronunciation, but perhaps to acquire the general picture and rules of a new language. Therefore, it is not quite necessary to push students to learn English as soon as they get into secondary school.

3.2 Why 14 to 15?

Turning back to the students in the country where opportunities for English instruction are limited, it is advantageous for them to receive English instruction after 2 to 3 years of study (around the age of 14 to 15) in secondary school. In the first place, after two to three years of learning in secondary school, most students may

have been adapted to the learning mode and style in this certain circumstance. Possibly, they may have developed the awareness or a system of learning methods or strategies, which in my opinion, are essential to language learning. As a result, even though the English instruction they receive may be deficient and the period of study is limited, still it is possible and feasible for them to learn English by employing learning strategies and self-regulation. Furthermore, based on the study of Catherine Snow and Marian Hoefnagel-Höhle (1978), it is the adolescents, not younger children or adults who were by way ahead and excelled in the language tests. The age of 14 to 15 is a raising stage during adolescence, which is possible to be an effective beginning period for English learners in this country.

Another reason why I consider 14 or 15 is an appropriate age is that it is still within the relatively effective period for second language acquisition. Firstly, students in 14 or 15 are still in their adolescence (usually range from the age of 10 to 17, slightly different on boys and girls), which is argued to be within a critical period for second language acquisition. Furthermore, in the studies conducted by Johnson and Newport (1989) and Patkowski (1980) mentioned in the previous section, all the subjects who succeeded in attaining high language competence were adolescents, which also makes 14 or 15 a suitable age to begin receiving second language instruction.

3.3 A Suggestion on Pronunciation Instruction

Because Learners in this country do not receive second language instruction at a comparatively early age, their phonological competence may be restricted by the sound system they already acquire (Wode, 1994). As a result, they may encounter with difficulties when picking up the pronunciation of a new language, especially when they are not equipped with adequate input and practice. However, it does not mean our hands are completely tight. According to the study that Bongaerts (1999) conducted on a group of successful L2 learners who didn't receive second language education at the early age, he pointed out that they were all given explicit phonological rules and explanations in later learning. Thus, in this case I also recommend that students in this country should be given clear and explicit pronunciation instruction so that they can make up the deficiency in pronunciation.

4. Conclusion

Above all, age is an essential element that can not be neglected in second language learning. A critical period may really exist and starting to learn English in a comparatively early age does to some extent enables the learners to attain high language proficiency. However, in some studies late starters are also found to be superior to early beginners from the perspective of capacity, rate of learning, motivation or other cognitive skills. Considering the given situation that the opportunities of English instruction is limited, I would suggest the age of 14-15 is a suitable time for students to receive English instruction based on their state of mind, mental development, learning ability, learning objective as well as learning environment.

Last but not least, though there is no doubt that age is a significant factor in second language acquisition, there is one thing we should always bear in mind, which is- "It's never too late to learn", especially for those who had missed out the opportunity to receive instruction at an early age. In fact, there are some of my students in their 20's and 30's who have not been exposed to English for years succeeded in making significant progress in language learning and eventually be able to use English fluently and accurately. My point here is that starting age is indeed important, but it is not 100% decisive. There is no reason to give up learning merely because of age.

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