

An OVERVIEW of 'EARLY BIRD CATCHES the WORM' CASE

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Abstract: There have been many views and discussions on determining the right time to learn or acquire a foreign language. According to some theorists, it would be beneficial to learn a foreign language right after the child learns his mother tongue while some claiming that there is a critical period called puberty for learning the foreign language in a more native like performance. Moreover, another group of theorists suggest that learning a foreign language before or after the puberty is identical. Although there is not a specific consensus in determining the right time for learning, this descriptive study focuses on some cases displaying that learning/acquiring a foreign language is worthy of note, and give teachers of English as a second or foreign language a point of view to design their courses accordingly.

Key Words: foreign language learning, acquisition, early learners.

INTRODUCTION

Along with the growing interest and necessity for learning a foreign language, which is basically shaped by the current tendencies in the world we are living, it has been an object of inquiry for researchers to find out the most appropriate time for learning or acquiring a second/foreign language. Since, the focus of this study is not primarily depends on the distinction of acquisition and learning, it aims to stress on some features in order to learn a foreign language more effectively by regarding the importance of early language learning – whether it is called acquisition or learning. However, acquisition process is more likely to be seen as a natural process which is prior to learning. Thus in this study while displaying the age-related views and theories on foreign/second language learning, both terms acquisition and learning are used vice versa. Driven with the focus on early language learning, this study briefly displays the views and hypothesis on this issue and looks through some current researches to follow the recent developments especially for the researchers and teachers and even for the parents who are willing to learn more about the nature of learning.

When focused on the current trend in learning second languages, it is obvious that

throughout the world there is a common tendency to learn foreign languages as early as possible. Contrary to what is believed, the historical development of learning and teaching second/foreign languages dates back to old times. For example, Truchot (2002:8) states that this implementation dates back to 1970s in North European countries and indicates that this implementation has become a general rule for the non-English speaking countries until 1990s. Accordingly, he refers to the increasing proliferation and suggests that there is a need in corresponding to the changing conditions in early ages thus, stimulating the process by the help of early language learning. In, the meeting held in March 2002, Barcelona, which the member countries of European Union came together to discuss the significance of language learning through the language policies, it was decided that second language learning should start to be learned as early as possible since, one of the targets of European Union language policies is multilingualism (European Commission, 2003:4). According to this, it would be more effective to start learning languages as early as possible, to promote learning other languages sooner. In addition to this, in the agenda of European Commission related to the collaboration within the schools of Europe, inferences were presented on this issue (2008:3). Hereunder, young individuals are expected to be more qualified and equipped in the changing and globalizing atmosphere assuming that they would be working on several jobs that we could not imagine today. Besides, it was stressed and envisaged in the meeting that, the technology would develop excessively; factors such as climate changes would lead people to aggressive orientation. For this reason, in a continually complicating world, it was stressed that creativity and lifelong learning would gain importance and thus lifelong learning should be a norm. In another meeting in 2002 within the member countries of European Union, it was stated that several attempts should be made to develop the multilingualism by enhancing the studies on teaching languages to young learners (European Commission, 2003; 4). The underlying idea in doing so is simply the thought that starting to learn earlier would promote lifelong learning and multilingualism which are the basic principles of Council of Europe in the educational settings (CEF, 2002). By raising language awareness, the child will also raise awareness to other cultures. Learning a language does not only consists of the grammatical structures of a language but also learning how to learn a language and this enhances the child to learn other foreign languages in a more effective way (Neuner,2002:12). In addition to this, starting to learn a foreign language in the early years of schooling would lead to the learning of other foreign languages earlier. For example, if a child starts learning a foreign language in the pre- school period, it would be possible for him to learn other foreign language/s in the

very beginning of the elementary school. By this way, multilingualism could be sustained as early as possible. In the context of Turkey, policies of foreign language learning are tried to be designed accordingly. The main goal of foreign language learning is described as follows;

In today's world, multilingualism is stimulated. Since countries are in need of people knowing foreign languages to promote the relations socially, politically and, economically among the countries. In our country, the aim of teaching English is to enable our citizens to communicate with other nations and leading our country to reach a well-deserved place in political, scientific, military, economic and social domains (Ministry of Education, 2006:2). Although there is a growing attempt to teach foreign languages earlier, the pre-school period is still out of concern in many aspects-since through the instruction of Ministry of Education, learning a foreign language starts in the second year of the elementary school (7 years old).

Thus this study focuses on the earlier foreign language learning by attributing its basis on the theoretical background of early second/foreign language learning field to shed light on the studies that would be conducted in this area and might be source to design foreign language courses for very young learners in the context of Turkey to promote multilingualism and lifelong learning.

BACKGROUND

Common Features in First and Second Language Acquisition of Child

There have been several views on the child's first language acquisition mostly sharing the similar approach in interpreting this nature of acquisition. In other words, children experience similar developments in this process throughout the world. This idea that there is a common attitude and synchronization in the process of acquisition depends mostly on the studies in developmental psychology. Since human is a whole with his cognitive, social, emotional and physical dimensions, language acquisition is also thought to be shaped by these features.

Piaget observed the babies and children in several contexts to get information about the acquisition process (Cameron, 2001). According to Cameron, Piaget mostly focuses on the tasks that children undertake in the environment which surrounds them and how this interaction effects their cognitive development. Child is in a consistent interaction with his environment in order to solve the problems caused by this environment. Acting to solve these problems ends up with learning (2001:2). The idea of Piaget depends on the cognitive process indicating that there are changes and developments in the brain which leads to acquisition.

According to Piaget, language is a system developed in childhood and it is a tool that is used by the children to express their knowledge (Lightbown and Spada, 1999:23). According to Piaget, cognitive development has four dimensions and these are; sensory-motor (birth-2 years), pre-operational stage (2-7 years), concrete operational (7-11 years), and abstract operational period (11+) (Brown 2000, Cameron 2001, Pinter 2006). As Nicholas (1992) states that child second language acquisition can begin much younger than the age of three, pre-operational stages which refers to the ages between 2 to 7 years, is subject to this study. According to this stage, the ability to think depends mostly on the instincts and child incrementally starts to think logically. The child is egocentric and lack of logical thinking is obvious (Pinter, 2006:7). Thus, in designing courses specific for very young learners this developmental period should be kept in mind.

Similarly, Brewster, Ellis and Girard (2002:15-16) cite Wells' five step process that all children experience before they reach to the formal school age. According to this process, first step includes attention getting for; leading others' attention to another point or to an object, getting what they want, requesting and making simple suggestions. In this step, child basically focuses on his needs and he sends the messages mostly with the intonation. In the second step, children start interpreting and categorizing the objects around them. They start to ask questions such as 'where' or 'what is this' to recognize their environment. Besides, they start to use possessives like 'up-down, hot/cold, big/small'. In the third step, they tend to ask several questions by the use of intonation. They use 'I want' to express more complicated needs and they use the form 'still' to refer the ongoing events because the concept of time has not occurred in their minds exactly. They use simple structures mostly in the present time form to refer their needs. The fourth step testifies that they start to use more complicated structures when they want to explain something or to be explained by others. In the last step, the child uses the language to give information, ask several questions, request –directly or indirectly-, making suggestions, state a circumstance and ask about it, explain their own feelings and attitudes, and ask for others. In other words, child starts to use every single type of speech to communicate.

Other theories investigating the nature of first language acquisition arouse from the limitations in the previous studies in explaining this nature but not neglecting the general principals designed to resemble the developmental process. Piaget has been criticized by ignoring the social factor in child's life. In this sense, Vygotsky with his socio-cultural theory seemed to fill the gap by referring to the significance of the social factor in learning. Although

it is supposed that Vygotsky's view is mainly constructed upon social and modern developments, he had never ignored the individual and his cognitive development (Cameron, 2001). By the term zone of proximal development (ZPD), he indicated what a child can do with the help of an adult (Lightbown & Spada, 1999; Scarcella & Oxford, 1992). In other words, Vygotsky believed in the idea that there are common features in the language development of a child however; he stresses the significance of environmental factors in the socialization of the child (Brewster, Ellis & Girard, 2002; Scarcella & Oxford, 1992). In addition to these theories, Bruner put forward the concept of scaffolding to understand how children acquire the language. In order to this concept, a child focuses on a specific linguistic feature mainly caused by his limited capacity and is in need of getting help from the adults (Cameron, 2001: 8). In this sense, scaffolding looks similar to those of Vygotsky's ZPD concept. However one of the components of the scaffolding concept is the use of routines which indicates that children need to repeat similar activities to feel comfortable in the learning process. According to Brewster (1991:8-9) the difference between the views of Piaget and Vygotsky is that Bruner had tried to define the different processes in problem solving more than the mature thought.

Another theorist studied in the field of language acquisition is Noam Chomsky. According to him the child has an innate capacity to learn a language independent from the environment he is living in. Thus, by this capacity every child learns his first language in the same competence. The only impact of child's environment can be the kind of the language that the child will learn. Child has a prior knowledge in how to learn the language as a part of their biological capacity. This is called the language acquisition device (LAD) (Ellis, 1997:66). Another concept that Chomsky put forward is the Universal Grammar (UG) which can be defined as; the system of principles, conditions, and rules that are elements or properties of all human languages... the essence of human language (Chomsky, 1976:29). Lightbown and Spada (1999:15-16) summarizes the thought underlying Chomsky's view as follows;

- Children are biologically programmed for language and this develops in the child in just the same way that other biological functions develop,
- The child does not have to be taught
- The environment makes a basic contribution
- According to Chomsky, the language the child is exposed to in the environment is full of confusing information and does not provide all the information which the child

needs.

- Children's minds are not blank slates to be filled merely by imitating language they hear in the environment. Instead, they are born with a special ability to discover for themselves the underlying rules of a language system (LAD)
- If children are pre-equipped with UG, then what they have to learn is the ways in which their own language makes use of these principles and the variations on those principles which may exist in the particular language which they hear spoken around them.

Critical Age Hypothesis

Driven with the notion of this innatist position, the biological stance for this view could be seen in the Critical Age Hypothesis which was put forward by Eric Lenneberg who was also be entitled as the father of this hypothesis (Singleton & Ryan, 2004: 33). This hypothesis deals with the question of when acquisition of first language occurs more effectively. Although this hypothesis mainly focuses on first language acquisition, it also been used by the second language acquisition researchers to identify the exact timing for a better language learning. According to Herschenson (2007:7), idea of a critical or sensitive period in the biological development first aroused between the late 19th and at the beginning of the 20th centuries parallel with several researches conducted in the field of embryology. In sum, these studies included the observations on interventions to the embryos during specific time periods and results indicated that there is a specific time for maturation. As stated by Herschenson, this belief also affected the fields such as; animal instinct, human behavior, neurological development and human language (2007). Evolving from this point, it also corresponded to the field of second/foreign language learning. Lenneberg maintains the idea that language acquisition is a process which is predetermined by the biological functions which are innate and there is a specific time limitation in acquiring every single language. Similarly Lightbown and Spada (1999: 19) state that, the language acquisition device, like the other biological functions, works successfully only when it is stimulated at the right time- a time called the critical period. According to Lenneberg, this process covers the periods among the ages of 2 to adolescence. With the impact of time, lateralization occurs in the brain leading the decrease in the brain functions and this beclouds the language acquisition after the adolescence (Birdsong 2001; Birdsong & Mollis 2001; Bacanlı 2011; Lightbown & Spada 1999; Herschenson 2007; Nunan 1999; Ellis 1997).

In the field of first language acquisition there are several samples supporting this idea

and, one of these samples is ‘Genie’. In their book, Lightbown and Spada describe the case of Genie as follows (1999; 20).

Genie was discovered in California in 1970, a 13-year-old girl who had been isolated, deprived, neglected, and abused. Because of the irrational demands of a disturbed father and the submissions and fear of an abused mother, Genie had spent more than eleven years tied to a chair or a crib in a small, darkened room. Her father had forbidden his wife and son to speak to her and had himself only growled and barked at her. She was beaten every time she vocalized or made any kind of noise, and she had long since resorted to complete silence. Genie was unsocialized, primitive, and undeveloped physically, emotionally, and intellectually. Needless to say, she had no language. After she was discovered, Genie was cared for and educated in the most natural surroundings possible, and to the fullest extent possible, with the participation of many teachers and therapists. After a brief period in a rehabilitation centre, Genie lived in a foster home and attended special schools....After five years of exposure to language, a period during which a normal child would have acquired an elaborated language system; Genie’s language contained many of the features of abnormal language development. These include a larger than normal gap between comprehension and production, inconsistency in the use of grammatical forms, a slow rate of development, overuse of formulaic and routine speech, and the absence of some specific syntactic forms and mechanisms always present in normal grammatical development.

The linguistic development of Genie had appeared to support the critical age hypothesis however unknown circumstances might also affected this process. The critical age hypothesis has also affected the studies in second language acquisition since first language acquisition and second language acquisition resemble each other in some aspects. The idea of ‘earlier is better’ has become one of the mottos in second language learning field. Many studies have been conducted in questioning the effectiveness of starting to learn a second language earlier. Thus, some of the studies indicated that it would be beneficial and effective to start earlier

(Weber-Fox & Neville 1999; Danesi 1994; Lightbown & Spada 1999; Long 1990; Gleitman & Newport 1995; Pinker 1994; Gass & Selinker 1994; Towel & Hawkins 1994; Halliwell 1992; Pollard 1996; Johnson & Newport 1989, 1991; Hurford & Kirby 1999). However approaches questioning the reliability of the critical age hypothesis has also been conducted (White & Genessee 1996; Bialystok & Hakuta 1999; Birdsong & Molis 2001; Hakuta et al. 2003; Flege 1999; Snow & Hoefnagel-Hohle 1978; Bialystok & Miller 1999; Epstein et al. 1996).

The findings of a research which is conducted by Marina-Todd and her colleagues in 2000 and covering 35 studies on the effect of critical age period indicated that only 14 of the studies were supporting the importance of critical period in learning a second language (Johnstone, 2009: 33-34).

In addition, some researchers indicate that there are disadvantages in starting to learn a second language earlier however they believe that starting earlier would be more effective in long-term (O'Grady 1983; Krashen et al. 1982). Although Singleton (2004:267) is against the concept of critical age, he stresses that the exposure to language in early years would be advantageous in the following years. However, he states that in order to achieve this, right learning environments and conditions should be provided to the learners or else there would be no profit in the long term too.

Similarly, Johnstone (2009:34) states that learning languages earlier is an important fact and should be supported within an appropriate learning context. In addition to this, he argues that the individual should not be compelled to choose one of the learning situations –earlier or later- since every age has its own benefits.

Focusing on the studies given above, a sequencing of these views on critical period could be made. For example, Singleton and Ryan (2004:61) summarize the views on critical age under four statements. According to statement one, students who were exposed to second language earlier are more successful than the older ones. As for the statement 2, adolescents or adults are more successful in learning second language than younger ones. In statement 3, it is suggested that adolescents or adults are more successful in learning second language however students who started to learn earlier are more successful in the long term. According to the fourth and the last statement, after a specific point of maturity, the process of second language learning changes qualitatively. As it is seen, the existence of several studies in this field is an indicator that there is not a specific consensus on the benefit of starting to learn a second language earlier. However, it would be beneficial to use the advantage of early second

language learning in foreign language learning contexts to promote effective learning whether in short or long term.

After focusing on the discussions about the critical period in learning second/foreign language/s, the differences – caused by the age- between the learners will be stated in the study to present a broader perspective.

Young Learners versus Adolescent and/or Adult Learners

When developmental stages of human is considered, it is obvious that there is a specific age sequencing in distinguishing the differences in cognitive, social, emotional and, physical development of individuals. Similarly, there are differences in the process of second language learning due to the age of the learners. It is thought that regarding the developmental features of the learner will help the researchers and teachers to determine the exact teaching methodology and environment for the learners with regard to their ages. As Philp et al. (2008:8) indicate that ‘children at varying stages have different levels of cognitive and social development compared to adults, as well as different types of relationships with peers and others, and these must be taken into account’. As mentioned before, very young learners at the pre-school period (ages between 3-7) belong to the pre-operational stage and have their unique needs and properties. The learners who attend primary school are at the concrete operational stage while adult learners belong to the abstract operational stage they still have their very own characteristic features.

Similarly, Harmer (2007:37) indicates that ‘the age of students is a major factor in our decisions about how and what to teach since people of different ages have different needs, competences, and cognitive skills; we might expect children of primary age to acquire much of a foreign language through play, for example, whereas for adults we can reasonably expect a greater use of abstract thought’. Moving from a generalization, Harmer presents three types of learners assumed to have their basic characteristic related with their age, and these are; young children, adolescents and, adults (2007:38-40). This generalization for three learner groups could be diagrammed as follows:

Table 1:

Learner categorization according to the age

Young children	Adolescents	Adults
They respond to meaning even if they do not understand	They are in search for individual identity	Can engage with abstract thought
Often learn indirectly rather than directly	Identity has to be forged among classmates and friends	Have a whole range of life experiences to draw on

Understanding comes not just from explanation, but also from what they see and hear, touch and, interact with	Peer approval may considerably be more important than the attention of the teacher	Have expectations about the learning process, and may already have their own set patterns of learning
Display enthusiasm for learning and curiosity about the world around them	May push teachers to the limit, but they are much happier if that challenge is met	Tend on the whole to be more disciplined than some teenagers and are often prepared to struggle on despite boredom
Need for individual attention and approval from the teacher	If engaged, they have a great capacity to learn, a great potential for creativity, and a passionate commitment to things which interest them	Come into classroom with a rich range of experiences
Keen to talk about themselves	Language teaching should be linked far more closely to the students' everyday interests	Have a clear understanding of why they are learning and what they want to get out of it
Have a limited attention span	Must be encouraged to respond to texts and situations with their own thoughts and experience, rather than just by answering questions and doing abstract learning activities	

Against the adults who mainly have a purpose on learning, children do not have a specific target in learning a language. Children are always in need of searching and finding out the information to meet their needs, wishes and interests. According to Brewster, Ellis and Girard (2002:27) adult learners come to the foreign language learning environments with a specific aim in mind such as finding a more qualified job or to work in a country in which the target language is used. Aims like these need a high motivation in learning however it is not possible for the children as young learners since they are still acquiring their first language and they do not have a specific aim or motivation for learning a second language as the older learners. Besides, it is possible for adult learners to make inferences on the target language since they already mastered their first language. Nevertheless, the child is not totally disadvantageous in learning a second language when the critical period hypothesis is taken into account in which the child who has not reached the puberty yet is seen prior to the older learners. In addition to this, children are quite competent in interpreting the meaning of the words even though they can not fully capable of understanding the meaning. Moreover, Nicholas and Lightbown (2008:33) state that 'part of being an adult is knowing what (not) to do in various settings. Part of being a child is not knowing how to behave in various settings'. It is possible to make an inference from this statement as the children will not have an anxiety for learning in the sense that they do not know what is wrong in a specific setting. Thus they will be more eager and relaxed in foreign language learning settings when compared to adults. Brumfit, Moon and Tongue indicate the reasons underlying the children's success in learning

a foreign language (1991:7). According to them, before the adolescence, the brain is more compatible and this leads to the acquisition of languages without consciousness. Children have less prejudices to other languages and cultures compared to adults and thus they become more motivated to learn. Children’s language learning is quite similar to the real communication since their learning is specifically based on the current physical environment. Lastly, children spend more time for learning when compared to adults.

Lightbown and Spada (1999:66) quote the findings of the Snow and Hoefnagel-Höhle’s study as given below:

Table 2:

Comparison of language learning at different ages (Lightbown & Spada, 1999:66)

Task	Child	Adolescent	Adult
Pronunciation	Y	Y	X
Auditory discrimination		XY	
Morphology		XY	
Sentence repetition		XY	
Sentence translation		XY	
Sentence judgement		XY	
Peabody picture vocabulary test		XY	
Story comprehension	Y	X	
Story telling	Y	X	

The letter X indicates that the group was best on the test and the Y indicates the group that did best at the end of the year. According to the findings of the study, it is obvious that adolescents were the most successful learners among all. Within few months adolescents had progressed. Moreover, as can be seen in the table, adolescents and adults learned faster than children in the first few months. By the end of the year, the children were catching up, or had surpassed the adults on several measures. Nevertheless, it was the adolescents who retained the highest levels of performance overall (Lightbown & Spada, 1999:66). However, this evaluation is not a sign that there is not a critical period for learning since some of the tasks are too demanding for the ages of young learners (e.g. sentence translation and sentence judgment). That is to say, further studies including different language components should also be designed.

CONCLUSION and SUGGESTIONS

Although there have been many different views on determining the exact age period for learning a second language it is obvious that starting earlier is a promoted fact in the current educational settings throughout the world. Especially, it is believed that starting to learn a second language would lead learning of other languages more earlier. According to this, a child would spend time to learn other languages if he starts to learn a foreign language in early years and this is one of the qualities which is promoted by the educational policies to enhance multilingualism and life-long learning. In addition to this, whether a critical period exists or not, it would be possible to assume that starting to learn a second language would be beneficial if the biological process of the human is considered since some biological functions might retreat as we grow older.

Detailed studies should be designed both to test the efficacy of the critical period in foreign language learning and to organize more effective classes mainly based on the age characteristics of the students. In this sense, more studies on bilingualism and multilingualism should also be conducted. Since there is a growing tendency on lifelong learning and raising multilingual individuals, it is quite necessary to study on designing foreign language courses for very young learners. In this process, a detailed study for curriculum development for pre-school children including the suitable activity types depending on the developmental features and individual characteristics of the children is of utmost importance. In this sense, this descriptive study aimed to shed light on some specific aspects on critical age and the current tendencies in educational policies for the researchers, teachers and parents who are concerned with this field.

To sum up, as every other single thing, education and thus foreign language learning and teaching fields are also shaped by the changes in the world. In order to meet the demands and necessities of the current context we are living in, changes and developments should be made positively. New teaching programs, curriculums and lessons should be organized supporting the life-long learning and early language learning by paying sufficient attention to the methodology which serves as a guide in shaping our new dimension, since designing new learning environments does not mean ignoring all the previous content in this field. Thus, this study by focusing on different views on early foreign language learning –in other words the critical period, aimed to present the specific information on this field to conduct further and detailed studies.

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