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THE ESSENCE OF CRITICAL AGE HYPOTHESIS IN SECOND LANGUAGE ACQUISITION

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Abstract. Many studies of second language acquisition look at how the first language influences the production of the second, but studies that look at how the acquisition of a second language affects the first are rare. Some scholars argue that the second language cannot be acquired after puberty, while others argue that age isn't a factor being an obstacle to learn a new language and they assume that people in older ages may be successful as the ones whose minds are fresh (adults). The current paper aims at discovering the age and gender influence of second language acquisitions.

Key words: *acquisition, puberty, Critical Age Hypothesis, age, SLA, human's lifespan*

Second language acquisition is a complex process that is interested in all factors starting from age, gender to learner's interests, methods, techniques, etc. The main point of SLA is to gather information by observing learners' strategies, interests to find solutions in case of problems. Even though there are a plethora of topics grabbing attention to discuss, the influence of age on the learning process is the pivot of this research. This is very topical in contemporary society in which people after puberty people show interest in acquiring a foreign language, or parents want their children to speak in other languages from childhood before puberty.

This paper will probably entail information about the different successes and weaknesses of learners before and after puberty in second language acquisition. Even though there haven't been so much researches on the age influence of grammar, this paper will clarify whether young or old learners make progress faster in

grammar. Having read this article, a reader is likely to understand that older learners can perform also be as good learners as young learners. In the article, the utmost is to understand that age isn't a barrier for learners to master foreign languages and they may start learning at all ages.

According to Lenneberg (1967), there is a time in a human's lifespan where the brain starts to receive information at a slow tempo, while some linguists believe that brain doesn't stop working and a learner of old age is supposed to succeed as young learners. However, it is likely to be connected not only the age, but also with learner's life factors like at old ages people probably have little free time from work and family, or be shy in front of others to express their opinion not to be laughed at, or they want to share complex ideas, yet the lack of vocabulary makes them feel awkward. On the contrary, a young learner has enough free time and in this period they primarily tend to the educational process. Thus, they may commit to receiving extra knowledge.

Moreover, globalization is occurring around the world so rapidly that learning languages are also becoming so popular among people. Motivation also plays an enormous role in acquiring a new language not depending on age and can accelerate the process of acquisition. Older learners, for instance, set a goal of mastering one language if they want to be employed in a foreign country. Similarly, there are opportunities in bulk for young learners who willingly plan to go abroad to study since some institutions offer scholarships and grants for free or for some amount of money. All of them encourage people of different ages to learn a language as a tool of communication.

Concerning age and language acquisition, many types of research were conducted where some linguists put young learners as good ones, while some argued that older learners surpass them. To be more precise, Fledge (2006) has found that young learners perform better in phonology and morphosyntax and he proposed that learners can reach native likeness if the process starts before puberty. However, Slavoff and Johnson (1995) contradict Fledge indicating that age deviation doesn't

affect learners' success in phonology, morphology, and syntax. Besides, it is argued that young learners attain native-like abilities, yet second language acquisition from young stages doesn't guarantee that all young learners reach this competence.

Lenneberg (1967) as the originator of the concept Critical Age Hypothesis was interested in biological factors having relations with learning. According to him, learners between two and around puberty have well-developed receptive aptitudes which may lead to native-likeness in input production. Moreover, he claims that the younger is the learner, the more successful they are in the learning process and input processing starts to decline in the hemispheric lateralization in the brain after puberty. In contrast, Snow and Hoefnagel-Hohle (1978) experimented with people with old ages to clarify whether age had an impact on learning and they came to the conclusion that their exposure to learning a language was higher than younger ones. Besides, they proposed that motivation might be one of the key factors affecting learners' accomplishment in learning whether they were in the young or old stages of a lifespan.

Albeit the age effect occurs in mostly morphology, syntax, and phonology, this paper will underline the difference in morphosyntax. According to Johnson and Newport (1989), grammar acquisition emerges with a good speed till the age of 7, yet then a gradual decline in acquisition starts in the brain between seven and sixteen. Afterward, outcomes seem tedious in post-puberty. Nevertheless, Bialystok and Hakuta (1999) have found that grammar engages older students more in which they experience similar structures in L1 and they endeavor to produce L2 grammar the same as L1 firstly. Periodically, they discover peculiarities of each and the application of L2 grammar starts to be in the process even with fossilization after a short period. Moreover, De Keyser (2000) holds the view that grammar cannot be acquired without explicit, analytic, problem-solving capacities. On account of life experience, older learners develop those abilities leading to progress in grammar.

For this research, Saya and Max were chosen with the age of 12 and 39 respectively. The former is a young girl who studies art and music at a specialized



school of art. By nature, Saya is an introvert who prefers being alone all the time. However, she burns with the curiosity of art and she invariably surrounds herself with talented people. On the contrary, Sam seems to be an extrovert with a good sense of humor. In reality, his character is outgoing and he always energetic to start exciting adventures. Neither Saya nor Max speaks English well and even they have a little background experience of English. Saya, for instance, studies at school where French is implemented into educational package and students are taught this subject twice a week. Even though French is given as mandatory, she isn't interested in these languages and she doesn't spend time learning French at all. Similarly, Max also learned German at school times, and from that time he hasn't attempted to drive his level from pre-intermediate to advanced. Ergo, his German remained constant without further development.

Although there is no relic of English in their life from the retrospective, the zone of proximal development(ZPD) aided them to be slightly acquainted with this language. Having analyzed experimented learners' life, it was ostensible that both participants opted to be ambitious and single-minded since they attained numerous achievements in their life. To clarify, Saya was awarded in many Republican contests including "Iste'dod" with a gold medal, in "Zulfiya" with the third placement which enabled her to achieve public recognition. In terms of Max, he was military when he was young and his title firstly was an ordinary soldier, yet periodically he showed his talents and later he was named as a colonel. Nowadays, with the development of the economy and politics of great powers, the demand for English is also increasing. Thus, the participants displayed an eagerness to learn English from the start to catch up with their friends.

Having a lack of information about participants' level, I decided to interview to detect whether they know frequently used words or it was problematic for them to understand the utterance. In this interview, I had prepared ten yes/no questions in order not to make them feel under pressure when they were asked to give full answers. Questions dealt with life, work, study, surroundings of the learners. Having

dissected the interview, it was obvious that the participants were in the elementary level, yet it also clarified that using their affective factor-like friends, siblings, parents, who knew English, their reception of discourse was somewhat improved.

Speaking about John, he also seems to have abilities to learn a language with his analytical skills and good memory. When he was asked questions, the answers weren't given promptly, but deliberately. Undeniably, it appears that reaching native-likeness is possibly difficult for him as his articulation has already been formulated, and in his speech, he tended to put the stress on the last syllabus of the word when he wanted to ask something. His level looks like A1 as Tina's.

After gaining information about the level of the learners, GTM (Grammar Translation Method) was applied to use in which "To be" and "Present Continuous" were the topics of the survey. It should be admitted that the audio-lingual method was to be implemented, yet it was supposed to overburden learners whose level was vague. Thus, GTM replaced that method having taken into account its convenience, namely usage of L1, drilling, repetition, to the learners.

A ten-day process of grammar teaching was split into 3 steps, including explanatory, practical, and checking parts. Initially, the learners acknowledged the rules of the aforementioned grammar elements. Subsequently, they were provided a timeline to practice them inside with some topic-based exercises and outside the classroom by recording their voice (all used materials are attached to the appendix part). Moreover, that step assisted them to relate and find alternatives of "to be" and "Present Continuous" in their mother tongue. Lastly, when this input processing reached its end, our processing started to dominate. For this step, a Jeopardy game has been implemented with two determinations, such as to show the learners how technology may be incorporated in the educational context and make the checking process with a little contest between these two participants.

Afterward, when data was obtained about their level, the Grammar translation method with instructions of "To be" and "Present continuous" was supposed to start with. Firstly, they have explained the rules and their application in sentences. They

worked on these topics for several days by doing exercises, translating small texts with continuous actions, and finding present continuous from given text. During these periods, they acknowledged what was "to be", "Present Continuous" in their mother tongue. Before the interview, using the audio-lingual method was going to be the target method, yet results gained from it changed the way into Grammar translation one. One of the peculiarities of this method is using L1 in the teaching and learning process not to overburden learners with a language they don't know.

After a few days of training, the revision game “Jeopardy” was displayed to check the input. In this part, there were two sections (Section 1-To be and Section 2- Present Continuous Tense) with five queries in each. The questions were hidden behind the numbers (100, 200, 300, 400, 500) and when a learner was asked to open one number from any section, they were supposed to answer that question and collect numbers. They took turns to open numbers. Frankly, it was both an informative and interactive game for learners to examine what they had learned.

The interview was one of the most crucial parts of data collection as it was able to elucidate learners' strengths and weaknesses. For instance, Tina's imitation was a notable feature that might aid her to master the English accent without any difficulties. It was clear that she wanted to imitate how the interviewee pronounces and spells words and her attempts were close to the speakers. The reason for this may be her study at a specialized school of art where she is taught from vocal. Singers tend to practice with ears (they listen to a song live or use earphones for recorded audios) and mouth movement simultaneously which helped Tina to do the same in the interview. If she continues learning English intensively, it is supposed that she may learn it faster with her imitation talent.

During the interview, Tina explained that she wasn't so keen on learning languages, but her core aim was to improve vocally. Moreover, Not English but French is taught for them at school as a second language in which she can't see her progress. Since she is on musical tours abroad very often, her exposure to English is more than French. When she was asked permission to take part in this research, she

without any hesitation agreed to say that they were going to America after the pandemic to spread the fame of Uzbek folklore. Till that time, she is going to improve her English and the research was her first trial to learn the language intensively. Moreover, her English surrounded atmosphere will be also an aid for her to accelerate the second language acquisition.

Speaking about John, who is smart and nimble, he is also surrounded by English-speaking friends and acquaintances helping him to make success in language learning. When he was asked about participating in the research, he expressed his resolution from being committed to it. According to him, they have a meeting that will be held in the United Arab Emirates in January and he will have to speak to his partners there. He stated that in previous events, he used to miss a lot of information that led to some eventual problems. Therefore, he is aimed at participating in the survey to enlarge his English performance. However, he also mentioned that he didn't want to acquire a new language sacrificing his native language that was common among youngsters, yet he wanted to be an additive bilingual. From his speech, it was clear that his friend impacted him by adding English words into his bank of vocabulary which was seen in his comprehension of most words of the interview. Unlikely, Tina's vocabulary needed to be enhanced since she asked to repeat the question several times, but her speaking was much better than John's who kept on talking English with Uzbek intonation, accent, and pauses. All in all, both of these participants have similar cases to learn the language, like being surrounded by an English environment. Even though they fossilize English by mixing Uzbek, their effort is making them explore English promptly. Furthermore, English songs in their playlist may foster second language acquisition. The scrip of the interview is provided in the appendix part.

It should be admitted that the audio-lingual method was to be implemented, yet it was supposed to overburden learners whose level was vague. Thus, GTM replaced that method having taken into account its convenience, namely usage of L1, drilling, repetition, to the learners. In the initial stage, the learners were explained

how to why, how, and when to use "to be" and "Present Continuous" which was followed by interconnecting these two elements of grammar. Indeed, those topics were chosen deliberately for their interrelation as to form Present Continuous the verb "to be" is demanded and it is altered according to the subject of the action that was instructed to the participants. From the endeavors of the learners, it was transparent that they were engrossed in English and it seemed that they may reach their aims of English learning with their curiosity. Nevertheless, they also encountered some problems, like Tina found it challenging to form an interrogative sentence that made her think over before giving a question. On the contrary, John made minor mistakes in the practice part and it was for his more analytical skill and experience gained throughout his life. It showed that learners after puberty have developed metacognitive strategies and second language acquisition may also be successful as in the learners' before puberty. Moreover, he draws a schema for his comprehension and was active after watching videos related to the topic, but it was so to his creativity and self-study. Unlike John, Tina limited herself only to classroom-based and provided rules, examples not adding something extra.

After mastering "to be" in which they tried to use it with different personal pronouns, the participants were instructed how to form "Present Continuous" by adding "ing" to the verb which is corresponded to "to be". To comprehend it with exercises, a gap-filling is given to them to form Present Continuous with provided bare infinitives. The activity caused some problems due to the lack of vocabulary for the participants who had to look up a couple of words from a dictionary that was unknown to them. Subsequently, the task was checked altogether and it revealed that Tina's pronunciation and reading were better than that of John. However, her results weren't as accurate as John's as she made relatively more mistakes. John accomplished the task with approximate error-free thanks for his additional commitment outside the classroom. Nevertheless, his pronunciation was one of his weak points that needed more concern. That is perhaps for his L1 articulation usage all the time in his life and he got used to speaking in that language that halts him to

reach native-like pronunciation of words. His speech may give a feeling that the nonnative speaker is talking.

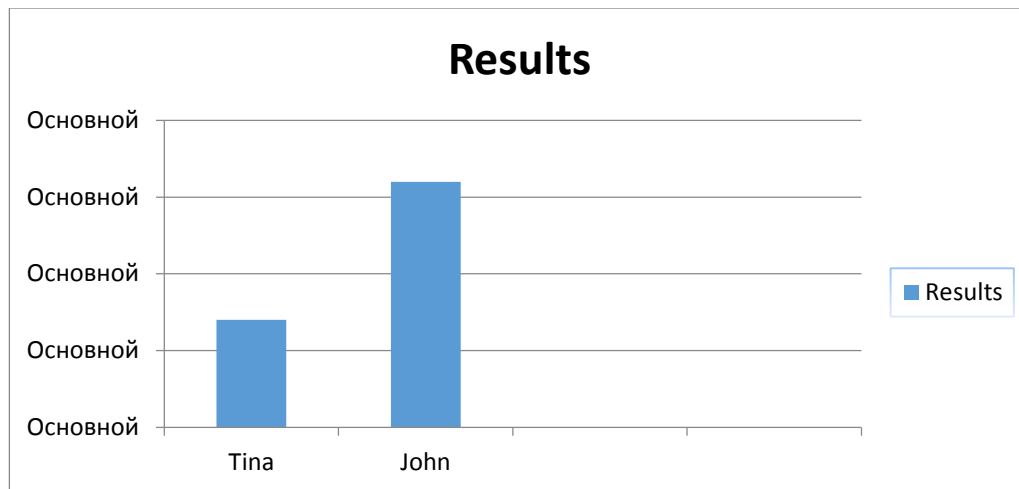
Coming to the following task, pictures with some actions were provided to the learners in the handout and their task was to form an interrogative sentence by replying to them. In this task, again John's performance was successful than Tina's who made three mistakes out of six. The process was continued with different a picture depicting various settings, namely fishing man, lying woman on the beach, a woman drinking lemonade, girls playing with the sand. There was the provision of statements that were incorrect and the task was to correct them with. John skillfully did the task in a couple of minutes by applying the rules correctly, while Tina couldn't find and correct all the mistakes because of inattentiveness during the classes. That also showed that how older the person, the more cautious and attentive he is in gaining input, learning a language. Perhaps, John made progress because he used to practice all the rules with his friends by sending the recording to check his speech. Conversely, Tina confined herself with the class materials only, and this quite common among young learners who show a lack of extra effort besides the classroom. What is more, she wanted an excellent speech and put the stress only on speaking which reinforced her fluent pronunciation, but failed inaccuracy of the speech. It was clear as crystal that she can reach native likeness in speaking English but reach accuracy with some problems.

The third task was to translate a simple text into English using Present Continuous and To be. John made few mistakes which weren't covered to them yet (the article) and Tina made visible errors. It should be acknowledged that Tina's speech sounded more fluent than John's and Tina was able to put the word and sentence stresses in a proper way making her speech more coherent. The Grammar Translation Method was useful to work with beginners who need more instructions in their mother tongue and this kind of translator task, drilling may strengthen learner's comprehension of a foreign language. The tasks indicated that the age hypothesis isn't as problematic for the older generation to start acquiring a new

language since they may perform better than the young generation operating with analysis. However, it seems easy for learners before puberty to gain native likeness that is a bit impossible after puberty. The used materials are given in the appendix part.

Lastly, for the checking part, the "Jeopardy" game was implemented where "To be" and "Present Continuous" sentences were hidden behind the score that was to be gained by the participants. It is a good method for measuring comprehension with a contest among learners. The game comprises two sections separating To be and Present Continuous. Each of them included questions related to their own rule, but the questions were behind 100, 200, 300, 400, 500 scores. The learners were to select a score firstly and be shown a question to answer. By this, they were supposed to gather points and the learner with the highest score was to be the winner.

The procedure attracted the participants' attention and they tried hard to precede each other. Tina chose 200 points to put "To be" in "I and Jim...friends". To the misfortune, she had a misconception that Jim was the subject and put "is" instead of being. , John attempted to choose 300 points from "Present Continuous ", "I'm writing an essay now. Question?" and his attempt was successful. Tina's next question was to open the box in the negative sentence which gave her 200. The game proceeded in that manner and the participants were fully involved in it. According to the results, John's performance was successful as he managed to answer all the questions. However, Tina couldn't act as John which showed that she needed more practice. The portion of the results are given below in the chart:



The research exhibited that learners before puberty are more dependent on teachers who learn with repeating, drilling by concentrating only on what the teacher delivers, whereas learners after puberty tend to do more self-study and extensive research on the materials given during the class. The script of the game is provided in the appendix.

To do research and see whether age plays a pivotal role in learning and acquiring a language, a plethora of case studies, articles and dissertations were looked through. During that process, it was deduced that the theme is quite topical among scholars who share different points of view. Some linguists opine that a person's second language acquisition is effective when he/she starts from early years as in Lenneberg's hypothesis and if not, then they may not perform it well, while others presume that age isn't a factor triggering a problem for learners to get exposed to a new language. They claim that it depends on individuals how to make success in SLA regardless of age.

To check this ambiguity, the current research was done with two volunteers who were taught grammar rules, practiced, and measured their comprehension of the process. It was inferred that the brain is capable to perform well in SLA not only before, but after puberty as well. Undeniably, there are some discrepancies in the learning of young and older generations. For instance, the research showed that young learners may reach native-likeness and their articulation may be altered as a foreigner, while the old generation may reach the accuracy but not native-like

speech. Nevertheless, learners after puberty have developed the analytical skills that help them to analyze and synthesize the input by thinking about the relations of one rule with another, whereas young learners are less attentive than old ones and they are likely to approach the rules, not in detail. Thus, young learners may have an instant improvement in phonology and

The research also drives a message that the learning process not considering the age can be accelerated with instrumental or integrated motivation. In the case study, Max states that he is eager to acquire a second language for visiting his aunt dwelling in the United States of America. Saya also sets a goal to learn English to receive a higher education abroad which keeps her to stay motivated in an integrative way.

Having analyzed all factors, a conclusion has been made that Lenneberg's hypothesis may not be referred to all age learners that post-puberty learners' brain declines to store input and Snow and Hoefnagel-Hohle's opinions that learners in their old ages can also succeed seemed to coincide with the outcomes of this case study.

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