

Aging Effects in Adult Second Language Learning

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Abstract

The purpose for this study is to research and synthesize the problems associated with learning a second language in adulthood. This study will integrate the works of published authors in the field of Second Language Learning in an effort to create a synthesis, respond to arguments, identify any relations or contradictions in the current research to provide responses, suggestions, and conclusions to solve the problems identified.

Munoz (2010) identifies the effects of a learners' age as a crucial issue in the area of second language learning, regardless if the orientation is theoretical or applied. The influx of merging cultures and the need of many adults to learn a second language in an effort to better adapt to their new culture and homes, or meet language requirements in the workforce has driven the "age" factor to the forefront of contemporary second language education. Among the areas to explore is the ability of adults to achieve fluency in: listening, reading, speaking, and writing. This study will aim to answer question:

1. What are the factors that hinder adult second language learning?
2. Is age a factor in the success or failure of learning a foreign language?
3. How can second language learning be facilitated in adult learning groups?

Factors that hinder adult second language learning

Aging can hinder adult's ability to learn a second language if the adult, (1) suffers trauma to the brain, (2) experiences aging of his or her senses, (3) lacks appropriate motivation, and (4) lacks appropriate input. Cerebral plasticity is changes that occur in the brain throughout life due to behavior changes, injury, environment and neural processes. Pülvermuller and Schumann (1994) claimed that most people's plasticity declines in the language area of the brain around puberty and remains low, and that this process explains the effects of age in language acquisition. Yet, they also recognize that the levels of plasticity vary among different individuals, therefore allowing some late learners to achieve native speech forms. Furthermore, they believe that very high motivation causes levels of activity in the midbrain that compensate for the loss of plasticity in the cortex.

Hatch (1983) noted a decline in the capacity of adults learning a second language due to a decrease of sharpened senses. Auditory and visual deteriorations are factors to consider when judging an adult's ability to learn a second language. Therefore Joiner (1981), advises second language instructors to take into consideration the visual and aural difficulties of adult learners by developing techniques and materials to compensate for such difficulties. A lack of support for the improvement of visual and auditory factors can hinder adult second language learning.

Hudson (2000) described two different types of motivation, the integrative motivation – a desire to integrate, and the instrumental motivation – a desire to obtain something practical or concrete. Faulk (1978) noted that students who had integrative motivation were most successful when learning a target language, because they liked the people that spoke the language, admired the culture, and had a desire to become familiar with, or integrate into the society in which the language was used. However, Brown (2000) makes the point that integrative and instrumental motivation are not mutually exclusive, because learners rarely select one form of motivation, but rather a combination of both. He cites the example of international students residing in the United States, learning English for academic purposes while at the same time wishing to become integrated with the people and culture of the country. Thus, a lack of motivation whether integrative or instrumental can hinder the long terms success of an adult to learn a second language.

Renandya (2001) refers to input as the oral and written language that a learner receives. He states that in order for input to benefit the language learning process it must be comprehensible, abundantly and reliably available, frequently encountered, contain features slightly beyond the learners' current level, engage the learners attention, and be interesting and meaningful. Furthermore, Krashen (2004) ascertains that exposure to comprehensible language,

either through reading or listening, is critical for language acquisition. Research studies investigating the impact of extensive reading on language learning have demonstrated that exposure to comprehensible language can increase students' knowledge of vocabulary and grammar, which in turn enhances their proficiency in the four skill areas of listening, reading, speaking and writing (Day & Bamford, 1998).

Is Age as a factor in second language learning?

There are inevitable changes that occur with age that can affect adult learners' ability to be successful in learning a second language. Neurological changes affect all human beings alike. However, only major trauma to the brain can inflict enough damage to affect an adult's ability to learn. Although visual and auditory acuity are two hindrances of learning that are normally associated with aging, they can also affect people despite their age. Most visual and auditory hindrances can be corrected, and accommodations can be made to support learners with these conditions. Thus, the hindrances related to health conditions reviewed on this paper do not support age as a direct factor in the success or failure in adult second language learning. Lack of motivation and input are factors that are unrelated to age. A learner can experience high or low levels of motivation at any age. The quality of the input is dependent upon both the learner, as well as the instructor. The motivation of the learner, and the experience, education and methodologies of the instructor plays a very important role in the quality of input receives. Thus, both factors can affect the success or failure of adult second language learners, but a learners' age is not a factor in the success or failure of second language learning.

Facilitating adult language learning groups

As in any learning group, one of the most important ways in which instructors can facilitate adult second language learning is by scaffolding the learning experience and ensuring that the learning environment, instructional plan, supporting resources and instructional deliveries are structured in a manner that best supports learning (Kaiser, Kaminski, Foley, 2013). Considering the visual and auditory difficulties that aging adults may have, the classroom layout and the seating of aging adults within the classroom is important, because it supports the learners by providing them with better visibility and audibility in the classroom. Also, supporting the learners by providing written material with larger fonts, and using microphones or other sound enhancing devices can help diminish both visibility and audibility issues. Engaging the learners in the construction of activities that are interesting and meaningful is a way of keeping the class engaged. Also, providing them with a range of delivery methods stimulates the classroom environment while also helping to maintain, or even increase motivation levels.

Conclusion

Learning a second language in its entirety and perfection may be easier to accomplish by starting at an earlier age, rather than in adulthood. However, age is not a factor that affects second language learning, but the consequences of the natural progression of age can obstruct the learning process if not handled appropriately and effectively. The success or failure of an adult second language learner heavily lies upon the motivation of the learner, as well as the competence of the instructor in maintaining his or her classroom engaged and interested in the learning process.

Furthermore, the quality of input that the learner receives from the instructor, as well as the input that the learner individually seeks for himself or herself greatly increases the possibilities of success regardless of age.

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