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ORIGINAL RESEARCH PAPER

THE EFFECTS OF AGE FACTOR ON LEARNING ENGLISH: A CASE STUDY OF LEARNING ENGLISH IN AN ONLINE CHINESE SCHOOL

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ABSTRACT

The purpose of this study is to investigate the effect of age on EFL learning in an Online English school based in China for the students of Chinese nationality. The importance of the early start is larger especially when the structure and the origin of their native language greatly differs from the foreign language they aim to learn. The populations of the study are primary and middle school Chinese students and English language teachers of different background and nations. This study found that the age factor has an important effect on the learner's acquisition. The results confirm that the early start of learning L2/FL intensifies the process of developing the learner's language skills. The aim of this study is to encourage parents and students to start learning English, or other foreign language, as early as possible, as this will enhance their chances of high level of fluency and proficiency in the target language.

Keywords: Age factor, Age effect, Learning, Young learner



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1. Introduction

Language is a system of symbols that individuals use to describe the outer, real world around them, as well as their inner world, but the interrelation between these worlds, too. Even though it is not the only mean of communication, it is the main, most important and most complex one, by which we meet the thoughts of others. This is why the language is not researched by linguists only, but by pedagogists, sociologists, and psychologists. Analyzing the characteristics of different languages, linguists are trying to investigate it from many different perspectives, but also to find the most effective way to learn a language.

Besides the age, there are many other agents that affect learning like motivation, individual differences, learner's personality, opportunities for learning outside of the classroom etc (Dervić & Bećirović, 2020). All of these are essential and they directly determine the success of learning. Many linguists consider the age factor as the most important one in the acquisition of a foreign language. In this research filed one of the most important notions to mention is the Critical Period Hypothesis (Penfield, Roberts, 1960). It is a claim that there is a biological age span, the first few years of life, that are crucial for an individual to be exposed to and acquire the first language and after that period, it may be impossible to develop or achieve a full command of language. When it is about L2, if there was no exposition and acquisition in the early life, the development and results of L2 acquisition are fundamentally and irreversibly changed and the full competence may never be possible to achieve. There are many studies that show that foreign-sounding accents are more likely to develop when the L2 is first learned later in life.

Many different international research projects, studies and papers have multiply confirmed that the learners who started learning a foreign language at an early age have much better performance and attain higher level of proficiency than the learners who start later e.g. at late teen or adult years (Yaman & Bećirović, 2016). Zhang (2009) and Munoz et al. (2010) claim that children demonstrate better performance in pronunciation than adults do, specifically they have higher chances to achieve native-like accent. Petkovic (2012) also proved that young learners gain better results at the level of acquisition of phonetic rules,

while older learners master syntactic and semantic language rules more easily.

Apart from this, when it is about the speed of learning, it is known that the older learners are faster at early stages of second language development. They also acquire the vocabulary and meaning in an easier way as their world and life knowledge is much wider and better developed than it is at the young learners. But it is proven that the young learners are better learners on the long run. They easily catch up and their brains are more flexible to adjust especially, if they are exposed to L2 on a daily basis. One common situation that makes these statements less bright is that we can assume that most of the L2 learners learn the language at school for 1 or 2 classes a week which is a very short time of exposure to usually one person, the teacher, commonly of non-native background, and that might lessen their biological age predisposition and advantage. Also, scarce affective stability and cognitive abilities may restrain children from understanding early language learning instructions (Vygotsky, 1986). Young children, usually don't even have English classes at school by the age 6-9, unless they take a special course.

As we mentioned before, there are many similar studies related to our research field, so we decided to actually write a replication study to the paper 'The Effects of Age Factor on Learning English: A Case Study of Learning English in Saudi Schools, Saudi Arabia' by Elsadig Mohamed Khalifa Gawi (2011), as the structure of this work is well applicable to the aim of our study. The research question that guided this study was is there a significant difference in performance and the speed of improvement between the younger and the older students?

2. Literature review

Bećirović and Hurić-Bećirović (2017) investigated motivation and achievement of students learning English across different age in Bosnia and Herzegovina. 210 students participated, divided into three age groups: ten, fourteen, and eighteen years-olds. The data was collected via questionnaire and the results showed that there is a significant relationship between age and the motivation of the learners. The research showed that the youngest learners had the highest motivation, while the oldest students had the lowest motivation to learn English. Correspondingly, the youngest gained the highest achievement, and the oldest gained the lowest achievement.

Another Bećirović's (2017) research paper dealt with the relationship between gender, motivation and achievement in learning English as a foreign language. 185 students participated parted in the age groups: ten, fourteen, and eighteen. Once again, ten-year-old students exhibited the highest motivation for learning English, and, expectedly, the eighteen-year-old students exhibited the lowest motivation. This study also investigated how gender influences motivation and achievement in learning English as a foreign language, and showed that female students are more successful than male students at each age group.

Krashen, Long & Scarcella (1979) conducted a significant research project proving that adults certainly learn faster than the younger students, especially at some early stages of acquisition, but students who begin natural exposure to a foreign language during their early years generally achieve higher language proficiency than those who begun as adults. In his paper, Krashen discussed the claim "younger is better" and reminded that there are studies that claim that the older students are better students, but eventually, all scholars agree that child second language acquirers will finally be superior in terms of ultimate attainment, that is, on the long run. And then, we shouldn't not forget the fact that, after all, younger starters had more time of life to perfect their language skills.

Ozfidan and Burlbaw (2019) consider age as a crucial factor in second language acquisition. In their study, to research the age factor, they examined three different age groups; children, adolescents, and adults, considering Critical Period Hypothesis. The outcome of this study proves that children learn a language in a much easier way than adolescents and adults do, especially in terms of pronunciation and morphosyntax. Adolescents showed to exceed in syntax and listening skills, while adults were the best at reading and writing activities. The authors also remind that different types of learners at different developmental stages require a diversity of instructional methods. Even though age plays a vital role in language learning, other factors such as motivation, the capabilities of a learner, socioeconomic status (Bećirović & Akbarov, 2015), ample exposure to target language, interaction with the physical world and social environment, time available for learning, and linguistic and cultural backgrounds are seen to be more influential in some cases. As a result, late starters may gain great progress in language learning, as

well as early starters (Hyland & Hyland, 2019). Based on presented literature review we hypothesized that students who start learning English at an earlier age attain higher level of proficiency than those who start learning English later.

3. Methodology

The general research approach was experimental investigated and examined one independent variable which is the age. The methodology used in this study is quantitative and qualitative research. The data was collected, analyzed and presented in the section 'results'.

3.1 Participants

The population of this study from which subjects were drawn can be divided into two categories: students from China (24) and English teachers of various nationalities (30 teachers).

The students are also subdivided in two age groups; younger and older. Out of total 24, 12 younger students range from age 4 to 5, while 12 older students range from 10 to 12 years old. All of the students are learning at the same level in our school – basic. It is important to mention that all of the students are learning English language at their regular schools too, they enroll in BetaKid Online English school for additional classes. At the beginning, all of the students need to do a few tests after which they are allotted to the corresponding level. The levels in our school are; Starter, Basic, Intermediate, Advanced, and Master. In this study, we are going to test the students of the Basic level students only. The students are surrounded by their native Chinese environment and they are taught both by native and non-native English teachers at the BetaKid Online school. The number of the classes per week one student attends varies from 1 to 6, according to their wishes and needs. One class lasts for 25 minutes and it is face-to-face type, that is one student-one teacher. The classes are mainly based on communication and story-telling, with listening, speaking, reading and writing exercises, while explicit learning of grammar rules is excluded.

The English teachers lecture lessons and materials provides by the school. All of the teachers were required to have one or more years of experience and teaching as well as a university degree, preferably, in order to get employed. Teachers of many different nationalities and backgrounds

teach from their home, native or chosen country of living. Teachers are instructed to base the classes mainly on communication.

3.2 Tools of Data Collection

The questionnaire is an instrument used to collect data from the teachers and it is composed of 7 general questions regarding the students' overall performance, their grammar, vocabulary, and pronunciation, but also the teachers' broad opinions, attitudes and preferences considering the learner's age. The questionnaire was created in the form of a poll where the teachers could choose just one of the two options; Younger or Older students for each question.

Test for students comprises of 12 different exercises and the types are; circle the correct answer, underline one or more words, and match the words. The exercises were adequately created for the learners of the Basic level of English, that is, internationally accepted as A2 to B level. The test consists of the grammar part (7 exercises) and the vocabulary part (5 exercises). The Grammar exercises test the learner's understanding of verbs (simple present, present continuous, past simple), articles, nouns, adjectives, and prepositions. The Vocabulary exercises test the learner's understanding of the meaning of the given words and sentences. The complete test carries the total of 20 points (Grammar; 7, Vocabulary 13.). The available time the students had to complete it was about 10 minutes.

3.3 Students' results

In order to test the research hypothesis, the analyses required comparison of younger students' performance with older students' performance.

As we can see in the *Chart 1*, the group of Younger students gained a total of 191 points out of 240 possible which makes their average score 15,91 out of 20 possible points per test, that is the finally **79,55%**. The group of the Older students gained the total of 190 points out of 240 possible, which makes their average score 15,83 out of 20 possible points per test, that is **79,14%**.

As expected, the Younger students scored better overall, although the difference is slight.

Figure 1.
Total test results

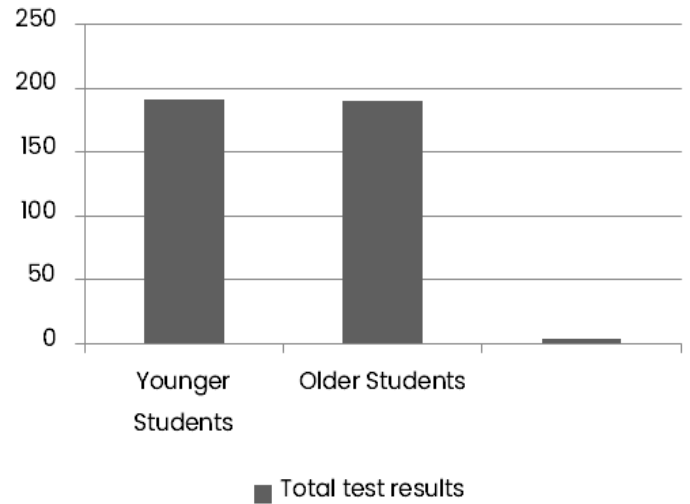
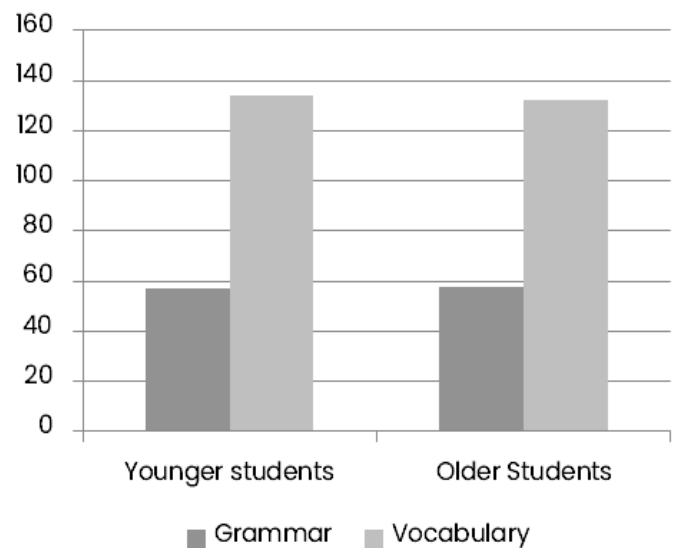


Figure 2.



As we can see in the *Chart 2*, Younger students gained the total of 57 points out of 84 possible, which makes their average score 4,75 out of 7 points for the Grammar exercises only, that is **67,85%**. For the Vocabulary exercises, they gained total of 134 points out of 156, that is **85,89%** so their average score is 11,16 out of 13.

The Older students gained a total of 58 points in the Grammar exercises, which makes their average score 4,83, that is **69%**, while they gained 132 points in Vocabulary exercises, that is **84, 61%** and their average score is 11 out of 13.

We can see that the Older students did slightly better in Grammar exercises, while the Younger students did better in Vocabulary exercises, just as some previous similar studies claimed before.

3.4 Teachers' results

Figure 3.

Teachers' questionnaire results

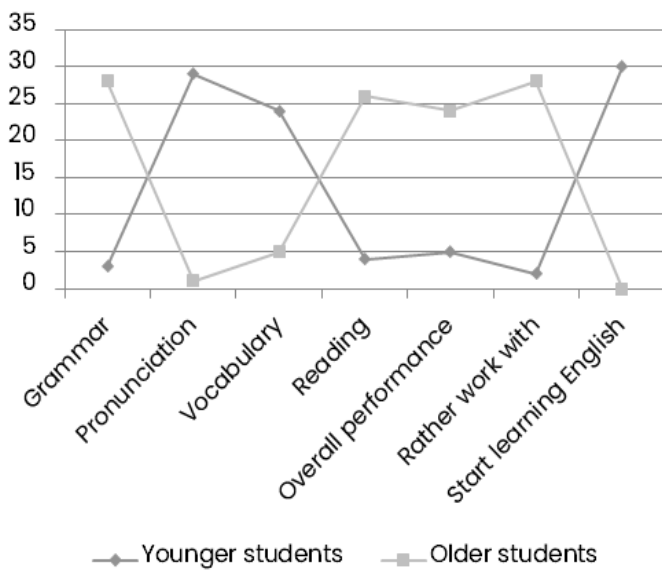


Table 1.

	Younger	Older
1. Who is better at grammar?	3	28
2. Who has better pronunciation?	29	1
3. Who is better at acquiring vocabulary?	24	5
4. Who has better reading skills?	4	26
5. Who has better performance overall?	5	24
6. If you could, you would rather choose?	2	28
7. At what age is it better to start learning English?	30	0

The teachers' questionnaire was completely left to be answered on the basis of their personal impressions and opinions. About 30 teachers participated. The interesting part of the results is that almost all of the teachers admitted they rather work with Older students, but they all agreed that the children should start learning English at an early age.

4. Discussion

There is difference in performance between younger and older students, although it is not significant, being as high as only 1 or 2 points. The researcher accredits the slight difference to the fact that all of the students are learning the English language in their regular schools too, therefore, older students have a privilege of learning the higher levels of English and probably on more often basis in comparison to the younger students who are still learning the lower levels of English or nothing at all at their pre-schools or kindergartens. Also, their world and life knowledge are still shallow,

which lessens their understanding and language awareness.

Still, the study confirms the hypothesis; the younger students they are, the better they will learn English. Although, as we mentioned before, there are some studies that claim that the older students

are better students, all of the scholars agree on one; young students are better on the long run. Just as the results of our teachers' questionnaire show, we can suppose that most of the teachers widely rather choose, if they can, to work with older students as they can have a wider range of topics to talk about in the class, but they are also all well aware of the benefits of the early start of learning the second or foreign language. The fact is that the younger students have more flexible brains and they can easily adjust to the mentality of the language, they can learn even to think in the target language, as their motivation is high, as proven before (Mašić et al., 2020). A slow beginning followed by a high level of success in the end characterize the learning progress of children (Hyland, 2019). Regarding the physical aspect, younger students will adapt much better to the accent and pronunciation of the foreign language as their speech organs are still developing. Older students usually already have their attitudes and character formed which might sometimes oppose to the mentality of the new language so this might be defective on their language progress. Again, physical factors and low motivation do not contribute to their easy and quick way on reaching high proficiency. Older learners show a great progress in the beginning of learning, but, eventually, they slow down (Slabakova et al., 2019).

Some previous research projects proved that the younger learners are better at acquiring vocabulary and adapting to the native-like pronunciation (Bećirović, 2021), while adolescents or adults are better at syntax. It was interesting to find that the results of our study also show that the children, although slightly, are better at vocabulary part of the test and, expectedly, older students somewhat exceeded in grammar exercises. It is also said before that adults prefer and benefit from explicit grammar rules learning (Andrews, 2017), which conforms to our results, too. Also, late learners can sometimes, under certain conditions and factors, achieve native-like perfection in the second language, too (Ioup et al., 1994).

5. Conclusion

In the light of the previous findings, one can rely on the assertion that age does affect EFL learning, because early exposure to language instructions is constantly resulting in better performance.

In this field, established studies show that the earlier the first language learning, the better

the second language general fluency (Snow, 1993; Taylor, 1990). Clearly, the findings of this study supported the established studies. It concluded that the performance of foreign language was better in students who started learning English at an earlier age (4-5) and that their skills developed in a way of better quality, than they did at early adolescents (10-12). Considering the different ways of how the two age groups of learners acquire the language, it is also important to remember that the teacher has to have a different and special approach, style of teaching, and instructional methods for these two groups. Children require variety in the classes and more picturesque presentation, while older students might require somewhat serious approach and more discussions, as they are cognitively mature. Although young learners have certain superiority over teenagers or adults, their achievements may be weakened in a formal learning environment. Children greatly prosper from an authentic target language environment, sensorimotor activities and colorful instructional materials. The essential point at this period is vocabulary growth (Andrews, 2017). Older students gain from formal settings with clear instruction methods and explicit rules (Hyland & Hyland, 2019; Delić & Bećirović, 2018).

The research results can help and be beneficial for teachers, schools, parents, and students in finding the most effective approach to learning and teaching English as a second or foreign language.

Certainly, there are some other factors that influence motivation and achievement in learning English as a foreign language, too. The research into such factors could be recommended for further investigation. The effects like the personality traits, teaching strategies, socioeconomic status of family, the number of family members, etc. might have a significant influence on motivation and achievement in learning English as a foreign language.

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7. Appendix

7.1 The students' test

1. Do you like to eat paper?

- a) No, I doesn't.
- b) No, I not like.
- c) No, I don't.

2. Did you swim today?

- a) No, I don't.
- b) No, I didn't.
- c) No, not swim.

3. Yesterday, I _____ to school.

- a) go
- b) going
- c) went

4. This is _____ pencil.

- a) a
- b) and
- c) an

5. I live _____ China.

- a) in
- b) with
- c) go

6. A house is _____ than a chair.

- a) biggest
- b) big
- c) bigger

7. There are 8 _____.

- a) childs
- b) children
- c) childrens

8. I am _____ a book.

- a) reading
- b) asking
- c) cooking

9. I like to _____ soccer.

- a) eat
- b) drive
- c) play

10. Circle water surfaces.

sea, table, pond, river, ground

11. Circle places.

park, table, paint, store, library

12. Match the words.

pet	jump
move	windy
vegetable	firefighter
weather	dog
job	potato