

IMPACT OF ADULT AGE ON SECOND LANGUAGE DEVELOPMENT: ESL LEARNERS' CHALLENGES

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ABSTRACT

Learners' age impacts to a larger extent in the second/foreign language learning process. This study was carried out to investigate the impact of the adult age on ESL learning and development The Sri Lankan context. This study was a descriptive survey research and a mixed method was applied in data collection and data presentation. In this study, 50 adult ESL learners at the selected higher educational institutions in Trincomalee and Ampara districts of Eastern Province were systematically selected as sample populations. A questionnaire was employed for collecting opinions among adult ESL learners. The findings and results of the opinion survey present that the majority of the participants agreed that learners' age is an important factor in second language learning, and child learners reach the anticipated learning outcome and proficiency level within a shorter period of time than adult learners. Further, most adult ESL learners encounter challenges in picking up language skills and natural pronunciation. According to many participants' opinions, factors such as learners' fear, anxiety, hesitation, negative attitude; insufficient basic language proficiency, and spending less amount of time in learning English affect adult ESL learning and development. Therefore, the problems in developing English language skills in the adult age can be overcome when the ESL learning process takes place before adolescence, and adult learners spend much time in developing language skills and other subcomponents of each skill through continuous practice.

Keywords: Adult age, English as a Second Language Learners, Second Language.

1. INTRODUCTION

Second Language (L2) can be defined as a person's language apart from the native language or first language (L1). The age of the students is a major factor in second language acquisition. Many theories and ideas on how people pick up a new language point to the influence of a learner's age, particularly the inherent theory and the Critical Period Hypotheses (CPH). Compared to adults, children who start learning a foreign language at a young age are more likely to succeed and achieve their goals. However, linguists, academics, and researchers have disagreed on this. Children who are exposed to a second language at a young age appear to be as fluent as native speakers, whereas some people who begin learning a second language may never become fully fluent (Lenneberg, 1967).

The arrival age is a strong predictor of success in learning Chinese and Korean as a second language, according to Johnson and Newport (1989), who also argue that this is true for arrivals before or after puberty.

Hossain (2015), however, claims that the result of L2D among adults differs in some significant

respects from that of L1D among children. When comparing the two SLL outcomes, it is clear that young children are more advanced than adults in achieving the learning objective and becoming proficient in the target language. For the sake of this investigation, it is important to note that English functions as a lingua franca and is spoken as a second language in Sri Lanka.

Therefore, English is either a required or elective subject in schools across the world. English is required to be taught in schools in Sri Lanka from third to thirteenth grade. Nonetheless, pupils' negative attitudes and lack of positive motivation cause the vast majority of them to struggle through elementary and secondary school without becoming proficient in English. However, several hypotheses and studies have found that children have the innate potential to learn any language by the time they reach school age.

While many students attempt to learn English, only a small percentage really succeed in doing so.

In instance, many adults in Sri Lanka who begin their English as a second language education later in life report being dissatisfied with their progress toward fluency and competence in the language.

They face a number of obstacles and tests. The results of a comparable research by Seefa in northern Sri Lanka were (2019). This research showed that students encounter external problems such a lack of exposure and opportunities to practise English outside of the classroom, as well as internal challenges like fear, anxiety, and negative attitudes, which prevent them from learning the language. A person's age has a disproportionately large effect on their ability to learn a second language, regardless of the other factors at play.

1.1 Problem Statement

Learners' age has been one of the primary factors in second/foreign language development. As far as adult ESL learning is concerned, most of the learners fail to reach the expected learning outcome and fluency in language skills such as listening, speaking, reading, writing, and pronunciation. According to the review of previous studies, numerous factors affect adult ESL learning and development since they do start up their second language learning after adolescence. Acquiring fluent speaking and natural pronunciation has been a huge challenge for a large number of learners. In addition, learners confront major challenges in improving advanced writing skills. These barriers lead to a failure in ESL learning. According to linguistic theories and research findings, learners' age plays a vital role, when a learner starts up his/her second language learning, he/she faces numerous challenges. In particular, in adult ESL learning, psychological factors such as fear, hesitation, and anxiety affect the success of ESL learning. Hence, this current study was carried out to investigate the impact of the adult age on ESL learning and development.

1.2 Research Questions

- Does ESL learners' adult age affect their second language development?
- Why do a large number of adult ESL learners encounter difficulties and challenges in grasping expected learning outcomes and skills in the English language?
- What are the factors that affect the ESL learning development of adult learners in Sri Lanka?

1.3 Objectives of the Study

- The primary aim of this study was to investigate the impact of adult age on second language learning. Based on the aim of the study, the following objectives are addressed.

- To explore how the adult age of ESL learners in Sri Lanka affects their second language learning and development
- To identify the factors that affect the second language learning of the adult ESL learners in Sri Lanka

2. LITERATURE REVIEW

This part focuses on the review of other relevant sources. They are presented in different subtopics.

2.1 Second Language Learning and Acquisition

Second language acquisition and learning have been the significant component of Applied Linguistics and psycholinguistics. Finally, the discipline of Applied Linguistics has done much study on the topic of second language acquisition. SLA produces practical disputes in the larger subject of psycholinguistics, as Rahman & Pandian (2016) explain by evaluating other relevant findings. Studies of second language acquisition (SLA) look on the similarities and differences between learning a first language (L1) and a second language (L2). Rahman and Pandian (2016) also note that this topic is now routinely covered in academic institutions.

Similarly, Brown (1980) writes that L2D is linked to acculturation and cohabitation in an advertisement for SLA and SLL. Learning how to adapt one's behaviour to the norms of a new culture is another definition of acculturation. SLA promotes interaction and harmony, as advocated by Brown (1980). The study of a foreign language provides students with an opportunity to get an understanding of other cultures. In addition, Hossain (2015) conducted research on SLA and SLL and came to the same conclusion: SLD is less automatic and less efficient than L1D among non-L2-dominants. Since any basic system has a limited amount of resources, its performance will naturally degrade as more and more is asked of it. There appears to be a connection between the morphological changes that occur with age and the cognitive processing that facilitates second language acquisition in certain regions of the brain.

2.2 Effect of Age on second Language Development

SLA is different from first language acquisition (FLA). Learners' age plays an important role in SLA and SLL. According to the review of other relevant sources, Morford and Mayberry (2000) indicate that individuals consistently outperform

both signed and spoken languages at earlier ages whether the first or second language. Further, According to Krashen, Long, and Scarcella (1979, 1982), adults are superior to children in SLA, and older learners pick up the language more rapidly than younger learners. Younger learners are between the ages of 6 – 12. Therefore, as for individual factors of SLD, the factors differ from learner to learner. It is argued that according to individual differences in SLL, age has been a key factor. Similar to another study, Tohidian (2009) claims that age plays a key role in SLL. It is commonly thought that younger language learners are more successful, and they reach ultimate attainment in at least some aspects of the second language.

Further, Penfield and Roberts (1959) argued that the best period for language acquisition falls within the first ten years of life. The brain retains its plasticity during this period. Therefore, according to the findings of many other relevant studies, child learners or younger learners achieve the expected outcome and second language proficiency more than adult or older learners. However, there are adult learners who achieve the highest level of second/foreign language proficiency. In this sense, Hu (2016) claims that there are successful second language learners who started SLL after puberty and have been able to achieve native proficiency. Although language acquisition theories reveal that adult and older learners will not be able to achieve native-like language skills and pronunciation, some exceptionally adult learners achieve native-like proficiency. Further, Hu (2016) concludes that according to the CPH, age is proved that young learners stand the advantage stage in second language learning. They can pick up second/foreign language advancement better than older learners.

2.3 Other Relevant Studies

A number of studies, including those that specifically focus on adult ESL learners, have set out to determine whether or not older students have an advantage when it comes to learning a second language. Oyama (1976) conducted a study with 60 male immigrant children and young men (ages 5-18) to see what effects this demographic had on the country. Oyama (1976) reports that while newly arrived children performed within the range of native-speaker controls, those beyond the age of 12 did not, and accents were also present in those who had come before the age of 12. Results from this

study imply that the ability to acquire the phonology of a second language decreases with age. In addition, Halik (2020) notes that the age of the learner appears to be a significant effect in the acquisition of pronunciation. Adult students often struggle with learning how to pronounce new words properly. So, it's clear that most adult ESL students in Sri Lanka have struggled with developing a native-like accent. Senel (2006) notes that age is an important factor in learning or enhancing pronunciation abilities, and this is also true when it comes to gaining pronunciation.

Senel (2006) adds that if a student has a native-like accent while pronouncing a second language, it is likely that they began learning that language as a youngster, having grown up in a household where that language was spoken. Therefore, according to other relevant studies, the findings of several studies show that adult second/foreign language learners particularly ESL learners fail to reach the ultimate attainment like a child or younger learners.

3. METHODOLOGY

This part presents the methods and materials used in this study which are given under various subtopics.

3.1 Research Design

The current study was a descriptive research and a survey research method was applied. In this study, a systematic sampling technique was used for collecting the sample population. This study employed mixed approach in data collection and data presentation. Since the primary data were quantitatively collected using a quantitative research instrument, the data collection approach was quantitative.

3.2 Sample Population

In this study, 50 adult ESL learners were systematically selected as a sample population for primary data collection. The selected participants learned the English language for higher education and vocation in non-state educational institutions in Trincomalee and Ampara districts of Eastern Province, Sri Lanka.

3.3 Research Instruments

A questionnaire was employed as the primary data collection tool of this study which consisted of 10 close-ended questions. The questions were designed based on the problem and the objectives of the study. The close-ended questions were set focusing

on the areas; effect of learners' age in second language development the difference between child and adult age in second language development, challenges and barriers that hinder the ESL learning of adult learners, and the factors that affect adult learners' ESL learning.

3.4 Data Collection Procedure

As for the primary data collection of the study, the questionnaire was distributed among the participants via social networking after a complete instruction about the research and data collection was given. Ten statement sentences were given in the questionnaire in which participants were required to opt for one of the options given as strongly satisfied, satisfied, and dissatisfied.

4. RESULTS AND DISCUSSION

The results of primary and secondary data analysis and discussion of the results are presented in this section. The findings are organized into different subtopics.

4.1 Results and Discussion of the Questionnaire

As presented in the methodology part, the primary data were collected using a questionnaire that contained 10 statements to which the participants were instructed to state their opinions in terms of whether they strongly agreed, agree or disagree with the statements. Accordingly, the following table shows the results of the findings in the participants' opinion survey.

Table 1: Participants' Response to the Questionnaire

No.	Statements given in the questionnaire	Participants' response by number		
		Strongly Agree	Agree	Disagree
01	Learners' age has been one of the primary factors in second language learning.	32	11	07
02	Child age can help the learners reach the ultimate attainment in second language learning.	21	14	15
03	Learning a second language in adult age does not give the expected learning outcome and proficiency in second language learning.	24	12	14
04	The majority of adult ESL learners in Sri Lanka confront challenges in achieving proficiency in all language skills.	18	13	19
05	Developing speaking skills seems a challengeable task for many adult ESL learners in Sri Lanka.	20	18	12
06	Adult ESL learners struggle to master natural pronunciation.	23	19	08
07	Child ESL learners achieve the anticipated learning outcome and communicative competency rather than adult ESL learners.	16	20	14
08	Adult learners' fear, anxiety, hesitation and negative attitude are significant factors affecting ESL learning development.	20	23	07
09	The majority of ESL learners in Sri Lanka fail to pick English language proficiency before adolescence.	15	17	18
10	Many adult ESL learners in Sri Lanka do not spend much time for self-learning as child ESL learners spend.	20	20	10

4.2 Effect of Learners' Age in SLL

According to second language acquisition and learning theories and the findings of several research, learners' age plays a vital role in second language development. Similarly, the findings and results of the participants' opinion survey present that the majority of the participants do agree that age has been one of the significant factors in second language learning. Moreover, most of the participants agree that childhood age helps the learners to pick up the language easily. Hence, the findings address that there are differences between child and adult ESL learning and learners. When the learners start their second language learning

before puberty period or adolescence, they acquire their second/foreign language more quickly than adult learners.

Likewise, according to CPH, Lenneberg (1967) suggests that natural language could only take place during a critical period, lasting from about age two to puberty. The findings-based conclusion of another relevant study carried out by Hu (2016) shows that young children are better at SLA than the later starters such as adolescents or adults. The findings of the current study further present that most adult ESL learners agree that adult second language learners fail to achieve the anticipated learning outcome and language proficiency. Therefore, the findings regarding the effect of age

in SLL can be concluded that child age or younger age children who learn or acquire a second language faster and reach the ultimate attainment than adult learners.

4.3 ESL Learning in Adult Age

This study was based on the adult ESL learners in Sri Lanka and the aim was how the age affects their second language development. Accordingly, the opinion survey presents that the participants agree with the statement that "the majority of adult ESL learners in Sri Lanka confront challenges and issues in achieving proficiency in all language skills". Except for a few learners, most of the learners fail to master speaking and pronunciation. Although some learners consist of fluency and accuracy in writing, their speaking skills and proper pronunciation seem lower. Therefore, the findings further reveal that developing speaking skills seems a challenging task for many adult ESL learners in Sri Lanka as well as they struggle to master the natural pronunciation.

Since the participants started up their ESL learning after puberty and adolescence, their age affects their language learning and development. As a consequence, ESL learning seems a failure among most ESL learners. Further, many participants agree that child ESL learners achieve the anticipated learning outcome and communicative competency rather than adult ESL learners. This statement is acceptable and in terms of the findings of other relevant studies, the results reveal that children age or younger children pick up the English language more quickly than adult learners. However, learners' adult age gives the ESL learners a positive impact. They very quickly develop grammatical accuracy and vocabulary and improve their writing skills too. In a similar study carried out by Wu and Le (2014), of which the findings show that Chinese ESL learners have experienced many difficulties and problems when pursuing ESL learning in the adult age. However, some advantages they might have over children.

4.4 Factors Affecting Adult ESL Learning

As for the factors behind the difficulties of adult ESL learners in learning English, the results of the findings show that a large number of participants agreed that adult learners' fear, anxiety, hesitation, and negative attitude are significant factors affecting ESL learning development. It was observed in the classroom that most of the learners were feared and hesitant in getting involved in

speaking tasks, presentations, and other language games and activities. Moreover, their negative attitude seems a reason for their poor performance. They do think that they will not be able to speak English well and produce natural pronunciation. Further, another factor found based on the opinion survey was that majority of the ESL learners in Sri Lanka fail to pick English language proficiency before adolescence.

Government schools in Sri Lanka have achieved remarkable success with English Language Teaching (ELT). Multiple studies have shown that most pupils aren't motivated to improve their English skills. Therefore, it appears that they have a lesser level of English competence. Sri Lankan students enrolled in the Advanced Level of the General Certificate of Education (GCE) were the subjects of a research that looked at the causes of disinterest in school. According to Halik and Nusrath's (2020) analysis of the reasons why GCE (General Certificate of Education) A/L (Advanced Level) students in government schools in Sri Lanka aren't interested in learning English, a number of factors—including a focus on "the main subjects," students' lack of an English background, teachers' reliance on tried-and-true teaching methods, the use of challenging textbooks, a lack of positive motivation, and overcrowded classrooms—have contributed to .

As a result of students' lack of interest, learners do not spend much time improving English language proficiency. Similarly, the opinion survey shows that the majority of the adult ESL learners in Sri Lanka do not spend much time on self-learning as child ESL learners spend. During the young ESL learning, students who are interested in learning English spend their time much for developing language skills and vocabulary. On the other hand, although adult ESL learners have an interest in grasping language skills, due to several factors, they do not spend their time much in learning English. This could be one of the key factors affecting adult ESL learning.

5. CONCLUSION

Learners' age has been a key factor in Second and foreign language learning and development. Younger learners reach the expected learning outcome and language proficiency than adult learners. According to the findings of previous studies, it is likely that most adult learners confront several challenges in reaching the ultimate

attainment in English language skills. Therefore, this study was conducted to investigate the impact of learners' age on the development of the English language among adult ESL learners. According to the opinion survey of the participants, the findings-based conclusion shows that majority of the participants agreed that learners' age is an important factor in second language learning, and child learners reach the anticipated learning outcome and proficiency to a larger extent than adult learners. Further, the opinion survey reveals that most adult ESL learners encounter challenges in picking up language skills and natural pronunciation.

As far as the age difference is concerned, younger ESL learners quickly reach the learning outcome

and language proficiency than the adult ESL learners. In addition, according to participants' opinions, there are certain factors; learners' fear, anxiety, hesitation, negative attitude; insufficient basic language proficiency, and spending less amount of time learning English which affects adult ESL learning and development.

Therefore, it is recommended based on the findings that the second and foreign language learning process should take place before adolescence. Even if the ESL learning process takes place in the adult age, the learners should spend a large amount of time developing language skills and other subcomponents of each skill through continuous practice.

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