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# IS THE YOUNGER THE BETTER? TEACHING ENGLISH TO YOUNG LEARNERS IN THE INDONESIAN CONTEXT

IKA LESTARI DAMAYANTI



**ABSTRACT:** *It is universally acknowledged that learning a second/foreign language, e.g. English, since early childhood would contribute positively to the child's language acquisition. Native-like pronunciation is one of the favored results gained from this process. This assumption is strongly supported by the Critical Period Hypothesis i.e. a biologically determined period of life when language can be acquired more easily. However, many studies indicate that "the younger the better" in learning English is not necessarily true. Native-like pronunciation and proficiency have been found to be acquired by a learner who started learning English in his adulthood. In regard to this matter, this paper attempts to review a belief "the younger the better" in learning English in the Indonesian context by looking at issues related to optimal age, factors contributing to the success of L2 acquisition, and current practices of teaching English to Young Learners (TEYL) in the Indonesian context.*

**KEY WORDS:** *second language, teaching English to young learners, critical period hypothesis, optimal age, psychosocial context, and learning condition.*

## INTRODUCTION

English has now been introduced at a lower-age students and officially included into national curriculum of early education in many parts of the world. One of the reasons is the status of English in those countries. In one country where English is as the Second Language (SL), English might be needed as the medium of instruction in secondary education; therefore it is necessary to be taught in primary school. On the other hand, in the case of Indonesia where English is as the Foreign Language (FL), English is considered important for its status as a means of international communication. Accordingly, the educational authorities decide that English needs

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to be introduced in primary school. In this paper, the terms related to SL and FL will hereafter be referred to as L2.

However, such a move as introducing English to young learners needs sound considerations. Merely believing in a well established assumption that “the younger the better” should be avoided because some research results reveal the opposite. In this paper, I would like to argue that the lower age is not a single determining factor towards greater level of proficiency in English as a L2. It is in line with what S.H.M. Todd (2003) has pointed out that *age factor has proven to be merely one among many factors that mutually contribute to determine the ultimate attainment in a L2*. Some other factors such as psychosocial context and learning conditions, therefore, need to be taken into account. In regard to this matter, the present paper will firstly discuss issues related to optimal age, the notions of psychosocial contexts and learning conditions, and finally issues related to English language teaching for young learners in the Indonesian context.

### **ISSUES RELATED TO OPTIMAL AGE**

Undoubtedly, a belief that young L2 learners are better than older learners has been very popular. This belief is supported by the Critical Period Hypothesis (CPH): a biologically determined period of life when language can be acquired more easily, that is between the age of two years and the early teens (Cook, 1991; Ellis, 1994; and Brown, 2000). Originally the idea that the early years before puberty offered a biologically favored stage for L2 learning came from Penfield in the fifties, he then recommended that the early childhood should be used intensively for language training (Stern, 1983; Abudarham, 1987; and Singleton & Ryan, 2004).

In support of the CPH is a theory developed by Lenneberg in the sixties that children's brains are more flexible, which therefore can contribute to the attainment of native-like proficiency in a language (in Stern, 1983; Cook, 1991; Rixon, 1992; and Hyltenstam & Abrahamsson, 2001). Many research results, such as those conducted by Oyama (1976), Cochrane (1980), Patkowski (1980), etc. indicate that young children are more likely to attain natively like proficiency in a L2 than teenagers or adults (in Ellis, 1994; and Gass & Selinker, 1994).

The strengths of a child's brain plasticity will be more well developed if the child is exposed to environment that support his/her language development. Further evidence showing the superiority of starting early is the Canadian immersion programs (Stern, 1983; and Rixon, 1992). Under certain circumstances the early start can be very advantageous; young children appear to be remarkably responsive to language education in a “natural” setting of language use of the kind offered by language immersion (Stern, 1983:364).

D. Singleton & L. Ryan (2004) present some American studies focusing on the effects of programs of foreign languages in the elementary school. The research results show that the age of arrival at L2 learning and the length of exposure differentiated the students' level of proficiency in a L2. They also highlight Yamada's

(1980) study in investigating students' success in learning a small selection of English words. The results indicate that the older the age the lower the score.

Nonetheless, the idea of the CPH and its effect on starting early has been challenged by a number of researchers. Studies conducted by Krashen (1973), Hoefnagel-Hohle (1978), Eckstrand (1978), and Asher & Price (1967) have proven that adult learners outperform their juniors (in Stern, 1983; Cook, 1991; Ellis 1994; and Gass & Selinger, 1994). Given the same teaching situation, older learners are better than younger learners even at pronunciation, which has been believed to be the advantage of starting early. It implies that the younger age is not the prominent factor to have native-like pronunciation.

D. Singleton (2001 and 2003) has argued that despite the decrease of cerebral plasticity in the brain, *the L2 age effects are exclusively a matter of neurologically predetermination*. In fact, one of the proponents of CPH, Lanneberg, highlighted that at the age of forty, a person can learn a new language (in Hyltenstam & Abrahamsson, 2001). They can learn more rapidly than children because older age will have a better knowledge of the world, semantic concepts, a longer memory span, and a more developed cognitive system (Grosjean, 1982).

In my own view, having better knowledge can mean a firmer knowledge of adults' L1. They can utilize this L1 knowledge as a basis to process the L2 learning. Their maturity also allows them to process abstract concepts. Eventually, they can use metalanguage to talk about language. These points are absent in children and make adults become more efficient learners. According to J.F. Hamers & M.H.A. Blanc (1989) on the basis of having more developed cognitive system, adolescents and adults learn better in a formal classroom. Children, in contrast, will learn better in a natural setting that may lead in the long run to native-like competence in all language skills.

As a research result shows, the inability of adults to gain native-like pronunciation may result from the interference of the first language. Some adults do not want to give up their native accent (Ellis, 1994; and Selinker, 1994). However, from my personal observation, a strong motive to have a native-like pronunciation significantly helps adult learners to achieve it. Because of religious reasons, for instance, many Indonesian Moslems have acquired native-like pronunciation in reciting the Holy Koran though they learn it later in their adulthood.

Having the fact that there has never been clear-cut research results concerning the younger the better, I believe that this is not yet the time for the issue to stop developing. M. Patkowski (1990) has advocated that the rejection of the CHP remains unjustified; enough evidence shows that children are better in a long run attainment. However, I accordingly agree with S. Rixon (2000) who confirms that *an early start may have its own benefits, but a later start is not necessarily a barrier to success*. By observing the on-going research results, measuring their benefits and flaws, I go on to argue that such a move as introducing L2 at the lower age still can gain benefits, without excluding the fact that adults can do so as well.

## **SOME CONTRIBUTING FACTORS TO THE SUCCESS OF L2 LEARNING IN EARLY EDUCATION**

To gain the students' highest level of proficiency in L2 is not only a matter of age factors but of psychosocial context and learning conditions. F. Grosjean (1982) affirms that it is psychosocial factors, such as the use of language in the society, and not the age of acquisition of the languages that will contribute to a child being bilingual. Social contexts according to H.H. Stern (1983) and R. Ellis (1994) also influence the learners' attitudes and motivation and, in turn, on their language learning conditions. Subsequently, introducing English to young learners is still worth doing and advantageous by carefully taking into account of the relationships between psychosocial contexts and learning conditions.

### **A. PSYCHOSOCIAL CONTEXTS**

The discussion of social contexts relates to the status of L2 in a particular country. There are some types of contexts of L2 learning, among others are those proposed by Spolsky (1974) cited in H.H. Stern (1983) and Judd (1978) in R. Ellis (1994). In this paper, I adopt the one proposed by Judd. The first type is the L2 serves as the native language (or one of the native languages), for example, L2 learners of English in the USA. Secondly, the L2 functions as the official language, such as English in India. Thirdly, the L2 is used for the interpersonal communications, such as English in Indonesia where it is neither the mother tongue nor the official language.

The status of L2 within a country influences the availability of exposures to the target language. In type one, younger learners have ample opportunities to use the L2 outside and inside of school life. V. Cook (1991) presents an example of how the children of her overseas students speak better than their parents. In type two, almost similar with the first type, with or without formal instruction, the exposure to the target language is available. However, before entering school young L2 learners have less exposure. Once they study at school, they will have more opportunities to use it. In type three, exposure to the language is limited to the school context and usually to very few hours per week, the teachers are generally nonnative of the L2, and there is no communicative need to use the L2 outside the classroom.

I particularly highlight more on this type as J. Cenoz (2003) has affirmed that this condition is different from that of learners immersed in a L2 context. It has been yielded that the immersion programs have met considerable success (Ellis, 1994) and the L2 learners generally achieved native-like proficiency (Cenoz, 2003). In the third context, however, there is very little exposure to the L2. Formal instructions are more likely to be the main choice to acquire the L2. This situation becomes problematic because, as discussed earlier, some research results show that younger L2 learners will perform better in natural settings.

M.L.G. Leccumberri & F. Gallardo (2003) respond to this problem by substantiating that in formal settings, children require much longer exposure than in natural contexts. Nevertheless, because of limited time of learning, six to seven

years have not been sufficient time for the youngest children either to catch up or overtake older learners. J. Cenoz (2003) agrees with the idea that the length of exposure to the L2 seems to have a positive effect on the subjects' performance. The longer the exposure to the L2 the better performance becomes. This conclusion strengthens what J. Khan (1991) has put forward earlier.

Yet everyone was aware that that excellent reasons for starting foreign language learning early were still valid—that longer exposure should mean more achievement, that young children's capacity for developing accurate pronunciation does not endure, that broadening horizons is educationally desirable (Khan, 1991:23).

### **B. LEARNING CONDITIONS**

In his framework of prominent factors of language learning, H.H. Stern (1983) mentions that educational treatment such as objectives, methodology and materials are included in the learning conditions. The objectives of learning are usually dependent on political and economical grounds (Cook, 1991). Often time the budget is very tight, working on the basis of evidence that beginning young can be more effective is therefore expected (Rixon, 2000). This can be realized by implementing suitable teaching methods for children, providing appropriate human and material resources, and focusing on long-term needs.

Teaching methods for young learners should be based on their characteristics. Much research indicate that younger learners will learn better in natural setting, thus, classroom settings and activities should be created in such a way that resemble natural settings. It is the "environment" in which children have ample opportunities to hear, see and use the L2 for communicative purposes (Cameron, 2001). Teaching activities should be kept whole, meaningful and interesting. This is to do with children's nature of "here and now" (Cook, 1991). The absent objects or abstract concepts are irrelevant for them. Children will find the activities meaningful and interesting when they can see the immediate relevance. Hence, children are easier to teach through an informal approach such as games, songs, stories and rhymes (Cook, 1991; and Rixon, 1992). All in all, the L2 lessons should provide children with the experience of the language in use. This is because the broader and richer the language experience provided for them, the more they are likely to learn (Cameron, 2001).

Teachers should be assigned on the basis of both their proficiency in the L2 and their capability in language teaching for young learners. This subsequently requires the educational authorities to train the primary teachers the L2 teaching methods because usually the primary teachers are more likely to be all-round subject teachers (Rixon, 1992). Supporting materials are necessarily supplied. They should reflect and match the children's ways of learning. Colorful and "bright" textbooks are preferable. Yet, they often require high prices. Some licensing agreements between publishers may lead to producing textbooks at price accessible to parents and schools (Rixon, 1992:83).

### **INTRODUCING ENGLISH TO YOUNG LEARNERS IN THE INDONESIAN CONTEXT**

Currently, English has been included into the national curriculum for primary education in Indonesia. It is aimed at preparing students to acknowledge English before they formally learn in secondary school. Hence, English subject is not compulsory but as a part of local content. It means that English subject is optional and will not be tested in the national examination.

The inclusion of English into the curriculum has been warmly welcome by many people, especially parents. Parents are eager to support their children to learn English. They see English as a prestigious language, they are proud when their children are able to speak English, even only small numbers of vocabulary. Therefore, regardless of the readiness of the school, English is taught in almost all primary schools in Indonesia.

However, as discussed formerly, the availability of quality L2 primary teachers is inadequate. The limitation of government budget also does not allow the school to train the existing primary children to teach L2 nor to recruit new English teachers. Consequently, the all-round subject teachers become the English teacher as well. The apparent effect was I personally experienced.

One of my nieces was appointed to be one of her school representatives in a speech contest held by a well-established English course in town. She rehearsed in front of me and I found it very shocking because she made terrible mistakes, especially in pronunciation. Because *Bahasa Indonesia* is pronounced the way it is written, my niece pronounced “uncle” as /uncle/ (the sound “u” as in “put”, “c” as in “chair”, and “e” as in “bed”). When I told her the correct way of pronunciation, surprisingly she objected. She said what she pronounced was what her English teacher told her to do so. This phenomenon reminds me of how good imitator children are. H.H. Stern (1983) mentions that the L2 learners are dependent on the model given to them by the teacher. Therefore, the teacher should be able to be a good model. If not, the teacher will become the source of long-term disasters.

Lack of knowledge in the part of the teachers does not only occur in pronunciation. Teaching methods suitable for young learners are often neglected. In teaching certain vocabularies, animal for example, the teachers often merely give the students lists of vocabulary and their equivalences in *Bahasa Indonesia*. Or, English songs, games, and rhymes are not used as the vehicle to learn English but as the end. A survey on teaching English for Young Learners in Indonesia shows that most of the English teachers in primary school do not have any relevant educational background. Some of them also admit that they themselves cannot speak English and rely heavily on dictionaries. In terms of supporting materials suitable for young learners, it seems that they are difficult to find or accessed because of the price. Some local publishers have produced English textbooks with reasonable price but often time with poor quality.

Looking at the negative sides of the implementation of teaching English for Young Learners in Indonesia leads to an assumption that introducing English early

is less advantageous. However, what I have just presented is happening in some parts of schools that are not ready with the program. There are also some successful stories of primary school which are well supported financially, and therefore can afford to improve the quality of their English teachers and to provide the students with appropriate materials and relevant facilities.

What I want to highlight here is that introducing English at the lower age can be more advantageous as long as some conditions to support it are met. Where the conditions are not satisfied, the reversed effects will be gained instead. Of course, some studies on L2 acquisition should be conducted in order to give a fairer and clearer description of L2 learning in primary education for the sake of long-term benefits.

### **CONCLUDING REMARK**

The debate on the age factor contributing to greater level of proficiency in L2 has been and is going on. For current situation, I agree with those who see that the age factor is not the main reason of successful L2 learners' acquisition. As evinced by some research results, it is no longer acceptable to claim that starting early is superior or in all respects that adult learners outperform younger learners. Nonetheless, the superiority of young age should be used effectively and appropriately. Length of exposure to the language use should be considered as one of powerful tools to the L2 acquisition process in the Indonesian context where English is not widely spoken.

Such factors as psychosocial context and learning conditions should also be taken into account when providing the students with certain amount of time of exposure. Negative effects such as pronunciation errors that may not lead to mutual intelligibility should be avoided. The length of exposure will mean nothing and even a disaster if many language errors leading to misunderstanding and meaning divergence are experienced by the children repeatedly. To undo and rectify the "already" existing "misleading" knowledge will be harder than to type new one. It is, therefore, worth noting that it is not the age factor that has very significant roles but how to manage the existing powerful tool i.e. brain capacity, with careful treatments which are suited to the students' background and learning conditions.

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