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Revisiting Age and Gender Influence in Second Language Acquisition

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Abstract

There is no doubt that language acquisition is a complex process which involves several factors, and that this process is highly influenced due to plasticity of the brain. Also, the types of memory systems involved in females and males are also have a pivotal role that makes the genders distinct. Age and gender, are among the factors that run in parallel with other factors and deeply influence language acquisition process. Given the importance placed on the role on age and gender, the researchers hold age and gender are not the necessary conditions for second language acquisition, although genetically there are some benefits that can be reaped for those who begin L2 acquisition early. Furthermore, both males and females are equipped with some predetermined tendencies that would be helpful for them to acquire some aspects of language much faster and easier. The present paper is an attempt to elaborate the ideas for and against *age* and *gender* as two influential factors in facilitating the process of language acquisition.

Key Words: Age; Gender; Critical Period; Universal Grammar

I. INTRODUCTION

The goal of SLA as reported by Ellis (1994) is the description and explanation of the learner's linguistic or communicative competence. To this end, the researcher must examine aspects of the learner's usage or use of the L2 in actual performance, by collecting and analyzing either samples of learner language, reports of learners' introspections, or records of their intuitions regarding what is correct or appropriate L2 behavior. The acquisition of an L2 feature may be considered to have taken place either when it is used for the first time or only when it can be used to a high level of accuracy (Ellis, 1994, p.15). One significant topic in second language acquisition is taking into account the learners' differences in achieving success in language learning. To this end, practitioners see a very fertile time to unravel the issues that relate to how individuals learn languages, how and why they undertake and succeed in language study, and how one person differs from another. What features are individual and what features are universal. To pursue some plausible answers, theoreticians usually refer to learner differences. To better appreciate the concept of learner differences, they are often classified under the following three areas: (1) learning styles, (2) learning strategies, and (3) affective variables.

Although first language acquisition is different from second language acquisition, Hagen (2008) in investigating the differences between L1 and L2 acquisition outlines four conspicuous differences that help us to appreciate learners' differences in language acquisition: (1) L1 acquisition among children is an astonishingly rapid process; (2) L1 acquisition is effortless; (3) L1 acquisition requires no formal training; and (4) stasis in the case of L1 acquisition is nearly invariable. In a nutshell, this paper is not an exception; it also attempts to investigate learner differences in general and the following two factors—age and gender, in particular.

II. LITERATURE REVIEW

A. Age

There are several hypotheses that explain the difficulties that a person can experience in learning an L2 are related to age-related factors, such as loss of plasticity in the brain or the influence of universal

grammar. It is held the brain loses its plasticity after the age of puberty. Henceforth, the acquisition of language becomes much harder for children in comparison with adults. In reference to the plasticity of the brain, Penfield and Roberts (1959, cited in Marshall, 2000, p. 39) were the first to introduce the idea of critical period which is later linked to the idea of lateralization with the capacity to acquire language up to puberty, where the brain loses its capacity to acquire faster and more efficient. Later, in 1967, Lenneberg coined the term Critical Period Hypothesis stating that it is a limited expanse of time where language acquisition is possible (cited in Morillas, 2011, p. 9). Accordingly, Morillas (2011) refers to two different versions of this period: the strong version and the weak version. The strong version totally denies the acquisition of language after puberty and claims it is almost impossible to acquire language, while the latter holds although language acquisition is more difficult after puberty, it is still possible to acquire it (Morillas, 2011, p. 10). In his seminal book, Biological Foundations of language, Lenneberg (1967) hypothesized that human language acquisition was an example of biologically constrained learning, and that it was normally acquired during a critical period beginning early in life and ending at puberty (cited in Newport, n.d., p. 737). Outside of this period, he suggested, language could be acquired only with difficulty or by a different learning process. Regarding what properties of language are pervaded by age, Morillas (2011), in comparison with morphology, syntax and lexis, continues: "phonology is thought to be the aspect of language in which age effects are mostly recognized" (p. 12). Scovel (1988) also insists that pronunciation is the sole properties of language related to physical properties that are determined by neuromuscular programming.

To Morillas (2011), much of the issues related with morphology and syntax are related to universal grammar. In other words, child grammar is influenced by Universal Grammar. However, the first language acquisition and the second language acquisition do not follow the same process. Regarding lexis, as Morillas claims little attention has been paid to lexical acquisition in relation with age. Probably, one of the reasons for this neglect is because humans keep on learning new vocabulary through their lives even in their first language.

Claiming that universal grammar has a role in language acquisition is undeniable, but the question is that when does it finish? BleyVroman's (1989) Fundamental Difference Hypothesis argues that adults have no access to universal grammar whereas children have. Accordingly, as adults do not have access to it, they go for problem solving skills to make sense of the grammatical structures of the L2 input (Morillas, 2011, p. 7). Nevertheless, Smith (1994) recalls, universal grammar "is not a grammar but a set of limits" (p. 144). He puts forth, "without these constraints, the child would be able to generate all kinds of ideas about the target grammar, including many that would crucially need correction, i.e. the sort of corrective feedback we know children do not need and usually do not get" (p. 144). He also maintains unlike L2 that may require syntactic rules, L1 does not require such rules. Along the same line, those universal grammar principles constraining movement would be irrelevant for L1 but would be valid for L2 (p. 144).

In fact, an important question about the nature of language acquisition is the extent to which age constrains its outcome, otherwise known as a sensitive or critical period for language. The idea that languages must be learned in childhood to be learned successfully has been widely held by educators for over a century. It lends support to a neurolinguistic hypothesis that the outcome of language acquisition is tied to brain development: The more the plasticity of the brain is, the easier and faster L2 acquisition takes place. Although there is a general consensus amongst critics that age plays a significant role in second language acquisition, there is great debate over what exactly this role is. According to Munoz (2006), "younger learners usually show an advantage on oral comprehension and pronunciation tests' (p. 12), which Harley (1986) believes it is down to the 'maturational turning point' that occurs at puberty and prevents adult learning from easily acquiring a second language (p. 8). The fact that native-like pronunciation is normally an unobtainable skill for adult learners is explained by the localization of our linguistic function, which suggests that aspects of language develop independently and as such occur at different rates, thus implying the existence of multiple critical periods. As pronunciation has a neuromuscular basis, it is deemed as a 'low- level function' and is consequently believed to become completely lateralized before the 'first year of life' (Molfese, 1977, p. 206).

B. Age and other affective variables

Considering age as a pivotal role on the language acquisition is undeniable; however, some other cognitive factors such as confidence, inhibition, risk taking, identity motivation etc should not be

disregarded. Confidence is an important factor as children are typically less inhibited than adults when it comes to adopting a persona and practicing foreign accents, which inevitably affects overall performance. Furthermore, we can regard the success that children obtain in naturalistic environments as due to the fact they are more highly motivated to interact with the other children they encounter at school than their parents are. As well as this, they have fewer attachments to their first language and have a weaker sense of identity, enabling them to fully embrace the language and culture of the host environment (Jaspel, 2008, pp. 236-237).

In this regard, the concept of age also leads us to an old myth: the younger, the myth. However, there is little doubt that children possess some inherent advantage in learning languages, and so there is a widespread view that 'the younger, the better. Young children are far less inhibited and far more open and receptive; they seem to soak their foreign language up (Johnstone, 2002). However, we must avoid the danger of creating a dichotomy between the younger=the better and the older=the better. As Stern (1976) declares on developmental grounds, each age in life probably has its peculiar advantages and disadvantages for language learning. Johnston (2002) concludes in principle it is never too early to begin, but equally it is never too late to begin. The big advantage in starting early is that one can tap into children's intuitive capacities for second language acquisition. However, Johnstone holds older learners (age 10 and above) also have certain advantages:

- they are able to anchor the new learning on meaningful pegs;
- they may be more experienced in handli ng the discourse of conversations;
- they are likely to have acquired a wider range of strategies for learning; and
- they may have a clearer sense of why they are learning an additional language.

Research comparing children to adults has consistently demonstrated that adolescent and adults perform better than young children under controlled conditions (Snow &Hoefnagel-Hoehele, 1978). One exception is pronunciation, although some studies show better result for older people. In a study reported by National Center for Research on Cultural Diversity and Second Language Learning claims research does not support what some researchers (e.g., Krashen, 1981) hold that the earlier children begin to learn a second language better. Genesee (1987) declares, on tests of French language proficiency, Canadian English-speaking children in late immersion programs have performed better than children who began immersion in kindergarten on Grade 1.

Krashen (1981), however, has already argued that older learners were better and quicker in the acquisition of the morphological aspects of language than younger ones. Along the same line, a study conducted by Brustall and her colleagues came to this conclusion that the younger learners took more than twice as long as the older learners (cited in Bista, 2009). However, adults naturally find themselves in such situations that request more complex language and expression of more complicated ideas whereas children lack pressure and maturity in second language learning (Bista, 2009).

C. Gender

A closer look at the historical development of the gender in language studies will reveal that the philosophies underlying the research have changed overtime. Among researchers who comprehensively brought a historical-typological account of feminist linguistic approaches is Cameron (1995) who made a distinction between three models of language and gender: (1) the deficit model, (2) the dominance model, and (3) the cultural difference model. In the deficit model, females are seen as disadvantaged speakers and communicators. Accordingly, the speech of men is considered as the accepted norm, while the women's speech is to be perceived as deficient (Aslan, 2009, p. 9). Along the same line, Swan (1989) found that "in contrast to the stereotype of the over-talkative women…it is men who dominate the talk…men have been found to use more interruptions…and simply to talk more than women" (cited in Gascoigne, 2002, p. 83). Along the same line, as reported by Holmes (1995), men use interaction as a means of gaining and exchanging information, whereas women use it as a way to connect to others (cited in Gascoigne, 2002, p. 83).Furthermore, studies of Ll classroom interaction have long shown that boys tend to dominate classroom interaction and that educators, at times, reinforce this type of behavior by giving additional time and attention to males (Gascoingne, 2002, p. 83). According to Holms (1995, cited in Gascoigne, 2002), it is "females who lost out. Their polite ways of participating in classroom talk means they are disadvantaged in mixed-sex classrooms" (p. 203).

The dominance model, traditionally existed in feminist linguistics, is, as Aslan (2009) asserts, rather radical in comparison with the deficit model which is more conservative. Along the same line, Block (2002) argues, "In this model women are perceived to perform their 'woman-ness' in an ethno-methodological frame as they continually negotiate their position of relative powerlessness vis a vis men" (p. 53).

Cultural difference model, as an alternative to the dominance model, perceives men and women as belonging to separate but equal cultures which predate the development of individuals who are socialized into them (Block, 2002). In fact, unlike deficit model, it does not take the differences negatively (Aslan, 2009). As Block (2002) reports cultural difference model adopts a socially liberal position that men and women are different but equal: women's speech and communication styles are not inferior to men's; rather the relationship between the two are problematic at least in part because of culture clash (Block, 2002). Overall, if communication breaks down between men and women, it's caused by misinterpreting the other party's form of interaction (Tannen, 1993, cited in Aslan, 2009, p. 12).

What these three models share is a modernist (structuralist) approach to social phenomena where concepts of clear boundaries, social stability and determinism are manifest (Block, 2002). The shift from structuralism toward post structuralism advocates the belief that "gender is a social phenomenon" (Block, 2002, p. 54). Henceforth, there is a shift in view from perceiving gender as an individual concept to perceiving it as a social construction (Aslan, 2009). Along the same line, the look toward gender is shifted— rather post-positivist. Taking a post-positivist lens involves understanding that gender cannot be studied in isolation. For Davies (1989) cited in Gascoigne (2002), masculinity and femininity are structural properties of our society, not necessarily of the individuals (p. 84). Similarly, the role of culture in pushing individuals into their appropriate gender roles, and the roles are so flexible that they can be taken to new contexts. Under this new conception, gender is not a fixed category but may vary depending on the speech situation and the type of interaction that takes place, as Ehrlich (1997) puts it, gender is "a construct shaped by historical, cultural, social, and interactional factors" (p. 424).

In second language acquisition, the concept of gender is variously interpreted. To Ellis (1994), there was nothing conclusive in studies of gender differences in SLA in achievement, attitudes and strategy use at that time. Accordingly, Ellis (1994) holds:

> Sex is, of course, likely to interact with other variables in determining L2 proficiency. It will not always be the case, therefore, that females outperform males. Asian men in Britain generally attain higher levels of proficiency in L2 English than do Asian women for the simple reason that their jobs bring them into contact with the majority English speaking group, while women are often "enclosed" in the home. Sex interacts with such factors as age, ethnicity, and, in particular social class (p. 204).

However, in a study reported by Aslan (2009), it was reported gender influences strategy choice. Along the same vein, females and males are observed to employ various strategies in language acquisition. In a similar study, Ehrman and Oxford (1990) who looked at the strategies used by 1200 university students came to this conclusion that gender differences made a profound influence. Also, Gascoigne (2002), in a study on "the Role of Gender in L2 Interaction: Socialization via L2 Materials" brings that males tend to use linguistic devices such as interruptions, directives, and sentence-initial conjunctions. Females, in contrast, tend to rely more heavily upon questions, justifiers, intensive adverbs, personal pronouns and word-initial adverbs (Gascoigne, 2002, p. 83). Besides, Niyikos (1990) reports female students seek social approval more than male students (cited in Aslan, 2009, p. 55).

Kimura (2006, cited in Piasecka, 2010, pp. 146-149) thoroughly discusses the differences between females and males in terms of various abilities: With respect to motor abilities, Kimura (2006), concluded men do better at such tasks as throwing things at a target (e.g. a game of darts) or catching objects (e.g. ball games), whereas women have an advantage at the so-called subtle motor activities (e.g. performing movement sequences using fingers, like in weaving, knitting or sewing). In much the same way, females are better at calculations and tests which refer to the material that was learned at school. In terms of verbal abilities, girls usually start speaking earlier than boys; they use longer sentences. Their articulation and grammar are more correct. Consequently, they have a richer vocabulary. Moreover, they are better at spelling, reading and tests in which they have to generate words according to a certain rule (e.g. words that start with a certain letter).

While the research shows that the topic of the text was an important factor in the reading performance; for example, female students did better on female topics, gender differences have also been identified in attitudes to reading. Furthermore, girls have more positive attitudes to reading and higher reading achievement than boys. It appeared that students who had more positive reading attitudes and whose self-concepts were higher were more successful on reading tasks.

Kaushanskaya, Marian, and Yoo (2011) report the mechanisms of gender differences in language acquisition have been proposed to involve the declarative memory system. The existent study shows that gender differences on phonological memory tasks, just same as gender differences on lexical and semantic retrieval tasks, might be driven by women's reliance on the declarative memory system. However, on phonological memory tasks, the involvement of the declarative memory system is constrained by the overlap between the material being obtained and the information stored as part of long-term knowledge. Kaushaskaya et al. (2011), also, continue the mechanism responsible for the female advantage when learning phonologically-familiar novel words therefore appears to be greatly flexible and dynamic in nature, and is likely based on the active recruitment of descriptive structures (long-term memory) during the encoding of verbal information.

III. CONCLUSION

Seen from this stance, we are not in the position to judge what our predecessors claim, but what is apparent is that the younger, the better is a myth; however, considering age, as a dominant factor is undeniable. Different ages of life present different challenges; these challenges are manifested in different psychological traits that make the process of learning easy or difficult. Handling these challenges is a guarantee to fulfill the demands of acquisition. A child forced to build sets of defenses is rarely able to cope with the demands of learning. Furthermore, different genders see the world from their viewpoints. Female students did better on female topics. Generally, their attitudes and interests toward a certain topic will affect their learning. Thus, the width of their perspectives certainly facilitates the process of learning.

Although the findings of these two do strengthen our stance in favor of age and gender, it is not our intention to minimize the influence of classroom factors influencing second language acquisition. One significant contribution of this research is that age is considered as a border beyond which learning is debilitated in particular aspects of language, notably pronunciation, while in the other aspects of language—syntax and lexis— there is little evidence, in general, that children run faster. Moreover, from social perspective, there is no doubt that different genders have diverse tendency toward participation in public, and the amount of this inclination in various features fluctuates.

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