

The Age Factor of Learning Second Language (L2) in Foreign Language Setting: Is The Earlier The Better?

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Abstract

Since long time ago, age factor has become one of the most controversial topics in second language education field. Some studies conducted in natural language setting revealed that early start is a good predictor for L2 learners in reaching native-like accuracy. However, the current studies in instructed language setting showed that age factor is not the most determining factor to achieve such goal. Responding to that issue, this study aimed to argue about a commonly over-generalized assumption of “the earlier the better” theory in instructed language setting. The study mainly discussed the implementation of English language teaching in Indonesian setting and how age factor is or is not the most important predictor for language attainment success. The study was a critical analysis upon relevant books and journals. The result of the study conveyed that age was not always the most dominant factor in successfully achieving a language attainment in instructed language setting. In most cases, there was positive support confirming that adult learners in instructed language setting could outperform young learners over some language domains. As conclusion, an early start in instructed language setting would not always lead to a better language attainment without adequate comprehensible input and learning motivation. Therefore, Indonesian government should consider more language empowering programs to support language learners to study English, for example by revitalizing its curriculum implementation and adding more learning facilities.

Keywords:

Age factor, second language education, language attainment, natural language setting, instructed language setting

A. Introduction

The existing literature on second language (L2) field suggests that there are many factors determining the success of L2 learners like motivation, personality, learning style, aptitude, and age (Singleton, 2001; Mayo & Lecumberri, 2003; Munoz, 2008). Among those factors, the later has become a fierce topic of debate in Second Language field. The core of this

debate is mainly about whether or not students who start learning L2 in the early stage of life will achieve better language attainment than those who start learning it at the later stage. In regard to this topic, some studies have been conducted in second language field especially in natural language setting where the target languages are spoken. Some studies reveal that early start is good predictor for L2 learners in reaching native-like accuracy (Baker, et. al., 2008) and lexical as well as semantics tasks (Izura, et. al, 2011). The findings on early L2 learning in natural language setting are consistent with a larger body of literature examining the Critical Period Hypothesis (Lenneberg, 1967; Singleton 2001; Bowers & Kennison, 2011). This theory mainly believes that there is a period where learners will lose a complete language acquisition (native-like) because their neuro-plasticity does not work as good as before (Lenneberg, 1967). They believe that the lower limit for such period is at the age of 2 and an upper limit around puberty.

While the theory of the earlier the better seem to have some appeal, there is evidence to suggest that early start of learning L2 does not always result in better language acquisition, especially when it comes to a instructed language setting. A study in Spain called the Barcelona Age Factor (BAF) by Munoz (2006) confirmed that adult learners in instructed setting even could outperform young learners. BAF project itself aimed to investigate the influence of age factor on foreign language learning at different period of time and for different language abilities. These results start triggering other scholars and researcher to reevaluate the commonly believed concept of “the earlier the better”. Therefore, there is more empirical support that such concept does not always work in instructed language settings.

Responding to that issue, this paper aims to reevaluate the common assumptions of “the earlier the better” for second language learning in instructed language setting. This is an important issue particularly in instructed language settings like learning English in Indonesia. The commonly believed concept of “the earlier the better” has influenced educational policy

about establishing the starting age for students to learn second language at school. The problem with this situation is most countries do not realize that an early start does not always determine the success of language learners. In supporting my arguments, some empirical and theoretical studies have been reviewed respectfully. Along with these theoretical references, I will also provide some practical findings both as language instructor and learner in Indonesia.

B. Discussion

English as Foreign language in Indonesia

Indonesian schooling system first introduced English in 1914 under the Dutch administration. Yet, it was not until 1989 that English officially got its legal recognition from Indonesian Education Ministry. After since, English is considered as the first foreign language and taught at the secondary level as compulsory subject under the national curriculum (Pusat Kurikulum, 2007). English is also allowed to be taught from Primary four for schools as an elective subject in particular schools. In fact, many elementary schools have included English as additional subjects for the students because it English is considered as very important subject. They even expand their English program by providing English extracurricular activities. Such program is supported by parents and community because they believe that exposing young learners to English will results in better language attainment (Ivone, 2005).

However, according to my practical findings as language instructor and students, this early start does not always help students to attain better English comprehension. Many Indonesian students still struggle to write and speak in English although they have learned it for six years at school. Although I started learning English in junior high school, my English national test score was even higher than my friends who started to learn English in 4th grade. The same case happens when I started to teach English for young and adult learners. Most of

my adult students even performed better than my young students although they started it later. Such fact provides me an opportunity to contemplate that the early start does not always constitute the better attainment. Therefore, we should go through and discuss further on whether or not the common belief of “the earlier the better” will always work in instructed language setting like Indonesia.

Age Related Factors

In natural language setting, many researchers appear to agree that age is an important predictor for L2 learners (Singleton 2001; Baker, et. al., 2008; Bowers & Kennison 2011; Izura, et. al, 2011). During the early stage, learners have more biological sensitivity in responding language inputs, especially in the realm of phonetics and phonology (Lenneberg 1967; Baker, et. al., 2008). This results in greater chance for young learners to attain native-like performance in using the language as compared to adult learners. A study from Ballester (2012), for example, confirmed that 5-year-old Spanish children acquiring second language (L2) English in an immersion bilingual context show sensitivity to grammatically contrast in their L2. She found that at the very early stage, L2 learners could potentially develop language property. Such result strongly supports “the earlier the better” theory. Therefore, many countries in the world take this commonly believed notion as their basis to start giving L2 subjects at school for young learners.

However, some experts argue that the finding of “the earlier the better” should not be over generalized in all language settings (Mayo & Lecumberri, 2003; Munoz, 2006; Munoz, 2010). The case in Ballester study (2012) showed a significant language attainment in young learners because this was conducted in fully immersion bilingual context. In that particular setting, the language inputs were definitely sufficient for L2 learners’ linguistic development. Yet, such immersion bilingual context does not always exist in instructed language setting.

Having said that, the finding in Ballester study is inapplicable in most instructed language setting. As explained by Munoz (2006), instructed language settings mostly encounter massive scarcity of comprehensible input. Because the language is not widely used by community, language learners will not get sufficient exposure to the language both in quality and quantity. Therefore, unless language learners are exposed to significant language input, age factor will not pretty much affect their language attainment.

The scarcity of comprehensible Input

The existence of comprehensible input is really significant in learning L2 because learning language cannot be separated from social interaction. Comprehensible input is type of input which can enhance language learners in using the language communicatively (Lightbown & Spada, 2006). The quality and quantity of comprehensible input in particular setting will define how effective the language environment in supporting language learners development. The more comprehensible language input will make their learning more effective.. Some studies of L2 in naturalistic language setting confirm that the amount of time or length of exposure is a good predictor of L2 attainment (Singleton, 2001; Bowers & Kennison, 2011; Izura, et. al, 2011). They argue that young language learners will have more opportunity to be successful learner because they have longer time of exposure as compared to the adult learners.

However, such situation is completely different in instructed language setting. The L2 exposure will only exist in formal instruction-based situation like school (Munoz, 2006). Once they step outside from this classroom, they will not get adequate L2 exposure. Their family, friends, society, or even media do not use L2. English in Indonesian schooling system is the example of such quantity limitation (Ivone, 2005). The junior high school students will only get 2 meetings per week where each meeting lasts for less than 2 hours. When they

move up to high school, the condition hardly ever changes. In addition to that issue, Indonesian teachers often switch to learners' L1 for classroom management or discipline, reducing the quantity of L2 exposure for learners in the classroom. Munoz (2010) argues that it takes around 10 years for language learners to be fluent in natural language settings under the circumstance that the language is intensively exposed in their daily life. Within rough calculation, those 10 years exposure equals to 200 years (50.000 hours) in instructed language setting because they will only spend 2 hours per week in the classroom. That number seems really impossible for language learners in instructed language setting to reach.

Another problem regarding to comprehensible input issue is the quality of input itself. In natural language setting, learners are exposed by the variety of language use, both for academic and non-academic domain (Singleton, 2001). At school, they will learn how to use academic language through their paper work, exercise, or any other assignment. When they go outside the school, they learn how to use language for their daily communication with friends, neighbor, and other people. Not to mention, they will be exposed by the native speakers language of L2 all the time. This situation enables L2 learners to get role model for proper pronunciation, intonation, and other language features (Ballester, 2012).

Not surprisingly, L2 learners in instructed language setting have completely different situation. Language learners in instructed language setting do not have such privilege to interact with native speakers. They mainly learn the language from their classroom. That said, the only role model that they have is their teacher. Such situation definitely limits the opportunity of the language learners to get quality inputs. According to Lightbown and Spada (2006), classroom learners are mainly exposed to very formal and academic L2 domain in comparison to the language as it is used in social settings. The language input will be directed on how to prepare them in passing the test or do their academic assignment. Therefore, the content is mostly not applicable for daily use.

The other problem dealing with the quality of input is the limited role model for the English production. English teachers in Indonesia, for example, still have problem with their oral production like pronunciation and intonation (Ivone, 2005). They do not speak as fluent as native speakers. They still mispronounce some words and language learners tend to just imitate such errors. This will jeopardize L2 acquisition primarily for young learners. Young language learners have more tendencies to imitate their role models directly (Lightbown & Spada, 2006). They are not sensitive enough in finding another source to compare their knowledge from their teacher. They will accept whatever they receive from their teacher. The adult learners, on the other hands, usually are more aware of the explicit strategy for language. They are cognitively developed to select and pick some more inputs other than their teachers. They will be more capable in maximizing limited input in their surrounding by looking up a dictionary, internet, or television.

This is worth noticing that most inference defining a successful language learner is determined by how close their language ability to native speaker standard (Baker et.al., 2008). The problem with such concept is that most of language learners in instructed language settings are barely interact with native speakers intensively. Although there is somehow support from Bongaerts, et. al (1997) that very highly successful old learners can perform as good as native speakers in domain of pronunciation, such case is fairly exceptional phenomenon. That situation required the late learners to be consistently exposed by native speakers in their life which most learners in instructed language setting will hardly ever have. This implies that the level of success for language learners in instructed language setting should not be defined by native-likeness that they have. Because their language performance is not established by native-speaker type input, the level of success should be based on how well they can use that language for instructed language use like academic purpose, etc.

Maturation of L2 learners

Next misleading assumption overlooks that young learners are better learner in all learning settings. Critical period supporters believe that there is a stage where the time-sensitive neurobiological exists in young human being and within this age, they are very potential learners (Lenneberg 1967; Baker, et. al., 2008). According to this view, early childhood is an optimal period where L2 learners can absorb the linguistic input and interaction better. Some studies conducted in natural language setting confirmed that young learners outperform the adult learners (Baker, et. al., 2008; Bowers & Kennison 2011; Izura, et. al, 2011). When L2 learners maturation process goes up, the full acquisition of L2 will be decreased. The finding leads to the assumption that young learners are better learners no matter what.

However, even some studies conducted in naturalistic language setting confirm different result (Mayo & Lecumberri, 2003; Muñoz, 2006). They argue that early stage of language learning is no longer the only predictor of success for second language (L2) learners. When young L2 learners and adult learners are compared in the same amount of time in instructed language setting, adult learners even can outperform the child learners. Munoz (2006) confirmed that BAF project showed surprising result. It confirmed that adult learners are able to outperform the younger learners in all measurement times. According to Lighbown and Spada (2006), motivation to learn and individual differences in aptitude for language learning is very important determining factors that affect eventual success in learning. In this sense, adult learners usually possess better maturation that eventually will increase their level of motivation to learn the language. The adult learners are able to advance faster in the early process of L2 acquisition process since they are aware of their own limitations and needs (Singleton, 2001).

Zang and Wu (2009) revealed that effective language learners in instructed language setting are those who can explicitly plan, monitor the comprehension, and select appropriate

strategies for their learning. This finding definitely favors adult learners in instructed language setting because they are more aware of the importance of learning compared to young learners. In Indonesian learning context, English is mostly taught explicitly for academic purpose in education (Ivone, 2005). Learners are expected to learn the language from the activities that teachers set up for them. These activities include lecturing, discussion, homework, assignment, quiz, and assignment. When learners do not have sufficient maturation and metacognitive awareness in learning, they tend to limit the inputs only from their teacher as the way it is. They will not have any intention to expand their learning if their teachers do not ask them to do so. Young learners are prone to be such learners. Although they will response very well for implicit instruction of learning, they mostly lack of motivation for further learning (Zang & Wu, 2009).

C. Conclusion

The previous section has discussed that the situation between naturalistic language setting and instructed language setting are different. This fact should be seen as the reason why we should not over generalize the research finding from one to other settings. This includes the finding that younger students are better learner for L2. For all this time, there has been misleading assumption toward the age related factor in L2 fields that “the earlier the better” is the best for learners. Although there is strong evidence that beginning to start learning L2 very early is a good predictor of L2 acquisition success in natural language setting, there is no sufficient proof that it constitutes the same results in instructed language setting.

This paper has showed that some studies in instructed language setting have provided empirical evidence that allows us to reflect on the finding of natural language setting.

Indonesian government just takes the finding for granted in establishing some educational policies. Indonesian government tends to start the program of second language since the very early age which I believe should not be necessarily that way. Decision about when to start

second language program in schools must consider the realistic estimates of how long it takes to learn a second language. By only providing two hours per week will not produce advance second language speakers, no matter how young they are when they begin. Adult learners may get some benefits because they can better use of the limited time they have for second language instruction. Age is definitely one of the factors which affect language learning success. But the opportunity to get comprehensible input, the motivation, and metacognitive awareness to learn language are also essential factors in achieving eventual success of language learning.

Reflecting to that context, the issue of English development in Indonesia does not only go to policy makers but also for the classroom teachers. Teachers should be able to maximize the limited time in classroom to involve students in learning English optimally. Struggling to always improve our teaching instruction is also important. Having said that, teachers should be able to create activities which will enable students to benefit in the input and metacognitive awareness in learning English.

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