

The Controversy over the “Age Issue” in Foreign Language Learning: Seeking A Compromise

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I. Introduction

The complexity of the process of foreign language (henceforth FL) learning highlights the seemingly infinite number of variables involved. It further entails that although most people can learn an FL and achieve a satisfactory degree of proficiency in both receptive and productive skills, no matter how old they are, there remain certain learners' characteristics which to some degree determine the learner's mastery of the FL. The *learner's age* forms a part and parcel of these characteristics and has been the subject of much research over the last 40 years. It is, in fact, the most salient characteristic that makes the issue of the availability of what is called the 'critical period' quite controversial among the specialists in language learning. It has paved the way to a further key issue and prime question in FL research and teaching, namely the differential success of children and adults in learning a new language.

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II. The Problem to be Investigated

Learners of foreign languages (henceforth FLs) worldwide display varied degrees of proficiency in learning languages other than their native ones. Learner’ age and the availability of the ‘Critical Period’ are said to have noticeable bearing on the attempt to achieve mastery of the new language and to manage effective communication. As such, the present research addresses the following questions:

1. What are the specialists’ viewpoints concerning the availability of what is called the ‘critical period’?
2. Does the critical period have really a role to play in language learning?
3. Building on 1 and 2, is it true that the learner’s age makes a difference in language learning?

III. Hypothesis

Adult learners, who are over the age of puberty, are not generally as successful in acquiring FL skills in a natural fashion as those who learn the language below that age.

IV. Aims of the Study

The present research aims at shedding light on a much controversial issue in FL learning, namely the existence of the so called “critical period”: the elapse of which is claimed to be of much negative bearing on learning a language other than one’s own. It further tries to present viewpoints, supported by empirical research, which are either in favour or against such a claim. Finally, reference will be made to some compromising viewpoints that are hoped to calm down the much debated issue in question.

V. The ‘Critical Period’ and Language Learning

The ‘critical period’ argument sets out from biological studies of species for whom some certain behaviour should be learned within a narrowly defined time period, generally early in life. According to Brown (1980: 46) and Rivers (1983: 93), the critical period is a biologically determined period of life, mainly about puberty, when language can be acquired most easily and beyond which language is increasingly difficult to acquire, as one is believed to lose the ability to acquire it in a “natural” (childlike) way, through much exposure to it, without actual formal instruction. Such viewpoint is mainly built on Lennenberg (1967) who was the first to extend the concept of ‘critical period’ to the human capacity to learn language by building on important advances in

neurobiology, and whose three-fold argument runs as follows: First, the human brain loses its elasticity and flexibility after the elapse of a certain age period. Secondly, the human being’s capability and potential to learn a language other than his/her own are decreased as some specific changes take place in the brain during the first 12 or so years of life, ending around puberty, that could be linked to changes in language learning potential. Thirdly and finally, language cannot begin to develop until a certain level of physical maturation and growth has been attained. Lennenberg’s viewpoints have been widely adopted due to the systematic relationship he has presented concerning advancement in age and language development. For instance, he claims that between the ages of two and three years, language emerges by an interaction of maturation and self-programmed learning. Likewise, between the ages of three and the early teens, the possibility for primary language acquisition continues to be good and the individual appears to be most sensitive to stimulus at this time and to preserve some innate flexibility for the organization of brain functions to carry out the complex integration of sub-processes necessary for the smooth elaboration of speech and language. While after puberty, this ability of self-organization and adjustment to the physiological demands of verbal behaviour quickly declines. The brain behaves as if it has become set in its ways and primary, basic language skills not acquired by

that time, except for articulation, usually remain deficient for life (Lennenberg, 1967: 158).

In the domain of education, the topic has been especially critical for FL learning. There will definitely be important implications for language education programmes throughout the world if there are really biological limits on the age at which people can master an FL. Yet, it should be noted that the evidence to either support or refute the existence of a critical period for FL learning has been completely equivocal. Most standpoints have never been biased to one particular side of the argument. They rather try to present points that may enhance the position of either parties of the argument, but with the real intention to calm down the hotly-debated issue. The available evidence ranges between full support of the claims for the existence of a decisive critical period, the absence of a critical period, and non-commitment regarding such a period. This is what the following sections attempt to outline.

(A) Viewpoints Advocating the Role of the Critical Period

It should be noted that “age” by itself as duration of one’s life cannot merely account for the issue at hand. Reference in the preceding section has also been made to the neurobiological development that individuals undergo as they advance in age. As

such, the viewpoints to follow set out from different angles and perspectives. Many of them take a double stand, i.e. advocate and refute the existence of a critical period. However, they all hope to have support from the relevant empirical studies.

Corder (1973: 113-115) points out that individuals learn a new language during a period when their *brains* undergo a particular stage of development. If language is not acquired then, there is some evidence that it is very much more difficult to acquire it at a later stage. This is on one hand. On the other hand, the adult language learner is in a position different from that of the infant as there have been certain qualitative changes in his *physiology* and *psychology* at some time in his maturation process which in some way can inhibit him from using the same learning strategies that he used as an infant, or make available to him some whole new range of strategies which he did not possess before.

Brown (1981: 2), relying on common observations concerning the existence of the critical period, sets out of the idea that children are "better" language learners and can learn an FL better than adults. This is based on studies on immigrants to North America which provide concrete evidence that the younger a person is on arrival in the new country, the more proficient s/he is likely to become in the language and the better s/he can learn the language of his/her new community with native or near-native proficiency. In the same vein,

Brown (1981: 49) points out that the acquisition of authentic control of the *phonology* of a foreign language indicates that persons beyond the age of puberty do not generally acquire authentic pronunciation of the second language. “Children who acquire a second language after the age of 5 may have a physical advantage in that phonemic control of a second language, is physically possible...Starting a physical skill at a young age is advantageous, (so it is) no wonder that children acquire authentic pronunciation while adults generally do not, since pronunciation involves the control of so many muscles”. Brown (1980: 47, 50) further makes reference to both Scovel (1969) who suggests that lateralization accounts for the inability of persons to acquire fluent, authentic pronunciation of a second language, since we know that children of age 5 through puberty generally acquire authentic pronunciation of a second language. Rosansky (1975: 96) is of the view initial language acquisition takes place when the child is highly “centred”, and not only egocentric at this time, but when faced with a problem he can focus on one dimension at a time. This lack of flexibility and decentration may well be a necessity for language acquisition, and make the young child generally unaware of the societal values and attitudes placed on one language or another. It is quite possible that a language learner who is too consciously aware of what he is doing will have difficulty in learning the second language.

Littlewood (1986) also advocates the existence of the critical period and points out that the most common explanation for the observations concerning the immigrant families control of the native language of the new communities where they had been living is that there is a ‘critical period’ during which the brain is flexible and language learning can occur naturally and easily. Since this period ends around puberty, adults can no longer call upon these natural learning capacities. The result is that language learning becomes an artificial, laborious process.

Finally, McDonough (2002: 91) believes that young children learn languages better because they are nearer to the age at which they become native speakers of their mother tongue, and because there is a biological critical period for first language acquisition after which natural language acquisition would be impossible, i.e. the biological mechanisms facilitating language acquisition would no longer be available. Accordingly, this argument suggests that in the very young, those exposed to several languages can become native speakers of those languages.

All these claims have been supported by empirical research carried out in different parts of the world with different languages and different subjects and as follows:

- (1) Patkowski (1980) investigated the effect of age on first consistent naturalistic exposure to an FL in subjects who have considerable lengths of exposure. He selected 67 FL English speakers from mixed first language backgrounds of various ages, who had all been resident in the USA for at least five years. He recorded their performance in an interview, together with the performance of 15 native speaker controls, transcribed the data to eliminate accent factor, and asked trained native-speaking raters to rate each sample for nativeness. In analysing the results, Patkowski made an arbitrary division between those who had first arrived in the USA before the age of 15, and those who had arrived after the age of 15. He found that those who had arrived before the age of 15 were strikingly more likely to be rated as native speakers or near native speakers than those who had arrived after the age of 15. Whether the subjects had formal instruction as well as naturalistic exposure had no effect on the ratings.
- (2) In a study on Chinese- and Korean-speaking learners of English resident in the USA for at least 5 years, Johnson and Newport (1989, 1991) focussed on grammatical intuitions rather than production data. They found that subjects who had arrived in the USA prior to the age of 7 performed as well on grammar test as native-speaking control subjects. Those subjects who had arrived after the age of 7 performed progressively less well. The older the

subject, the less native-like was the performance on the grammar test.

(B) Viewpoints Refuting the Role of the Critical Period:

Lennenberg’s view has been strongly challenged by some researchers, even though many of them have seemingly advocated the existence of the critical period as presented in the preceding pages.

Ausubel (1964) hints at the relevance of the concrete/formal stage to the critical period of language acquisition by noting that adults learning a second language could profit from certain grammatical explanations and deductive thinking that obviously would be pointless for a child.

In spite of his support of the existence of the ‘critical period’ as shown in the preceding pages, Corder (1973: 115) tries to minimize the effect that such a period has on learning a new language by focusing on the levels of language rather than on language as a whole system. He sets out of the idea that acquisition of one’s first language, i.e. possession of verbal behaviour, entails the absence of any physiological or psychological impediment to the learning of a new language if one wants to since most of the learning capacities seem to go unimpaired until later life. Obviously

people do learn new languages at all periods in later life, though their ability to acquire native like pronunciation seems to be limited, at least for most learners, to the 'critical period'. But learning a language is not just learning a pronunciation; there are some qualitative changes in the physiology and psychology at some point in the maturational process, which in some way inhibit using the same learning strategies that are used in infancy, or make available some whole new range of strategies which are not possessed before.

Guiora (1976) suggests that the language ego may account for the difficulties that adults have in learning a second language. The child's age is dynamic of growing and flexible through the age of puberty, and thus a new language at this stage does not pose a substantial "threat" or inhibition to the ego. However, the simultaneous physical, emotional and cognitive changes of puberty give rise to defensive mechanism in which the language ego becomes protective and defensive.

Brown (1980: 47) also attributes the success of learning a second language to the existence of the critical period. Quoting the anthropologist Jane Hill (1970), he points out that some adults-after the age of puberty have acquired authentic control of a second language, and that they can, in the normal course of their lives, acquire new languages perfectly. He further states that "anecdotal evidence shows that some adults who have been successful

language learners have been very much aware of the process they were going through, even to the point of utilizing self-made paradigms and to other fabricated linguistic devices to facilitate the learning process”(pp.50-51). Moreover, lateralization hypothesis provides another key to cognitive differences between child and adults language acquisition. As the child matures into adulthood, the left hemisphere which controls the analytical and intellectual functions becomes more dominant than the right hemisphere which controls the emotional function. It is possible that the dominance of the left hemisphere contributes to a tendency to overanalyze and to be too intellectually centred on the task of second language learning.

Rosansky (1975) views the observed differences in the learning of a new language between small children on one hand, and adults, on the other hand, to be related not so much to neurological development, i.e. the notion of lack of plasticity of the brain tissue put forward by Lennenberg. He rather attributes them to the stages of cognitive development presented by Piaget who outlines the course of intellectual development in a child through the following various stages: The sensometer stage from age 0 to 2; the preoperational stage from age 2 to 7; and the operational stage from 7 to 16, with a crucial change from the concrete operational stage to the formal operational stage around the age of 11. The most critical stage for a consideration of first and second language acquisition

appears to occur at puberty. It is here that a person becomes capable of abstraction, of formal thinking which transcends concrete experience and direct perception.

In the same vein, quoting Inhelder and Piaget's studies (1958), Rivers (1983: 93, 94) states that it is at about 11 to 12 years of age that the individual reaches *the stage of formal operation* where he is able to use hypothetical reasoning and starts to think in the abstract with propositions. He becomes able to isolate variables and deduce potential relationships. At first, he is satisfied with the search for a single constant factor in correspondence. He can perform the formal operation of implication, by which he assumes that a determinate factor produces the observed consequences in all cases. By the age of 14-15, the individual is capable of hypothetico-deductive-reasoning, performed as a mental operation divorced from actual material objects. He is able to isolate and combine variables that depend on a number of factors, performing all the sixteen binary operations of logical thought. He does not have to confine his considerations to one relationship at a time, but considers the possible effect of several variables, testing the effect of each by holding other factors constant. He feels the need to find the reason for the relations he observes and performs the operations of implication and equivalence, distinction and simple and reciprocal exclusion. He is ready, then, to think about and

comprehend the many complexities of syntax. A process just the opposite to that of small children who due to not developing the ability to use their logical operations, find an abstract approach to a new language, that is, explanation of rules and tables of paradigms, incomprehensible, irrelevant, and tiresome.

McDonough (2002: 91) states that many people believe that language learning gets more difficult the older they are. There are a couple of obvious difficulties with that argument. First, the course of cognitive growth (and decline) is not that simple. Children, school pupils and university students differ enormously in the intellectual problems they can solve; many linguistically relevant cognitive skills like paraphrasing and summarizing develop through schooling. So, if language learning is like other school subjects, one would expect to follow the same pattern, and older students to be better than young ones at language learning. Second, during adulthood people may have very strong life-plan reasons for learning another language and do so very successfully, or they may have learnt a number of languages for professional and travel reasons and become quite skilled at learning and maintaining them. So age may not be the crucial variable: other life events associated with one's age and stage in life, but not predicated on biological age, may be more important.

To support these viewpoints, a set of findings shows that older FL learners have an initial advantage over younger learners:

- (1) Sonerson (1967) studied the Tswana tribes of South Africa. At least two dozen languages are spoken among these peoples, and each tribal group, identified by the language it speaks, is an exogamous unit- people must marry outside their group, and hence almost always marry someone who speaks another language. Sonerson reported that during adolescence individuals actively almost suddenly begin to speak two or three other languages to which they have been exposed at some point.
- (2) Snow and Hoefnagel-Hohle (1978) studied 42 English-speaking initial learners of Dutch in Holland over 13-month period. They range in age from 3 years to adulthood. The measures on which subjects were tested were pronunciation, auditory discrimination, morphology, vocabulary, sentence repetition and translation, and tests were administered at 4½ month intervals. Snow and Hoefnagel-Hohle found that at the first test the adult subjects outperformed the younger ones learners on all measures except for auditory discrimination. However, by the time of the final testing there was no significant difference between the subjects. To summarize, over a period of 13 months child L2 learners of Dutch outperformed adult learners, and

adult learners were actually faster during the initial period of acquisition.

- (3) Swain (1981) compared L1 English-speaking adolescents in late Immersion Programs in Canada with younger children in early immersion programmes, and found out that the adults performed as well on reading comprehension and a CLOZE test after about 1,400 hours of immersion as the children did after 4,00 hours of immersion

(although the early immersion students were better on listening comprehension).

(C) Seeking A Compromise

Due to the thorny nature of the topic under discussion, many researchers have been quite cautious about what may be regarded as bias to one side of the ongoing debate rather than another. Hence, we have seen them stating opinions that advocate both viewpoints side by side with some additional information that can work as a compromising stand.

Corder (1973: 114) states that the attempts to formulate generalizations about age-related differences in language learning have been bedevilled by apparently incompatible results. The fact that old learners can appear to achieve native-like pronunciation in reading lists of words after only a few hours’ practice conflicts with

the generalization that, with exposure, young children (as a group) become more native-like on all linguistic measures than their older counterparts, as does the fact that young children may not appear to be as successful as older learners over the first few months of FL learning. These apparent conflicts are resolved once mere ‘parroting’ is distinguished from potential ultimate knowledge. Added to that, learning an FL, after acquiring verbal behaviour (in its mother-tongue manifestation) is a matter of adaptation or extension of existing skills and knowledge rather than learning a completely new set of skills from scratch. When these fundamental properties (which all languages have in common, linguistic universals) have once been learned (through their mother-tongue manifestations) the learning of a second manifestation is a relatively much smaller task (p.115).

Macnamara (1976: 79) notes that “a child suddenly transported from Montreal to Berlin will rapidly learn German no matter what he thinks of the Germans”. But as a child reaches school age, he also begins to acquire certain attitudes towards types and stereotypes of people. Most of these attitudes are “taught” consciously or unconsciously, by parents, other adults, and/or peers. The learning of negative attitudes towards the people who speak the second language or toward the second language itself has been

shown to affect the success of language learning in persons from school age on up.

In fact, many factors, other than age, may be of influence in this respect and make one believe that one group of learners is better than the other. For instance, Brown (1980: 49, 51, 55, 56) states that (1) Muscular coordination may play a significant role in establishing a criteria for overall successful acquisition of a second language. Yet, the acquisition of the communicative and functional purposes of language is far more important. (2) “The role of attitudes in language learning” is another affectively related variable that deserves mentioning since negative attitudes can affect success in learning a language. Very young children, however, who are not developed enough cognitively to possess “attitudes” towards races, cultures, ethnogroups, classes of people, and languages, are unaffected. (3) The peer pressure children encounter in language learning is quite unlike what the adult experiences. Adults experience some peer pressure, but of a different kind. They tend to tolerate linguistic differences more than children, and therefore errors in speech are more easily excused. Children are harsher critics of one another’s actions and words and may thus provide a necessary and sufficient degree of pressure to learn the second language. (4) The linguistic and cognitive processes of second language learning are in general similar to first language processes

and that similar strategies and linguistic features are present in both first and second language learning in children, as has been found out by Natalicio and Natalicio (1971), Dulay and Burt (1974), Ervin-Tripp (1974), Raven (1974), and Hanson-Bede (1975), among others.

Krashen (1982) suggests four main types of explanation for age differences to work as compromising points. First, the language faculty is just as capable of learning FLs in older learners as in young learners, but 'affective' factors like threatened self-esteem, low ego permeability and perceived social distance act as a barrier between FL data and the language faculty. Secondly, input to adult learners is less well-tuned than to children, so that older learners do not get the data they require to be fully successful. Thirdly, cognitive development (development of advanced thinking processes) somehow inhibits language learning ability. Fourthly and finally, changes in the nature of the brain with age cause a decline in language learning ability.

Littlewood (1986) states that one of the difficulties in comparing the learning ability of children and older learners is that, in the majority of cases the matter is not merely limited to the age issue; children have better learning conditions than older learners: more time, attention, communicative needs, opportunities for use, and so on. Hence, the following compromising points can be

posited. (1) Children often have more favourable learning conditions. They are often exposed to the language for longer periods of time and receive more intensive attention from native speakers of the language, including other children. (2) Children are likely to be exposed to simpler language which is easy to process and understand both from adults and from other children. (3) Children are less likely to hold negative attitude towards other speech communities or to be aware of other factors (e.g. fear of rejection), which may produce barriers to interaction and learning on the part of adults. (4) The adults’ tendency to analyse and apply conscious thought to the learning experience may abstract some of the natural processing mechanisms through which the new language is internalised.

Bailystok (1997: 553-4) highlights some prevailing consistencies across the literature and as follows: (1) An effect of age learning seems clear before the learner is about 5 years old. Before this time, FL learning does seem to be more complete or more perfect than FL learning begun after that age. (2) The age effects, even when they are found, do not apply to language in general. Rather, there appear to be certain aspects of language which are best learned in early childhood, probably before puberty. After this time, these linguistic aspects seem not to take on the same perfection and assurance they do in the mind of a native speaker.

Pronunciation is an obvious example of this, but certain features of grammar, such as verb and aspect, also appear to be influenced by the age of acquisition. (3) The results depend crucially on the types of instruments used to assess proficiency. Tests of oral comprehension or competence frequently reveal an advantage for younger learners; tests of written competence, in particular, grammar, frequently reveal an advantage for older learners. (4) The effects of second language learning depend on specific language pairs. Greater effects of age are generally found when the two languages are maximally different from each other. Bailystok (Ibid.: 554) further points out that consistencies across studies indicate an underlying system in which language is represented in at least different ways. One form of linguistic representation is built up early, before the age of five. It is most clearly revealed in situations in which language is used orally and aurally. Included in this system are pronunciation and basic grammatical categories such as topicalization. The pairs of language seem not to matter very much in determining the degree to which the FL is learned. This type of competence appears to be acquired best by younger learners. At the same time, language is also represented in a system that allows learners to solve more formal problems with language. This includes the arbitrary aspects of language, such as vocabulary and parts of morpho-syntactic structure. Here, the learner's proficiency

in the FL will depend on the degree of relationship between the native and the FL language. This system develops with age, and tests of FL ability based on this competence frequently favour older learners.

Johnson and Johnson (1998: 91) state that acceptance of the existence of the critical period still leaves one with a choice between a number of explanations and as follows: Physiological explanations which vary from the loss of ‘plasticity’ in the brain, to the specialization of the brain into hemispheres, to the growth of the gyrus granule cells in the brain; social explanations which talk of the different situations and input for child and adult; affective explanations in terms of the affective barrier that gets raised in the teens between the learner and the input; cognitive explanations including the difficulties of learning language for those in the later Piagetian stages of development and of the formation of a ‘language ego; that is hard to ‘permeate’; and linguistic explanations that account for the lack of access to *universal grammar* in second language learning. There seem rather more explanations than there are facts to explain; with so much changing in human development, almost any of these might be the cause of putative decline.

Quoting singleton (2001: 77-81), Cohen and Dornyei (2002: 171) state that recent research shows that ‘the younger the

better' is only valid in environments where there is a constant and natural exposure to the L2 (for example, learning French in France); in typical classroom environments where the amount of exposure is relatively small, older learners seem to have advantage over the young peers; that is, here older is better. Also age seems to have a much greater effect on pronunciation than on other linguistic abilities, such as grammar or vocabulary. Even here, it seems that some late-starting learners have been able to develop native-like pronunciation. Thus, although the 'age factor' may have some physiological basis in the way the brain handles language, there are also likely to be several basis age-related factors at work, including the amount and pattern of L2 input, the amount of verbal analytical ability and the motivation to learn the L2.

McDonough (2002: 92) points out that one reason for all the conflicting evidence and certainty about critical ages is that the multitude of research projects have investigated a multitude of contexts: school learning, outside school learning, pre-school learning, adult proficiency, migrating populations, many different instructional contexts and syllabi, untutored learning, and so forth. There is lack of uniformity in an area of human activity that is determined by so many different life circumstances and reasons for learning.

From the present researcher’s viewpoint and in the light of what has so far been stated, it can be pointed out that the process of FL development appears to be highly similar across child and adult learners. Yet adult learners (as a group) are faster in the initial stages of second language learning than young learners (as a group) on most linguistic measures (syntax, morphology, lexis). With continued exposure, young children (as a group) become more native-like than adult ones (as a group) on all linguistic measures. Individual learners may depart from these generalizations as some older learners may be slower than young children in the early stages, while some other older learners may ultimately become as successful as child learners.

In the light of both theoretical statement of the relevant information and the findings of the empirical studies, the hypothesis that adult learners are less successful than children in acquiring the skills of an FL is rejected.

VI. Conclusion

We have so far outlined two opposing viewpoints concerning the role of the ‘critical period’ in foreign language learning. The first viewpoint supports the idea that children who have not reached the age of puberty and have more flexibility of the brain, are "better" language learners and can learn an FL better than adults.

The second viewpoint refutes the role played by the so called the ‘critical period’ and claims that adults who reach the age of puberty are more mentally developed and can profit from certain grammatical explanations and deductive thinking that obviously would be pointless for a child. Hence, they are ready to think about and comprehend the many complexities of syntax. A process just the opposite to that of small children who due to not developing the ability to use their logical operations, find an abstract approach to a new language, that is, explanation of rules and tables of paradigms, incomprehensible, irrelevant, and tiresome. Added to that, our statement of such viewpoints has been supported by a number of empirical researches of the past forty years or so, which underlie certain generalizations about the relationship between age and foreign language learning. Finally, there have been some concluding remarks which might work as compromising ideas so as to bridge the gap between the two opposing viewpoints to the least possible extent.

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ملخص

الجدل حول "مسألة العمر" في تعلم اللغة الأجنبية:

البحث عن صيغة توافقية

أ.م.د. حسين علي أحمد(*)

بل رغم من مكانية تعلم أغلب الناس لغة واحدة أو لغات أخرى عدا لغة الأم الخاصة بهم في أي وقت من حياتهم محققين مستوى ملحوظا من النجاح في المهارات المختلفة ذات العلاقة، ما يزال ثمة خلاف حول عمر المتعلم بوصفه عاملا مهما في تقرير مستوى التمكن من اللغة الجديدة، وتنطلق هذه الدراسة من الجدل القائم بأن المتعلمين الكبار، وبحكم اجتيازهم ما يسمى "الفترة الحرجة" من العمر هم أقل نجاحا في تعلم مهارات اللغة الأجنبية مقارنة بالمتعلمين الأصغر عمراً. وعليه يستعرض البحث الحالي، ومن خلال دراسة نظرية مدعومة بنتائج دراسات تطبيقية أجريت في هذا الصدد تدعم أو تدحض النقطة مثار الجدل. وتم تقديم بعض الأفكار والمقترحات التوفيقية التي تبرز دور العمر، ولكن تشير في الوقت ذاته إلى مكان الصعوبة والنجاح التي قد يواجهها متعلمو اللغة الجديدة، صغارا وكبارا.

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