

TEACHING ENGLISH AS A FOREIGN LANGUAGE TO PERSIAN CHILDREN VS. ADULTS

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ABSTRACT

Teaching English as a foreign language has always been a topic for performing researches to obtain the best methods and techniques in order to achieve the objectives of language learning. One of the aspects which should be taken into account is the differences between individuals and their styles of learning. It can point to age difference among the individual differences as a very discussing factor. The present study explores the differences between children and adults due to language learning style from perspective of biological aspects and pedagogical psychology. In terms of the results of this study, some effective teaching methods will be suggested related to children and adults learning styles of English as a foreign language.

Keywords: *Children Learners, Adult Learners, Foreign Language, Biological Aspects, Pedagogical Psychology*

INTRODUCTION

To teach English as a foreign language, it is necessary to be aware of the differences between how and why children and adults learn it. On this topic, a lot of research has been done on differences in learners' characteristics according to biological and psychological aspects related to the effects of age which their results have been effective in teaching English language methods and techniques. The findings in this era showed that children are somehow more successful in picking up foreign languages, although some other researchers found that adults can be as successful as or even more successful than children.

This has led to research on different learners' characteristics between children and adults to find foreign language teaching and learning methodologies and became a very crucial concern for teachers, educational policy makers, and test makers to find out the appropriate methods, materials, and tests for teaching English as a foreign language.

According to critical hypothesis as a neurological characteristic, Lenneberg (1967) claims that "there are maturational constraints on the time a first language can be acquired. First language acquisition relies on neuroplasticity. If language acquisition does not occur by puberty, some aspects of language can be learned but full mastery cannot be achieved" (p. 180). This theory has been considered for learning a second or foreign language as well, but without being accepted so much.

Related to this hypothesis, Birdsong (2002) claims: "...age entails a loss of ability to learn a second language. It is clear that the sensitivity decline persists over the age spectrum: it is more a case of progressive losing than eventual loss. L2 learning appears to involve not a single monolithic faculty, but distinct neural and cognitive components with differential susceptibilities to the effects of age" (p.38).

Krashen (1989) refers to latency as a natural way of learning in childhood. According to him, language learning is not easy after five years old when the sensitive period has finished, by claiming this he didn't mean adults can't be a good learner of grammar of a foreign or second language, but it will be possible in the intentional and explicit learning way while at the semantic level, sensitive period cannot be this much effective due to being a process that can be developed in any age.

Margaret (1955) in her translation of "The Construction of Reality in the Child" written by Piaget refers to children's cognitive development in terms of their sensory experience in acquiring knowledge by understanding things directly or via audio visual aids and other sensory inputs while adult learners, because of cognitive maturity learn through indirect abstract thinking.

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Adults and children are also different due to the amount of paying attention and focusing on learning materials. Ruff and Lawson (1990) point out that the time spent consciously on doing a task is different according to different ages. Adults can have attention more than children. Dukette and Cornish (2009) also state "the estimations on sustained attention for doing a task range from about five minutes for a two-year-old child, to a maximum of around 20 minutes in older children and adults." Concerning this difference, teaching methods must be designed appropriately for Children and adults in terms of their capabilities of attention span. Then, teachers must try to use the methods and techniques to increase their students' motivation, and interests to make their attention and its stability be increased (especially for children who don't have a driving motivation to learn languages).

According to Brown (1941), because children are not aware of social values and attitudes put on language, their sentences in comparison with adults' are produced not difficultly while adults' Self-consciousness makes them to monitor and filter to be sure about producing utterances with the correct grammar and vocabularies due to a special context and situation.

In this way they reduce their mistakes.

Tippin (2011) believes that adults are more capable than children to come to terms with learning language on an intellectual level and this capability leads them to make themselves suited for learning language more quickly than children. Coppieters (1987) found that non-native speakers who began to learn French as their second language after early childhood could not have the intuitive competence of this language syntax and usage as its native speakers.

Considering these differences makes a significant selection of methods to teach children and adults in terms of their characteristics. For adults, the teacher must pay attention to their cognitive maturity and knowledge about the world around them, while for children, they must consider cognitive immaturity as well as immaturity of language to be learned. Although the best method cannot be just one method, a combination of all methods can be more fruitful by considering the learners' needs, styles, backgrounds, and the environment where learning will occur.

Richards & Rodgers (2001) state that "Chomsky had shown that the structural theories of language prevalent at the time could not explain the creativity and variety evident in real communication" (p. 153–155). According to Savignon (2000), learning can be effective when the emphasis is on personal freedom for learners to choose what they prefer to communicate "These materials concentrated on the various different social meanings a given item of grammar could have, and were structured in such a way that learners could choose how to progress through the course themselves." .

David (1991) by emphasizing on the communicative aspects of language, introduces five features of communicative language teaching as: (1) an emphasis on learning to communicate through interaction in the target language, (2) the introduction of authentic texts into the learning situation, (3) the provision of opportunities for learners to focus, not only on language but also on the learning process itself, (4) an enhancement of the learner's own personal experiences as important contributing elements to classroom learning, and (5) an attempt to link classroom language learning with language activities outside the classroom.

Statement of the Problem

The question of the methods of teaching English as a foreign language has been always attracted the attention of parents, scholars and policy makers over the years. Recent studies show that adult learners may actually be at an advantage when studying a foreign language.

Patricia Duff in her paper, "Foreign Language Policies, Research, and Educational Possibilities" presented at the 2008 APEC Symposium on Education Reform, claims this downward push can be justified for affective and cognitive reasons. Other researchers believe younger children are more amenable to other languages and cultures. Furthermore, they are less self-conscious about FL production than older children and adolescents.

The purpose of this study is investigating the differences of teaching English language to children and adults as foreign language learners by considering their different characteristics in terms of biological and psychological aspects.

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The Significance of the Study

Among the methods of teaching English as a foreign language, using the methods which focus on communicative aspects of learning a language with reducing the amount of anxiety and encouraging learners to feel free and comfortable in classroom can be mostly helpful for adults and children language learners. This can be more fruitful if age and characteristic differences between children and adults in learning a foreign language come along too.

This study is an attempt to find the best teaching method for adults and children as the foreign learners of English language from the perspective of pedagogical psychology considering individuals' differences in their characteristics as a method which can serve to facilitate learning processes in various educational settings across the lifespan.

Research Questions and Hypotheses of the Study

The present study will try to answer the following questions:

1. Is there any difference between children and adults in learning English language listening comprehension skills as foreign language learners due to their biological and psychological characteristics through communicative methods of teaching?
2. Is there any difference between children and adults in learning English speaking skills as foreign language learners due to their biological and psychological characteristics through communicative methods of teaching?

Based on the research question the following null hypotheses are proposed as the tentative explanations for phenomena:

1. There is not any difference between children and adults in learning English speaking skills as foreign language learners due to their biological and psychological characteristics through communicative methods of teaching?
2. There is not any difference between children and adults in learning English speaking skills as foreign language learners due to their biological and psychological characteristics through communicative methods of teaching?

** Significance level in these hypotheses is $P=.05$.*

MATERIALS AND METHODS

The population of this study was 20 students of English as a foreign language, 10 adult students in the age range of 20-23, and 10 child students in the age range of 8-10 who were going to start English language learning as foreign language learners from the basic skills at Simin English language institute in Tonekabon, Iran. The gender factor was not controlled in both groups. Both groups were randomly selected from among those who have neatly no knowledge of English language after taking a general English test.

For both group the same teacher started to teach the lessons due to the English language basic listening and speaking skills of English language using interactive methods.

For teaching listening skills, the techniques were used to activate background knowledge of the topic in order to predict or anticipate content as well as attending to those parts of these skills input relevant to the identified purposes. Top-down and bottom-up strategies were selected to be used for improving the learners' confidence and at the same constructing meanings. And encouraging them to monitor their comprehension helped them to detect failures in comprehension and directed them to use other effective strategies. Here it must refer to adults who usually monitor their own performance consciously while children are mostly do it unconsciously, then encouraging children learners must be more than adults in this era.

Teaching materials were compiled appropriately for children and for adult learners, the contents were to fit the characteristics of each group.

As children naturally are keen to learn new things generally through sensory input and experiences, audio and visual as well as simple were used to get benefits of their imitation characteristics in learning English for communication. Here TPR method was used to improve their receptive skills before productive ones

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via physical and stress-free and anxiety-free activities such as singing, role playing, and using language games to encourage them to join in communicational situations.

As adults like to focus on real life materials, dialogues, documentary audio and video clips were chosen with the aim of meeting their communicative needs and practical uses, based on real-world communicative function. Rules and grammatical structures were taught implicitly through contextual meaning to demand their own analyzing and challenging to find the truth by themselves, then solving language problems. After teaching period of 36 sessions, LTTC General English Proficiency Test at elementary level by focusing on the listening and speaking skills questions was taken from both groups. The objective of the course of study and taking this test due to listening skills was the learners could understand simple English sentences, short conversations, and stories; and due to speaking skills they could read aloud simple passages and give a simple self-introduction could engage in simple dialogue in situations with which they were familiar. This test has already obtained reliability and validity. The gained data was measured and analyzed through Independent *t*-test by using SPSS software to find that by considering the significance of $P=.05$, if the hypotheses could be confirmed or rejected.

Descriptive Statistics of Data Analysis

The descriptive statistics of the data collected from the applied tests were presented as follow:

Table 1: Frequencies of two scores of the same test from the two groups

Group Statistics					
	Group	N	Mean	Std. Deviation	Std. Error Mean
Listening	children	10	8.0000	3.00000	1.06719
	adult	10	15.0000	1.00000	.00000
Speaking	children	10	12.0000	3.00000	1.01325
	adult	10	9.0000	4.06202	1.00000

Table 2: Independent sample T-test: comparison of mean scores between two groups Independent Samples Test

Independent Samples Test		Levene's Test for Equality of Variances		t-test for Equality of Means		95% Confidence Interval of the Difference			
	F	Sig.	t	df	Sig. (2-tailed)	Mean Difference Std.	Error Difference	Lower	Upper
Listening Equal variances assumed	4.000	.039	-6.027	18	.000	-7.00000	1.00000	-	-4.00000
			-6.027	12.000	.000	-7.00000	1.00000	-9.00000	-4.00000
Speaking Equal variances assumed	.000	.000	1.000	18	.093	2.00000	1.00000	.00000	6.00000
Equal variances not assumed			1.000	17.074	.094	2.00000	1.00000	.00000	6.00000

*Listening: $t_{observed} = -6.027 > t_{critical} = 2.101$ (the null hypothesis was rejected)

*Speaking: $t_{observed} = 1.000 > t_{critical} = 2.101$ (the null hypothesis was failed to be rejected)

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RESULTS AND DISCUSSION

Results

After collecting data and doing statistical measurements, the final results of independent sample *t*-test showed that through communicative methods of teaching English as a foreign language by considering participants' biological and psychological characteristics, there was a difference between children and adults in learning listening comprehension skills. As the results of estimating the listening parts of the given test shown in table 2, *t* observed was equal to -6.027, and greater than *t* critical=2.101; therefore, the null hypothesis was rejected due to the findings of estimating the listening comprehension items. Furthermore, according to the results gained from the estimation of speaking skills, *t* observed was equal to 1 and smaller than *t* critical= 2.101, the null hypothesis was failed to be rejected or sufficient evidence had not been found according to the statistical measurements and the difference with 95% degree of confidence and .05 level of significance.

Discussion

In the present study, the effect of individual's characteristics on teaching English as a foreign language through communicative methods was studied by focusing on listening comprehension and speaking skills. As was shown in table 2, for adults and children this method was more successful via the techniques which were used for each group. It was supported that through communicative methods the listening skills could be improved for both groups while using the appropriate teaching strategies. But the second null hypothesis related to speaking skills, was failed to be rejected, maybe due to sufficient evidence to support it were not found. Teachers must be aware in all teaching programs they need to know about the different characteristics and learning styles of learners. For example some children are sociable and learn the foreign language more quickly without being worry about their mistakes, while other children are shy and quiet for fear of making a mistake. In comparison with children, most adults care about being corrected and this makes them feel anxious therefore leads to avoid speaking in foreign language in front of other ones. According to (Harmer, 2000), adults can benefit from their abstract thought, life experiences, and their certain expectations about the learning process, so they are more disciplined than children. All these can affect teaching and learning a foreign language and in this study they could influence listening comprehension and speaking skills of English as a foreign language.

Conclusion

It can be concluded that teaching English as a foreign language through communicative methods as well as real life aspects in terms of students' characteristics including age, cognitive, behavioral, and characteristics can be effective to achieve the teaching goal successfully. It is worth to be mentioned although the philosophy of language teaching and learning is emphasizing learners' differences, there is no single and perfectly appropriate method of teaching because there is no single type of learner. Therefore, the studies in this field are on a new way day by day to find more effective results than the previous ones.

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