



BENEFITS OF LEARNING A FOREIGN LANGUAGE AT AN EARLY AGE

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Abstract

It is known that the early age is a most suitable time to start foreign language learning. Early childhood is the best time for language acquisition. The study of another language provides the most effective tool for penetrating the barrier of a single language and a single culture. Furthermore, experience with another culture enables people to achieve a significantly more profound understanding of their own. Therefore, we can consider language learning as a useful tool in adapting to a new culture and a society. We can say that learning a language means a learning new culture. Young students are very motivated to learn a foreign language. The young brain is really flexible to learn something new. They are so curious about the world around them. The younger we start the more time there is to be exposed to the language. As we call brain of the young learners plastic brain. They can learn everything unconsciously. In fact, adults brain full of the problems, where brain of the children fix on the lesson. We are going to speak out in this paper about lots of advantages of the learning a language at an early age.

Key words: Early foreign language learning, Kids, Culture, Childhood, Cultural Identity.

1. Introduction

One of the important factors today is to learn a language must be age factor. Firstly, most of the results of the research studies show us that there are many advantages to learn a language at an early age. A number of studies report that the children can acquire the language better than adults do. If we want to take the task of foreign language learning seriously, one of the key principles is the earlier start. The children do better than adults in picking up the English pronunciation as well. As it is mentioned in of the books which shows one of the studies called "Teaching Young Children A second Language" that it did not matter how long the immigrants stayed in the United States the important that is they came to this country at the early age they sounded like native-born Americans. In addition, that study shows that children can have intuitive knowledge of whether a sentence well formed grammatically. We can say that adults miss this intuitive knowledge. We can mention that young learners can easily talk in any foreign languages and can be imitators of the native speakers, where language is the mirror of proper culture. Here it can be mentioned about the Critical Period Hypothesis. Lennerberg pointed out that innate behavior can be developed just at the special stage at the early age. This stage called "The Window of opportunity" or "the critical period". He made the comparison between the birds and the children where he said that if certain bird species do not hear other bird is singing at an early age, they would not be able to sing in the way ever they hear it in their later ages. Where there is a similar thing in the human history where children can acquire the language easily in their early ages.

Young children can acquire native-like fluency as easily as they learned to walk. Where adults have to work through an established first-language system, studying explicit grammar rules and practicing rote drills, the young kids learn naturally, absorbing the sounds, structures, intonation patterns and rules of a foreign language intuitively, as they did their mother tongue. The young brain is inherently flexible, uniquely hard-wired to acquire language naturally (Ghasemi, Hashemi, 2011, p. 875).

2. Learning a language at an early age

Most of the scientists today support this view and believe that the language can be learn even probably as a mother tongue only if children are exposed to the language during early years. We can say that these early stages will succeed in the language learning, language production and the language comprehension. Actually, the young children never come to the classroom empty-handed. They bring with them an already well-established skills or characteristics, which will help them to, learn another language. They can easily understand the language by gestures and facial expressions. All these stages help them to understand the meaning of the unknown words and phrases. This first knowledge will be very helpful to them in their later life. It remains a fundamental part of the communication. In one of the books called "Teaching English in the Primary Classroom", the children readiness to learn a language listed in this way:

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- They can use a language very creatively
- They are able to learn indirectly better than directly
- They find the lesson funny and enjoyable
- They have a very nice imagination
- They are free in talking

Children who have a chance to learn a foreign language at the same time have a chance to have many cultural patterns as a literature, music or arts because of exposure to the other cultures.

It is advised to introduce a second language as if it was a mother tongue, using songs, games, nursery rhymes and natural conversation with the children. Without the element of fun, learning is almost impossible. Learning is easier if it is made fun or emotional, because, the brain stem, sometimes called the reptile brain, controls many of our body's involuntary functions, e.g. breathing (Adžija Sindik 2014, p. 52).

While learning a language is an enriching experience for all ages specially children have the most to gain from the adventure. As children are always discovering new things and trying to learn. They are considered superior language learners. Where to According to Dr. Curtiss who is Professor of Linguistics, who studies the way children learn languages notes that it does not seem to matter how many languages we seem to throw to the children's way, they have a very great power to learn it. They can learn as many spoken languages as you can allow them to hear systematically and regularly at the same time. Children just have this capacity. They can develop several languages at the same time. It has a positive effect on intellectual growth. We can list the advantages in this way:

- Enriches and enhances a child's mental development
- Leaves students with more flexibility in thinking
- Improves a child's understanding of his/her native language
- Gives a child the ability to communicate with people s/he would otherwise not have the chance to know
- Opens the door to other cultures and helps a child understand and appreciate people from other countries
- Increases job opportunities in many careers where knowing another language

"Any normal child, born anywhere in the world, of any racial, geographical, social, or economic heritage, is capable of learning any language to which he or she is exposed" (Fromkin, Rodman and Hyams, 2003, p. 27).

The young brain is inherently flexible, uniquely hard-wired to acquire language naturally. Children can receive native like fluency as easily as they learned to walk, but adults learn through an established first-language system, studying explicit grammar rules. Early childhood is the best time for language acquisition. Researches into the effects of bilingualism on children suggest that exposure to more than one language is an excellent way of flexing those brain muscles and building them up. Here actually the term of bilingualism can be explained. The term can refer to an occurrence regarding an individual speaker who uses two languages, a community of speakers where two languages are used, or between speakers of different languages. When children continue to develop their abilities in two or more languages throughout their primary school years, they gain a deeper understanding of language. They have more practice in processing language, especially when they develop literacy in both, and they are able to compare and contrast the ways in which their two languages organize reality. Actually lots of researches today show that children can develop more flexibility in their thinking because of processing information through two different languages. Therefore Bilingualism shows us the importance and the usefulness of the learning a language at an early age. According to Brown (1994: 56-58), the development of the learner's speech muscles may be a larger contributing factor to the attainment of native-like pronunciation. Since human speech involves hundreds of muscles, children's muscular plasticity gives them advantages over adult learners, as in the cases of most great athletes starting their training at a very young age. Complex sounds such as 'r' and 'l' in English are typically acquired at around the age of five, when plasticity is still present. We can say that the children can understand, what is being said before they understand the individuals words, they have a very high ability to imagine things. Halliwell (1992,p.12) states that:

"Intonation, gestures, facial expressions, actions and circumstances all help to tell what the unknown words and probably phrases mean. By understanding the message in this way, they start to understand the



language. In later life, we all maintain this first source of understanding alongside our knowledge of the language itself. It remains a fundamental part of human communication”.

So according to all information above there are lots of advantages of the learning a language at an early age As it was mentioned above that the young generation can learn language quite easily than adults do. Nowadays the education of the foreign language should be started early in order to achieve good results.

Liddicoat goes on to enumerate the important educational outcomes of learning languages, all of which are central to the needs of students who will be required to participate in an increasingly interconnected world: knowledge of the language and the ability to use it in communication with other people understanding of the culture of another group understanding one’s own language and culture through comparison with another language and culture knowing how to communicate in contexts where shared language resources between participants are limited knowing how to communicate across cultural boundaries (Fernandez, 2008, p. 5).

Language is at the heart of virtually of all human relations. People use language to identify themselves in relations to others in the ways they group themselves. By their manners, they form the system and the structure of the society. Hence, language is the construction of the identity. Actually we can say that a developing stages of the child shows us clearly that by the learning a language the child starts to be aware of social environment and cultural values, hence he/she is going to earn a particular identity of her/his society. Quintana and Wright states that:

“In terms of cultural identity development, it is generally at this stage that children begin to move from a conceptual understanding of race and gender from a physical standpoint to a social perspective, with the beginning notions of the sociopolitical context from which culture is derived” (Cited in Tomas, Schwarzbaum, 2006,p.2).

3. Erickson’s stages of psychosocial development

Erickson’s stages of psychosocial development help us to understand development and its relation to the language and culture. Erickson was interested how children were socialized and how these affect their identities. According to the theory the successful completion of each stage will be the reason in the developing the healthy personality and identity. The theory of stages of psychosocial development has eight stages, which are the following

1) Trust versus Mistrust: From ages birth to one year this stage is very important stage in the developing a healthy identity of the child. Where a child receive a good care and will be taught to earn a trust of his environment after during his growing stages in front of fear he will not lose his control to self. The child must gain confidence and security in the world around him. If the stage will be incomplete, it will result to inability to trust and may result an anxiety and mistrust to him and others.

2) Autonomy vs. Shame and Doubt: This stage is between the one and three. Children is trying to realize their independence where they can choose which toy to play or making chooses what to wear or what to eat. If parents support and encourage child in his independence, he can win trust to himself and will learn to be independent. In this stage if child will be overly controlled, pressed and mostly time criticized, the children will feel inadequate in their ability to survive and they can become overly dependent upon others.

3) Initiative vs. Guilt: This stage is starting at three and continuing until six. They try to plan activities, make up games and initiate with others. If child will be given the opportunity to be initiative with others and to be creative in playing, where it is known that children learn by fun, hence he/she will develop a sense of initiative and will develop their ability to interact with others to make friends and will be ready to take decisions themselves.

4) Industry vs. Inferiority: From age six until puberty, Ericson calls this as a “school age”. Here child starts to master the more formal rules of the life he can take be initiative in projects at school and feels good and proud about that what they have achieved. During this stage, firstly parents and teachers play an important role in their success. If children are encouraged and reinforced, they will be productive and will have an ability to achieve their goals.

5) Identity vs. Role Confusion: The transition from the childhood to adulthood is the most important stage. Children are becoming more independent and starting to look for the future career, relationships, housing etc. They start to form their identities according to their origin. Nevertheless, here they still not sure about their job career and still decide stage.



6) Intimacy vs. Isolation: Occurring in a young adulthood, we begin to share more intimately with others. We explore relationships, which can lead to the marriage, or we can settle down our relationship with our environment and have a long term and successful and trustable friendships. However, at the same time at this stage, we are afraid of rejection; being turned down, our partners breaking up with us. We are familiar with pain and to some of us rejection is painful, our egos cannot bear the pain. Avoiding relationships can lead to isolation, loneliness, and even depression

7) Generativity vs. Stagnation: In adulthood, we concern of establishing and guiding next generation. Here we try to settle down our relations, we establish our careers, begin our own families, raising our children happily, trying to be productive at work, other way by failing the activities we became stagnant and feel ourselves unproductive.

8) Ego Integrity vs. Despair: As we grow older, we start to be less productive and explore life as a retired person. Usually people after completing all these stages are happy about their success as their children, their work and the rest of the things. That time if we feel that we did not accomplish our goals, that time we can become dissatisfied with the life and develop despair which leads to a kind of depression and hopelessness.

These stages show us how our personality grow and develop or by other words, how our identities are structured by our cultural insides. Holland, Skinner, Lanchicotte and Cain stated that:

“ Identities are a key means through which people care about and care for what is going on around them. They are important bases from which people create new activities, new worlds, and new ways of being”. (Cited in Kim 2003:138) In fact, the relationship between language and identity is very important; theories of the language reflect our identities. The educators need to take this relationship very seriously. We can say that speech, speakers, and social relationships are inseparable. Here related to the issue of child development and identity I would like to cite Bonny Norton (1997, p. 410) who stated the following: “In this view, every time language learners speak, they are not only exchanging information with their interlocutors; they are also constantly organizing and recognizing a sense of who they are and how they relate to the social world. They are, in other words, engaged in identity construction and negotiation”.

4. Cultural identity

Related to this issue, I would like to give an example that is related to how cultural identity reflects the language learning. Schecter and Bayley (1997, pp. 518, 521) mention about Mexican family, who lives in California and tries to adapt to the new society. The authors examined the patterns of communication at home and on the relationships among language choice and dimensions of language use. Relating to this the family faced a problem in dealing with the school of their child. As mentioned above that the family was trying to adapt to the new society that requires investigating and studying a new language, culture and society. When the mother first time went to the school there, she met her daughter’s kindergarten teacher, the teacher counseled her against teaching Spanish literacy to her child and she advised to the parents to speak English at home. In this way, she claims that their child is going to avoid a conflict at school. Therefore, they started to practice English at home. However, the members of the family came to the point that they started losing their mother tongue along with some patterns of culture. Finally, when their daughter entered third grade they initiated interaction with their daughter in Spanish and required her to use Spanish in return. Therefore, according to all we can conclude that when a language is not practiced anymore it is not only the beginning of lost a language but also a culture that one has. So we can consider, as many times we mentioned above that language learning is a useful tool in adopting a new culture and society. We can see clearly how our identity is affected under the studying languages when we learn a new language and culture. It brings for us a lot of advantages and a kind of enrichment, however if we start to lose the native language it can be a critical point and a big loss as it stated above it will be not just loss of the language but the loss of our cultural values, where our identities are built over it. Actually nowadays especially with bilingual children, the parents should teach them their mother tongue and culture as well. As we live in a global world so not so important where we live it can be not our origin country but the family plays a very big role in a constructing the right identities of their children, by speaking their tongue at home and by practicing their own culture. Where in one of the articles Morales states that Spanish who lives in America speaks sometimes as she called it “Spanglish” those who speak “Spanglish” may see it as representative of their identities as Spanish speaking Americans. “Spanglish is what we speak, but it is also who we Latinos are, and how we act, and how we perceive the world” (Cited in Gibson, 2004,p.5) By other words, they perform code switching or code mixing to show their personalities. Morales issues that:



“Language both code and content is a complicated dance between internal and external interpretations of our identity”.

5. Productive Teacher

Firstly, actually every teacher must remember that every parent has high hopes, valid concerns and big expectations for that child. The teacher must be the helper of the parents who gave their children in the teacher’s hands. The teacher must be to be helpful to develop the parents’ confidence. In short, the good teacher can be helpful for the students to realize that many difficult things can be resolved very easily. All lessons should be built over the students needs.

Where Penny, (1996, p. 284) states in her book

“Think back to your own classroom learning, as either child or adult, not necessarily of a foreign language, and try to recall a teacher of yours who was outstandingly good, from whom you really learnt well”.

Good teacher must try to create atmosphere in which every student can learn and to be productive, in which every student feels safe enough to share their thoughts and feelings, an atmosphere in which making a mistake is seen as an opportunity to learn rather than an opportunity to feel like a failure. The teacher must be the helper of the parents. The home and school should ideally work effectively together and support one another. If the relation between the teacher and the student is friendly, it is already a kind of success. Where some researches shows that when the teacher just concentrates over the materials it could not be enough for successful learning. Hence, the instructor must appreciate some values like a cultural or social background of the children... Therefore, we can conclude that teacher plays an important role in language learning. The teacher must be very selective in organizing a lesson considering the factors like race, ethnicity, age and social background otherwise the students will not be comfortable and the lesson is not going to be successful and productive. Without language knowledge it is difficult to learn about different cultures.

In addition, one of the important points that the teacher should be aware with the students’ culture as well other way it will lead to a big misunderstanding. Where Thanasoulas mentions in his article that a new teacher from the U.S. was teaching English in a Palestinian school in Israel, the teacher was trying to explain a grammar of present perfect tense. After its explanation, the teacher asked some questions to the students where it was a cause of misunderstanding. The question was in this way: Have you ever lived in Israel? The responds of the students were completely different and most of them were silent and a little bit confused. Some of the students said no. The teacher firstly could not realize and understand what the problem is. After some moment, the teacher asked same question, only to receive a response. At that moment one of the students said: “Palestine teacher, Palestine”. That moment the teacher was so amazed because the students’ responses were according to cultural values and all of them knew the grammar well. Hence, this kind of example shows us clearly that the teacher should always be aware of the both of the cultures. The cultural awareness should be considered as one of the important factors in the education. According to Dana, Sheley and Sharon (1997, p. 630).

“Educators should develop and implement curricula that respect human differences in race, ethnicity, language, religion, age, and gender... Curricula should also incorporate multicultural literature and materials that reflect a vast array of heritages”.

Actually teachers should instill in their students a sense of self and pride in their cultural heritages, and teach them to respect one-another. The educators play a very important role after the parents. They create models, which are especially followed by the young generation in their future. Educators should also encourage students to positive human interactions between each other, despite of their historical and social backgrounds. Studying culture always leads us to study our culture as well. Byram, Esarte-Sarries and Taylor (1991, p. 8) state:

“Second, language teaching is merely one of the learning experiences through which pupils might be affected in respect of their perceptions and attitudes”.

Surely foreign language education is intercultural. Bringing a foreign language to the classroom means connecting learners to a very different world from their own world. The teachers should possess with a number of intercultural competencies and strategies. They should be helpful to their students to be familiar with the levels of communication in which misunderstanding can arise, where they will be able to negotiate the meaning and resolve misunderstanding. Fantini (1991, p. 118) states: “Entry into another world view, hopefully, will help individuals develops an appreciation for the diversity and richness of human beings”.



Therefore means that at any rate language learning means culture learning. In fact, there is no such a thing as human nature independent from culture. Every our word or mimic are filled by our cultural values and traditions. According to small details, we can guest an origin and culture of someone.

6. Conclusion

In fact, there are many advantages of the studying foreign language. Knowing another language enriches our personal lives and gives us many new opportunities because we can communicate and connect with people of other cultures and nationalities.

There is no doubt that we are living in times of great change. Nowadays the education of foreign language become is one of the important factors. Businesses and professions seek employees fluent in more than one language. Employers want their employees to be intercultural competent.

Hence we can say that the language is a tool which is used in a transforming a culture. Language can be used in a learning our own or in a discovering new culture as well. Language helps us to be engaged with a new ways of life and patterns of new cultures, where we can communicate with someone from very far and different points in the world, which will make our life colorful and rich. Exposure to another culture through its culture will introduce us the new realms of ideas, customs and habits. It can help us to follow the international events with insight, opening us perspectives to make us an informed and responsible citizen of our country and of the world. Realizing new cultures will create good opportunities for exchange, cooperation and mutual benefit. Though we cannot imagine how much ethnic and cultural values differ through language, where language preserves the history and traditions of the people. Hence, such insider knowledge can achieve the cultural understanding.

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