



ISSN: 0975-833X

Available online at <http://www.journalera.com>

INTERNATIONAL JOURNAL  
OF CURRENT RESEARCH

International Journal of Current Research  
Vol. 13, Issue, 01, pp. 15718-15723, January, 2021

DOI: <https://doi.org/10.24941/ijcr.40120.01.2021>

## RESEARCH ARTICLE

### THE FACTORS THAT AFFECT SECOND LANGUAGE ACQUISITION

\*<sup>1</sup>Dr. Sivadasan Madhavan, <sup>2</sup>Mr. Tesfaye Buche and <sup>3</sup>Mr. Temesgen Markos

<sup>1</sup>Associate Prof., Dept. of English, Wolaita Sodo University, Ethiopia; <sup>2</sup>Asst. Prof., Dept. of English, W. S. U., Ethiopia; <sup>3</sup>Lecturer, Dept. of English, W. S. U., Ethiopia

#### ARTICLE INFO

##### Article History:

Received 09<sup>th</sup> October, 2020  
Received in revised form  
29<sup>th</sup> November, 2020  
Accepted 10<sup>th</sup> December, 2020  
Published online 30<sup>th</sup> January, 2021

##### Key Words:

Critical Period Hypothesis: the period that is critical to learn the language by a certain age.  
Language Acquisition Device: the innate ability of one who acquires the language.  
Second language: any language that one learns after developing the mother tongue.

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Citation: Dr. Sivadasan Madhavan, Mr. Tesfaye Buche and Mr. Temesgen Markos. 2021. "The factors that affect second language acquisition", *International Journal of Current Research*, 13, (01), 15718-15723.

#### ABSTRACT

The Second Language Acquisition is a topic of hot discussion among the language teachers and students at the level of higher education. This paper looks into the pros and cons related to internalizing a language other than one's mother tongue. The factors that affect the acquisition of a second language are examined and described in this article from an academic point of view.

## INTRODUCTION

The academic field of Second Language Acquisition (SLA or L2 acquisition) has been the moot point in all the debates and discussions among the educationalists, linguists, sociolinguists and psycholinguists ever since the discipline began to exist. As an upcoming discipline in the second half of the 20<sup>th</sup> century, it gained popularity among the scholars all over the world. It is still an unfinished task and the experts are making ceaseless efforts to seek solutions for the burning issues of language acquisition. A child will learn a language in about 6 years whereas the linguists are unable to explain exactly how one acquires a language even after the linguistic studies that have lasted for more than 2000 years. This paper is an attempt to look into the logical factors that affect L2 (second language acquisition).

**Foreign Language:** The laymen get confused about the terms 'Second Language Acquisition' (SLA) and 'Foreign Language Learning' (FLL). Invariably, people use these terms interchangeably, but they differ from each other for all the practical issues considered by the teachers and students. Foreign language learning occurs in a place where the target language is not the native language of the society. For example, you are learning English as a 'foreign' language in your own country and learning English as a 'second' language in the native land of English speakers. This difference in setting is of very great practical importance to language

teachers. If an Ethiopian student learns English in Ethiopia, he is learning English as a Foreign Language, but if he learns it in England, he is learning it as a Second Language. That means, the Ethiopian student is less exposed to English in Ethiopia (as he uses English only in the classrooms) while he is more exposed to English in England (where he has to use English everywhere except, perhaps, at his home). For a further clarification, if a Libyan student learns English in Libya, he is learning English as a Foreign Language, but if he learns it in England or America, he is learning it as a Second Language. In other words, FLL takes place where the target language is not the native language of the society while SLA takes place in a country where it is spoken. It is the degree of exposure of the learner to the language that makes the difference between SLA and FLL. A special comment is required here to explain the meaning of 'second language' as the term 'second' stands for any language other than the first language: it can stand for the nth number (third, fourth, fifth, etc.) of languages. After your first language (mother tongue), whatever you learn (whether it is the second, third, fourth, fifth, etc.), it is a second language. It is in the same sense that the term 'second' is used in the business field. When you buy a used car, you always say that you buy a second hand car even though the car was sold and bought by many others before you. This confusing state of not having a particular conceptual sense in this context of language learning makes it convenient for anyone to use the term 'foreign' for 'second' as well. Hence, it may be confusing to those who hear it for the first time, but

later when they come to know the usage and its implication it will be clear to them.

**Language Acquisition:** A distinction between 'acquisition' and 'learning' is also to be clarified just as the distinction is made between 'second language' and 'foreign language'. Stephen Krashen delineated the difference between the terms 'acquisition' and 'learning' while explaining his 'monitor model' by the early 1980's. He identifies 'acquisition' as a subconscious process of incidentally "picking up" a language, but 'learning' is studying consciously and intentionally the features of a language in the traditional classroom. In our scholarly circle, a distinction is often made between foreign language learning and second language acquisition: as Krashen describes, 'learning' is the conscious learning of explicit rules of the language, and 'acquisition' is the unconscious internalization of linguistic knowledge. Though learning and internalization of linguistic knowledge refers to the same cognitive process, there are differences in the nature and easiness of making it one's own. In learning one makes a deliberate attempt spending much time to learn the grammar rules and how people use them in practical life. A language 'learner' has to concentrate on the techniques of reading and pronouncing the words, the word-order, meaning, and the custom of spelling and writing. Without a conscious effort for a long time, one cannot acquire the language skills. However, the term 'acquisition' indicates an effortless, natural and smooth access of the learner to the grammatical rules and usages of the language. From the daily routines and real life situations the learner picks up customs and traditions of using words and expressions, and forms well-formed sentences of his own. It takes place mostly unexpectedly without being conscious of learning. In the case of children, however, it is the term 'develop' that is used rather than 'learn' or 'acquire' as it refers to the internally driven growth of the cognitive skills in communication. So the experts say 'child language development' to mean 'child language acquisition/learning'. A child always 'develops' the second language so naturally and flawlessly as it develops its mother-tongue. The age factor determines the way one 'develops', 'acquires', or 'learns' the language. The grown-up people are also, undoubtedly, acquiring the language skills when they internalize the second language. When a teacher tells his students a story in English, without mentioning anything about the grammar points, structure or vocabulary, they pick up different concepts like tense, voice, structure, etc. in addition to following the story. Stephen Krashen identifies 'acquisition' as casual a process as the students who listen to the story. That means, each term ('learn', 'acquire' or 'develop') has its own special connotation as per the context.

**Critical Period Hypothesis:** The age factor is a stumbling block to the second language learners. In the linguistic world, a widely believed concept is that there is a critical period for learning a second language that shuts down around the onset of puberty. As the learners get older, their ability to acquire the language diminishes and it begins with a time period in their life which is known as the Critical Period Hypothesis (CPH). The CPH is based on the fact that there is an ideal time span to acquire language in a linguistically favourable situation, after which further language acquisition gets more difficult. Even the deliberate attempts and systematic efforts like attending regular classes, in the case of adult learners, do not become effective – or so they believe. Adults may become doubtful of their ability to learn a new language. The

CPH states that the first few years of life constitute the time during which language develops readily and after that language acquisition is much more difficult and ultimately less successful. It says that there is a period of growth in which full native competence is possible when acquiring a language. This period is from the early childhood to adolescence, but it is not without differences of opinion and skeptical attitude on the part of scholars. However, the CPH is the subject of a long-standing debate in linguistics and language acquisition over the extent to which the ability to acquire language is biologically linked to age. According to the theories of language acquisition, adults do not acquire language as children do because of internal and external factors. For example, older learners rarely achieve a near-native accent, and some linguists suggest that it is owing to their being beyond the critical period. A reason for the difference between the younger and the adult learners is that the adults believe that they cannot learn the language like children. Some say that it is their sorry excuse for the mistakes they commit while learning; children do not worry about the mistakes but the adults cannot afford to digest getting corrected. Another learned opinion is that it is not the false prestige of the adults that comes in the way always, but there are certain bottlenecks that let them down when they try to learn. Influence of mother-tongue, being unable to articulate foreign words, lack of time due to other occupation, etc. can be cited as examples. A common argument about the second language acquisition is that the children or learners are not sufficiently exposed to the second language. The logical problem of language acquisition is the difference between the linguistic experience and the learner's competence. The innate Universal Grammar propounded by Chomsky can bridge this gap. He explains the innate domain-specific procedures and the system of knowledge of what a human language can be in his words:

A consideration of the character of the grammar that is acquired, the degenerate quality and narrowly limited extent of the available data, the striking uniformity of the resulting grammars, and their independence of intelligence, motivation and emotional state, over wide ranges of variation, leave little hope that much of the structure of language can be learned by an organism initially uninformed as to its general character. Children are exposed to insufficient linguistic data compared to the linguistic knowledge they eventually attain. In the case of adults learning a foreign language, similar logical problems are seen: inscrutable logic is there behind acquiring the language when the linguistic data they are exposed to are limited. A remarkable difference that occurs between the younger and the older learners in the acquisition of language is that they have different motivations and paces of progress. If the learner already has knowledge of one language and a powerful system of problem-solving skills, it accounts for the difference in the degree of success. That means, there are such constraints on the role of the domain-specific learning system including the principles of Universal Grammar.

**Language Acquisition Device:** Chomsky explains the innate ability of children to learn the language as they are born with language. Whether this Language Acquisition Device (LAD) will work in adults as it does in children is the question. Some scholars doubt whether it operates any longer in adult foreign language acquisition. In other words, an imperfect operation of the Language Acquisition Device in adults makes it difficult for them to acquire the language. It goes in line with the ideas of Lenneberg's Critical Period Hypothesis (CPH) although he

does not give much evidence for the complicating questions about CPH. The difficulty of adults in acquiring the language paves the way for the concept of Critical Period Hypothesis. The experts in applied linguistics have been debating the CPH, and many of them come to a vague conclusion that the ability to acquire language is biologically related to a certain age. They talk about an ideal time span to acquire language in a linguistic environment and after that further language acquisition becomes more tedious and effortful. That explains the reason for the difficulty of adults in acquiring a foreign language.

The CPH refers to the first few years since the childbirth. Children acquire the first language when the language input is in a normal way if there is no physical and mental disability to them. If a child is not properly exposed to adequate linguistic stimuli it cannot achieve a full command of language. A child develops the abstract system of grammar while being exposed to the linguistic atmosphere. Psycholinguists argue that it is like the other critical periods in the biological life of a human being. For example, a child takes some time to recognize its parents and relatives, its gradual visual development, its being able to walk, and so on. It is true that the cognitive skills develop along with the physical maturation. The debate on the issue of critical period of language acquisition (CPH) always leads to the controversial ideas both for and against it. It is due to the lack of uniformity in the perception of the concepts about the components of language among the scholars. The acquisition of the segmental features of the phonemes and their articulation, supra-segmental aspects of phonology, gaining vocabulary, grasping the process of grammatical system, etc. do not take place at the same time. Each aspect of the language will be acquired at different levels at different ages. Some of them like acquisition of vocabulary and grammatical system can be further improved by deliberate attempts or by being trained after the end of the CPH.

**Faulty Pronunciation / Influence of Mother Tongue:** It is widely accepted that babies start using their abilities to babble to imitate the sounds they hear around them. Children learn language by imitating parents and others in the early stage. J.D.O 'Connor (1999: 1) says:

... normal babies can hear and can imitate; they are wonderful imitators, and this gift of imitation which gives us the gift of speech, lasts for a number of years. It is well known that a child of ten years old or less can learn *any* language perfectly, if it is brought up surrounded by that language, no matter where it was born or who its parents were. But after this age the ability to imitate perfectly becomes less, and we all know only too well that adults have great difficulty in mastering the pronunciation (as well as the other parts) of foreign languages.

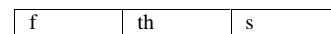
Therefore, it is incredulous to believe that the same fundamental process takes place in both the child's learning of a first language and the adult's learning of a foreign language. In the case of pronunciation, people differ from one another: not all are equally talented whether it is native language or foreign language. An adult learner finds it more difficult to learn the pronunciation of a foreign language. The speech sounds are limited in every language and we may wonder why it is difficult for a normal man to learn them correctly as children do. Whatever teaching method is used to teach pronunciation of a foreign language to an adult, he will not be

able to pronounce as perfectly as a child who learns it. A reasonable explanation for the faulty pronunciation of grown up people may be seen in the words of J. D. O 'Connor (1999: 2) as:

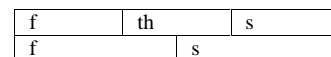
By the time we are grown up the habits of our own language are so strong that they are very difficult to break. In our own language we have a fairly small number of sound-units which we put together in many different combinations to form the words and sentences we use every day. And as we get older we are dominated by small number of units. It is as if we had in our heads a certain fixed number of boxes for words; when we listen to our own language we hear the sounds and we put each into the right box, and when we speak we go to the boxes and take out the sounds we want in the order we want them. ... But every language has a different number of boxes, and the boxes are arranged differently.

A convincing diagrammatic explanation of the sound boxes is given by J. D. O' Connor (1999, 2) as follows:

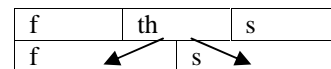
But every language has a different number of boxes, and the boxes are arranged differently. For example, three of our English boxes contain the sounds at the beginning of the words *fin*, *thin*, and *sin*, that is, *f*, *th*, (this is one sound of course) and *s*. Like this:



Now many other languages have boxes which are similar to the English ones for *f* and *s*, but they do not have a special box for the sound *th*-sound. And we can picture this in the following way:



When the foreign listener hears the English *th*-sound he has to put it in one of his own boxes, his habits force him to do so, and he has no special *th*-box, so he puts into either the *f* box or the *s* box:



In other words, he 'hears' the *th*-sound as either *f* or *s*; a funny *f* or a funny *s*, no doubt, but he has nowhere else to put it. And in speaking the same thing happens: if he has to say *thin*, he has no *th* box to go to so he goes to the nearest box available to him, either the *f* or the *s*, and he says either *fin* or *sin* (or it may be *tin*, if he has a *t* box in his language).

One possible explanation that may go with the above explanation is that the innate system that guides a child to acquire language does not operate in the adults, or its operation is weak, partial or imperfect. The CPH plays havoc in the study of accent where the elder learners do not reach the native-like pronunciation. That means, LAD does not function in adults as it does in children. But there are exceptions to this: under certain conditions, native-like accent has been seen on account of multiple factors like motivation, more exposure to the native accent, etc. where the learners overcome the biological constraint. It must be a clear case of exception to have similar type of language acquisition in children and

adults alike. A vital difference between the learners of first language and the second language is evident in the arguments of the scholars. Nevertheless, many experts in the field have come to a consensus that the same fundamental process lies under the child's learning of a first language and the adult's learning of a second language. It is seen when we observe how a child makes the past form of the verb by adding '-ed' to the present form as he uses 'comed' instead of 'came'. For example, as a child is used to the expression "I walked home", he may say, "I comed home". An adult may also use such techniques of forming the words using his own logic and reasoning, and one can say that both children and adults explore the language the same way while learning. However, the domain-specific language acquisition system as Chomsky puts it does not have anything to do with addressing the logical problem of foreign language learning that it has in child language learning. The adult foreign language acquisition has a wide range of characteristics that make it uniquely different from child language learning. Generally speaking, it is a broader way of adult problem-solving rather than child language development, and to prove it otherwise, as a joke from the one who opposes the idea, let those who support the idea try. On logical grounds, the role of Universal Grammar in child language development is assumed by the first language knowledge in adults who give priority to problem-solving. In other words, the role of the language-specific learning procedures of children is taken up by the general problem-solving principles in adults. In view of this observation, it is logical to dismiss the argument that the same type of child language development operates in adult language acquisition too. It does not mean that the LAD is underestimated: it suggests that the operation of the LAD is different in both children and adults. In the meanwhile, some sort of intuitions that exist in adult learners seem to counter the idea mentioned here. The pros and cons of the argument can also be raised here, and it indicates that one cannot get a unanimous opinion about the SLA.

**Factors to Affect Second Language Acquisition:** The linguists and language teachers have traced the features of SLA to discuss the various aspects of second/foreign language acquisition over the last three decades. Going through some of the characteristics of language learning, although many of them are controversial, will help us get a clear picture of the problems related to SLA. A few notable points are briefed here, based on the common observations, to show the ups and downs in the field of language learning. The striking characteristics are as follows:

1. **Variations:** Adults vary in the degree of success even after having the constant age, instruction, exposure, etc. The child language development has no much variation as the difference that we see in adult skill acquisition. Pinker indicates that the child language acquisition theory must be in line with the theory of Universal Grammar that allows only one grammar. It must be owing to the fact that the adult foreign language acquisition undergoes varying interests as per the context or situation.
2. **Failure:** The grown up people find it very difficult to achieve the native accent of the second language. Not only that, they rarely get the ability to make the subtle grammaticality judgements. Selinker (1972), in his paper 'Interlanguage', expresses his doubt about the complete success of the second language acquisition theory. That is, the acquisition of adult foreign language and the development of child first language are basically different. One may get the impression of inevitable success on the one hand, and inevitable failure on the other. It leads to the reason for the credentials of the innate domain-specific language faculty in children.
3. **Guarantee:** The adult foreign language learning is not hundred percent successful. The success of the learner depends on various factors: the main reason is that they are not children. Since they are not children, the language they are learning will be for some particular reason. But in the case of children, they are learning it for the sake of learning, and they try to make it successful. Adults learn it as they learn any other subject, and their failure will be like the failure of those who learn how to play tennis. All those who practice playing tennis will not be equally talented in tennis. Lack of guaranteed success points to the theory that the adult learners are controlled by general human cognitive learning capacities, rather than by the sense of domain-specific module which guarantees success in the case of children who acquire the first language acquisition. When the adults fail to do what children do we cannot accept the view that the same process of language acquisition takes place both in adults and children.
4. **Varying goals:** There are differences of the type of attainment in that some adults develop a type of 'pidginised' systems with elementary grammatical elements. But it serves the purpose of communication. Some others concentrate on grammatical accuracy although their fluency may lag behind. Some may need to develop the foreign language competence to wait on tables or to deliver lectures on engineering or philosophy while some others may concentrate on building up good vocabulary. Some learners try to get native like pronunciation even though the grammatical correctness is not achieved. These variations go in line with the assumption that the foreign language acquisition of adults is general problem-solving. Their understanding of general problem-solving involves setting 'goals'. In the case of children, the 'goal', if at all there is any, may be predetermined by the language faculty, not by any external control.
5. **Age and proficiency:** The younger learners learn the language faster than the older ones. The studies on immigrants show that the children learn the language easily and 'the younger, the better' is the dictum to explain the second language acquisition. Seliger, Krashen and Ladefoged (1993) have proved that the immigrants who arrived over a range of ages have studied the language with varying qualities showing the greater ability of children to learn the language of the country well. Teenagers often achieve the competence like the native-speakers. Some studies show that in the age range of ten to fifteen, they reach progress more rapidly than their younger counterparts. The nature of highly successful teens which shows Lenneberg's conjecture that puberty is the cut-off point cannot be correct.
6. **Inadequate intuitions:** Lack of clear grammaticality judgements of non-native speakers is said to be a different level of inadequate intuitions. The competence they acquire is described as 'indeterminate' by the scholars. That is, even the advanced non-native speakers do not have the perfect intuitions of the native speakers for the grammaticality judgements. Although the conjecture of Selinker's (1972) supporters that "an 'interlanguage' may

be linguistically described using as data the observable output resulting from speaker's attempt to produce a foreign norm" is widespread, no systematic analysis of grammaticality has been produced yet.

7. **Fossilization:** Reaching a stage short of success in learning the foreign language, according to Selinker, is known as the stage of fossilization. No improvement takes place and even the serious efforts become futile, and the learners constantly get stabilized at this stage though brief changes may be seen sometimes. It is a stage after attaining a level of communicative competence even though grammatical accuracy is not achieved. However, in children fossilization is very rare. Though it makes a serious obstacle, it is so negligible to say that the adult and child language acquisition are basically the same or similar.
8. **Necessity of instruction:** Instruction matters to the adults who learn the foreign language. Even without organized formal classes children may pick up the language; however, the adult learners need well-organised formal classes for them to internalize the rules of the language. Some teachers believe that systematic, organised and controlled drill is important for the adults while it does not play such an important role in child language acquisition.
9. **Negative evidence:** There is a general agreement among the teachers and students of foreign language that negative evidence is sometimes useful. In the form of error correction, it can be used to teach or learn the foreign language. However, child language acquisition does not rely on any sort of negative evidence. The natural tendency of children is to observe and learn the language and it has more importance for children to acquire the first or foreign language.
10. **Influencing factors:** The factors that affect the foreign language acquisition are many. For example, personality, socialization, motivation, attitude, etc. play vital roles in language acquisition. Beginning with the work of Gardner and Lambert in early 1970's so many empirical studies have shown significant correlation between affective factors and language proficiency. The teachers and students of foreign language unanimously agree with the fact that general adult skill acquisition is highly susceptible to the affective factors. However, child language development appears to be unaffected by these factors. This goes in line with the view that the child language development is controlled by the development of an innate domain-specific faculty, and it contrasts strongly with the case of general adult skill acquisition.

A valid argument of the experts is that it is logically impossible for children to acquire complex linguistic competence by means of exposure to language that children get at their home. They argue that a specialized biological programme must be there for language acquisition like the programmed course of development of physical systems like vision, digestion, and respiration. If children are exposed to conducive linguistic environment during the critical period, they will uniformly acquire the language so much as they develop their physical organs. But if they do not get any chance to be exposed to the language during the critical period, no amount of exposure after it can compensate for it. The words of an advocate in a court declaration in 1998 that "The optimal time to learn a second language is between age three and five or as soon thereafter as possible, and certainly

before the onset of puberty" (Porter, 1998, p. 1) can show the relevance of CPH. The New Jersey State Department of Education's World Curriculum Framework cited CPH research to make the point that reads: "With each year of growth, children are less able to filter out the distinctions among the sounds of other languages. After early childhood, the language acquisition mechanism becomes highly structured creating an interference effect that may account for the difficulty in learning languages at a later time." (1999, p. 7)

## Conclusion

Against all the positive attributes of CPH as a time limit of the SLA (L2 acquisition), there are certain points that go against the theory. The common notion is that CPH works for both L1 and L2. That is, L2 acquisition is a cumulative process that builds on the competence already developed in L1 acquisition. So, if L2 acquisition is the recapitulation of L1 acquisition process, then the evidence for or against a CPH for L1 acquisition is relevant to L2 acquisition. The question it poses is whether the equation  $L2 = L1$  is correct or not. How can all the questions related to L1 acquisition be relevant to L2 acquisition? It is apparently an anomalous idea that equates with the cumulative model, and it adds up to the logical problems of SLA. To put it in a nutshell, the argument for CPH is shaky for some critics as there is no empirically definable limit in both the child and the adult learners of second language. But it does not mean that there is no age effect on the L2 learners. It is clear that there is a gradual decline in the achievement of the learners of L2 with age. But no one can claim to have the biological constraint that would turn off specialized Language Acquisition Device at puberty. The decline over age in the acquisition of L2 is due to social, psychological, and cognitive factors. These multiple reasons cannot be used for the prediction unless the researchers who want to study the critical period hypothesis become more specific in stressing each factor. They have to be careful in going through various aspects of the teaching and learning the language, viz., the intellectual capacities of both the teachers and students, their familiarity with the technology-aided language learning environment, the resources and needs of the society that motivate students to learn the L2, etc. It concludes that these ideas can give a bird's-eye view of the time limit for acquiring the second language, and it is certain that the time-span to acquire the L2 will vary from learner to learner.

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