



## The Role of Age in SLA: A Review of the Literature between 2012-2023

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**Abstract:** Second Language Acquisition (SLA) is a complex process of acquiring a second language after a first language is already established, one of the factors is the age factor. Over the past few years, there has been a lot of study that argued that age plays an important role in learning a second language. Some studies stated that age has been considered a major factor in determining language learners' success in second language acquisition. There is an assumption that the younger the learner, the better it is for them to acquire a second language. Even so, those studies did not specifically talk about how the role of age has an effect on second language acquisition. Therefore, in order to fill that gap, this study aimed to give some contribution in offering some answers regarding the role of age in second language acquisition. The result of this study indicated that age can be a contributing factor in someone's second language acquisition. However, it is not the only driving factor since there are still so many variables that can affect one's ability to acquire a second language.

**Keywords:** Age; language; second language acquisition.

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## A. INTRODUCTION

Over decades, the study of the role of age in second language acquisition has become of great interest to many researchers. A lot of studies suggest that children or young language learners are more likely to be successful in reaching the ultimate attainment (UA) in second language acquisition (Aoghala, 2021). This belief is also based on the hypothesis that young children have more potential and are faster when it comes to language learning compared to

adults or adolescents, which became more popular in 1960s and started to be known as the sensitive period hypothesis or Critical Period Hypothesis (Roberts & Penfield, 1959).

Critical Period Hypothesis (1959) was introduced into the field of language acquisition by neurologist Wilder Penfield and co-author Lamar Roberts. Eight years later, Eric Lenneberg (1967) refined and popularized the hypothesis. Lenneberg argued that “language acquisition needed to take place between age two and puberty—a period which he believed to coincide with the lateralization process of the brain” (Vanhove, 2013). The existence of a critical period is commonly accepted for first language acquisition. However, in its relation to second language acquisition, this hypothesis remains controversial and is the subject of debate in SLA.

According to Abdukadyrova & Suyunova (2019), it is observed that most children from immigrant families are often fluent in the language of the new community with a level of fluency that is native-like, but their parents failed to reach the same level of language mastery. From such a case, an assumption could be drawn that age plays a role in second language acquisition. CPH suggests that there is a period of life in which a person can acquire a target language more easily. Arguably, the younger the learner, the easier it is to acquire a second language.

There are several contradictions in the previous studies about the effect of age on language acquisition. Yang (2019) stated that some research has shown that the starting age does have an ability to affect someone’s second language acquisition. Young learners, specifically children, are found to be more proficient in second language learning (Abdukadyrova & Suyunova, 2019). It is believed that earlier exposure to a second language may allow young learners to get more exposure to a greater variety of L2, which will help to increase their proficiency. The idea that “younger is better” is supported by that belief. It also shows an assumption that there are certain drawbacks for adults or adolescents when it comes to language acquisition, for they do not have the same amount of L2 exposure as younger learners. However, in a more recent study, Le & Thuy (2022) argued that the assumption about age having an effect on L2 acquisition is only partially correct. This is in line with Elise (2022), in which it was stated that the age effects on SLA can be influenced by several other factors, namely environmental, contextual, and individual factors.

Age, along with attitude, personality (extroversion and introversion), motivation (instrumental and integrative), and native language (L1) aptitudes, are among the most significant internal factors that can affect one's second language acquisition (Sun, 2019). In terms of attitude, Saidahmadovna (2023) stated that the positive mindset of the students motivates them to make genuine attempts to learn the language. Negative attitudes, on the other hand, hinder learning. Other than attitude, the learners' personality can also affect the acquisition. For example, an extrovert is more likely to succeed in SLA than an introvert because extraverted personalities equip learners with optimism, better social skills, and a strong desire to interact with people. An extrovert in SLA is likely to pay little attention to basic language structure and never have the stamina for in-depth thought and investigation, something an introvert frequently excels at (Sun, 2019).

Another substantial factor that can affect someone's second language acquisition is the learners' motivation. Sun (2019) stated that motivation can give the learners strong desire to interact with speakers of the target language and their admiration of a second language. Learners that have a strong sense of motivation are constantly engaged in second language acquisition. Even though so, it is important to keep in mind that motivation is not the only contributing factor in second language acquisition. L1 proficiency is an additional consideration that needs to be made. Because language transfer occurs frequently during learning SLA, a person's mother tongue competency will have a significant impact on how effectively they acquire the language (Sun, 2019). Although certain aspects are considered to be dominating and others to be equal, each one contributes differently to the success or failure of second language acquisition (Saidahmadovna, 2023).

In terms of age factor, "the younger the better" is a widely common view to many ordinary people regarding the acquisition of a second language because of Lenneberg's (1967) hypothesis, in which it was suggested that children are much better than adults in acquiring a second language. However, some studies and researches in our time proposed arguments against it. For instance, there appears to be no unanimity among experts, on a specific age when UA in L2 is impaired. According to several other studies, the acquisition age may be sooner than Lenneberg stated. They believe that between the ages of 6 and 7 years is the best time to develop native-like L2 skills.

On the other hand, Krashen et al. (1979) concluded in their analysis of the literature on the age issue that: a) adults have a faster rate of acquisition than children, and b) older children learn L2 faster than younger children. There is also an experimental study that shows adults outperform children in the short term. After 10 15-25 minutes German pronunciation sessions, Olson & Samuels (1973) discovered that American English-speaking teenagers and adults scored much better than children.

The belief that stands against the idea that “the younger the better” is also supported by Ausubel (1964), in which it was mentioned that adults learning a second language can benefit from grammatical explanations and logical reasoning that would be useless to a youngster. Adults benefit from such explanations, depending on their applicability and efficiency, the instructor, the situation, and other educational elements. Children learn L2 without the aid or hindrance of formal operational reasoning, according to the researcher.

In a study conducted by Archila-Suerte et al. (2012), it was indicated that early L2 exposure leads to accurate within- and between- categorization, implying that children learn L2 speech through sensorimotor and unconscious mechanisms. Late L2 exposure, on the other hand, only results in correct between-categorization of novel L2 sounds if the adult learner is highly proficient, implying that adults can learn the acoustic cues that determine the phonemic boundaries of L2 using high-level cognitive processes such as attention and other explicit strategies.

Additionally, according to Zhao & Morgan’s (2004) literature survey, the correlation between age and L2 achievement is generally negative. The commonly held belief that “the younger the better” may have some validity, and there are potential benefits to starting L2 early, especially when the instruction is well designed for early learners. However, variations in emotional, sociocultural, and input factors are reflected in the age-related impact. L2 cannot be evaluated only on the basis of the “critical period” without taking into account any other factors.

Next to that, according to early bilingualism studies, the age of first exposure to the second language is merely one of the elements that influence final jurisdiction. Several research question whether the concept of “critical period” includes a moment of rupture. The impact of age is difficult to assess since age refers not just to a person’s biological or neurological maturity, but also to his or her cognitive and social growth. As a result, it is better to refer to a range of age variables rather than a single factor age while learning a second language (Palea & Boștină-Bratu, 2015).

With the increasing number of contradictions between each study about the role of age on second language acquisition, this research aims to answer the question regarding the role of age on second language acquisition. The researcher believes that the assumption about age effect on SLA may need more attention in the field of language acquisition, for it is very crucial for us to understand what factors that could be influential for someone who is trying to acquire a second language. Thus, this research has an objective to understand and dig deeper about how does age can affect one's ability and success in acquiring a second language. Through findings and discussion of the literature review, it is hoped that a conclusion about the role of age on second language acquisition can be drawn.

## **B. RESEARCH METHOD**

This study is based on the qualitative method, which gathers and examines perspectives, opinions, materials, and prior studies about the age effects on second language acquisition. In this research paper, the majority of the relevant research publications that could be found were thoroughly evaluated. By using a systematic literature review approach, a large amount of literature on the effects of age on SLA were evaluated. Using the key phrases 'Second Language Acquisition, Age', 'age impacts on SLA', 'SLA, age', 'SLA adult', and 'SLA children', several journal articles were mainly found using the Education Resources Information Center (ERIC), Google Scholar, JSTOR, and ResearchGate.

In collecting the data, the electronic databases were diligently browsed. The terms and key phrases were searched thoroughly to find the relevant studies. Then, a selection of the researches was done to decide whether the articles will be included in the review or not. To select the appropriate study, there are some criteria that must be fulfilled. Firstly, the scholarly articles must be written in English. Then, the source's topic must have a relation with the role of age in second language acquisition, which means it must explicitly address second language acquisition and its relation with one's age in the theme.

The key phrases "second language acquisition" and "age" must be located on the collection's title, abstract, or keywords. Some terms that were too generic and produced a lot of irrelevant articles (such as research that just focuses on second language learning in general) were adjusted. Lastly, the sources have to be published between the year 2012 to 2023. This time frame was defined while considering the latest update of researches regarding the role of age in second language acquisition to avoid outdated studies.

The reports and the findings of the research that were found in terms of age effects and their implications for second language acquisition were then reviewed and examined. These studies either support or falsify the idea, in hope to get insights about whether or not the role of age has certain effects and influence on one's second language acquisition. The goal of this research is to bring earlier researchers' perspectives and opinions to light and make them more apparent so that they may be better understood by those whom it may concern.

## C. FINDINGS AND DISCUSSION

### Findings

The results of the research data in this literature review are the analysis of documented studies connected to the role of age in second language acquisition, which are presented in the following tables.

**Table 1. Research Results on Role of Age in Second Language Acquisition**

Researcher and Year	Primary Source	Research Results
(Al Ghabra, 2015)	The influence of gender and age in SLA (Doctoral dissertation, Master's thesis)	This article explores the links between second language learning and age and gender characteristics, as well as how these two factors impact and alter the language acquisition process.
(Anggaira, 2015)	HOLISTICS	The purpose of this article is to demonstrate age as an internal component that influences language acquisition success or failure.
(Anvarqizi, 2022)	Modern Journal of Social Sciences and Humanities	The relevance of the age effect on second language acquisition is discussed in this article.
(Czinglar, 2012)	Vortrag Beim Workshop on Cross-Linguistic Influence in Non-Native Language Acquisition	The findings of this case study reveal that there is L1 to L2 transfer, and that the strength of this transfer is determined by the age of exposure as well as the structural complexity of the structures involved.
(Le & Thuy, 2022)	Research Journal of English Language and Literature (RJELAL)	This paper examines the effects of age on SLA, with the goal of assisting adult and younger learners in making the most of a vital moment to take an active part in learning a foreign language.
(Li, 2015)	Sino-US English Teaching	The purpose of this study is to address the age issue in SLA, with a focus on the learners' acquisition of accent.
(Marzuki, 2018)	POLINGUA	This article aims to provide a

		viewpoint on language acquisition, as well as the elements that impact it and the relationship between language learning and age.
(Newport, 2018)	Bilingualism: Language and Cognition	This paper proposes a view regarding the disparities in age effects for first and second languages.
(Ozfidan & Burlbaw, 2019)	International Education Studies	The study examines some prevalent SLA ideas. The results of the study indicated that the diverse types of brain organization seen in learners at different stages of development necessitate a variety of educational strategies for children, adolescents, and adults.
(Palea & Boștină-Bratu, 2015)	Land Forces Academy Review	This research examines some of the most influential psychological, social, and linguistic ideas in the subject of second language acquisition. The study also emphasizes how, as these ideas have evolved, so have people's opinions on child and adult SLA.
(Rahman et al., 2017)	International Journal of English Linguistics	This study examines the impact of age on Second Language Acquisition (SLA), addressing the issue of whether the Critical Period Hypothesis (CPH) occurs in second language acquisition.
(Sang, 2017)	Journal of Education and Practice	This article evaluated previous key research on the age effect on L2 acquisition and highlighted current agreements and controversies. It gives a thorough overview of the subject that is useful for L2 education.
(Shakouri & Saligheh, 2012)	Advances in English Linguistics (AEL)	The purpose of this research is to explore the arguments for and against age and gender as two important aspects in the language learning process.
(Yang, 2019)	International Journal of Information and Education Technology	Using empirical information from recent relevant research, this study analyzes the impact of Age of Onset of Acquisition (AOA) on Second Language Acquisition (SLA) and its implications for pedagogy.
(Xu, 2023)	Journal of Education, Humanities and Social Sciences	The effect of age on second language acquisition was the main topic of this study. The usual empirical techniques for age-effect studies and analyses are addressed



in this work, along with some of the most important issues in related research.

**Table 2. Research Results on the Role of Age in Second Language Acquisition in Young Learners**

Researcher and Year	Primary Source	Research Results
(Aoghala, 2021)	Al-Qirtas Journal for Humanities and Applied Sciences	The impact of age on second language learning is discussed in this study. It examines whether the widely held belief that “the younger, the better” is valid in a variety of learning situations.
(Arifin, 2020)	Journal of English Teaching and Learning Issues	This study is based on Steinberg’s research between 1982 and 1993, which sought to solve the topic of how children and adults govern second/foreign languages, with the goal of providing more logical responses to the question of whether children are better at mastering than adults.
(Elise, 2022)	Journal of Language Teaching	The current study gives a brief summary of key ideas and empirical results pertaining to the impacts of age on second language acquisition, as well as a critical assessment of the assumption that “younger is better” in educational language learning situations. The implications of studies on the effects of age on second language acquisition for language education are also looked into.
(Herschensohn, 2012)	The Cambridge Handbook of Second Language Acquisition	According to the findings, childhood is a more sensitive era for learning a post-maternal language, but it is not a critical period.
(Hu, 2016)	Theory and Practice in Language Studies	This article explores whether young learners learn a second language faster than older learners. The findings imply that foreign language instruction should begin as soon as feasible, preferably at a young age.
(Philp et al., 2017)	Annual Review of	This paper was created with the



	Applied Linguistics	goal of including a wide spectrum of studies on children's second language acquisition. Each of the papers in this issue is briefly summarized by the researchers.
(Stefánsson, 2013)	Second language acquisition: The effect of age and motivation (Doctoral dissertation)	This research investigates the role of age in learning a language other than one's mother tongue, as well as if there is sufficient current research to show that starting young makes a significant difference in gaining improved linguistic proficiency.
(Urazmetova, 2022)	Scientific Progress	The study features of young learners in the process of learning a second language. The study focuses on specific unique characteristics of young learners that teachers should consider when instructing them.

**Table 3. Research Results the Role of Age in Second Language Acquisition in Adult Learners**

Researcher and Year	Primary Source	Research Results
(Hopp & Schmid, 2013)	Applied Psycholinguistics	In a direct comparison of perceived foreign accent of 40 late L2 learners and 40 late first language (L1) attriters of German, this study analyzes restrictions on final accomplishment in L2 pronunciation.
(Kinsella & Singleton, 2014)	Applied Linguistics	In this study, it was found that native-likeness can still be attained far into old age, and in success stories like these, factors other than age are often significant.
(Suhaimi, 2016)	Tarbawi: Jurnal Ilmu Pendidikan	This study is looked at four major impacts of age on second language learning. From the research, it was found that the process of learning a second language grammar is not much impacted by age, but the process of learning pronunciation may be.
(Zhang, 2022)	2021 International Conference on Education, Language and Art (ICELA 2021)	The age of learning, according to this article, has a direct influence on phonetic learning in second language acquisition (SLA), but its impact on other components of SLA is unclear. As a result, the age issue has been the primary focus of this research.

### ***Second Language Acquisition in Young Learners***

For almost a century, educators have held the belief that languages must be studied in childhood in order to be learnt well (Shakouri & Saligheh, 2012). Anvarqizi (2022) claimed that age is one of the characteristics that might influence how learner approaches second language acquisition. The age at which children should begin learning a second language has piqued many people's interests and has practical implications for parents raising bilingual children and governments determining when to begin teaching a second language to children (Cook, 2012).

It is believed that the earlier second language is learned, the more learners benefit from the brain's plasticity (Czinger, 2012). Children are generally assumed to be better at languages than adults (Anggaira, 2015). Given that numerous studies have conclusively shown that adult learners may successfully pick up a second language, learning a second language at a young age has long-term advantages. Xu (2023) stated that younger learners typically have a greater chance of success in the long run.

In a hypothetical situation, Rahman et al. (2017) argued that an early start may provide some advantages in terms of acquiring native-like pronunciation; nevertheless, no positive association of age was identified in terms of other elements of acquisition. If the belief is correct, the primacy of English language policy planning in a second or foreign language setting recommends that early introduction of a second language access should be completely re-evaluated. As a result, English language education technique, curriculum, material, teacher beliefs, and practice will undergo significant transformations.

### ***Second Language Acquisition in Adult Learners***

According to Ozfidan & Burlbaw (2019), adults are assumed to have distinct goals in mind when learning a language. Their motivation is frequently instrumental, as seen by their readiness to study a language in order to obtain a job, enroll in a university, or improve their qualifications. Working, or practical, knowledge of a target language should be included in language training instruction in this case. Adult learners would be able to meet their requirements in this way, particularly in terms of academic reasons that need a comprehension of relevant information available on the Internet.

Palea & Boștină-Bratu (2015) stated that many academics disagree with the premise that “the younger the better”, calling the idea of a superior learner into doubt. When it comes to learning speed, there are no real benefits for young learners, but there are for adults. This is because adults learn at a faster rate only in the early stages of acquiring a second language.

In a critical review about age effect on SLA, it is also said that adult learners consistently outperform younger learners in most, if not all, elements of language, including foreign language settings, over short periods of time (Aoghala, 2021).

It can be said that older students may learn quicker and more efficiently since they have better memory and more capable of conceptual framework. When it comes to mastering a foreign language other than L1, memory is usually connected with neurology or neurolinguistics (Arifin, 2020). Adults have established values, ideas, and views, as well as the ability to connect new knowledge and information to previously acquired knowledge and experiences.

### *The Comparisons*

Adults are people who have years of experience and a plethora of knowledge, but their learning style and speed have most likely altered. They are better at overcoming the silence period and performing with structures they have never seen or acquired (Marzuki, 2018). On the other hand, children like learning new things and respond well to activities that have a clear significance (Urazmetova, 2022). They also have a strong ability to mimic the teachers' language and social habits. Children mimic the language of their classmates in order to garner attention from the instructor and their peers, as well as to coincide with their peers' conduct (Philp et al., 2017).

According to the accumulating evidence, older learners have an advantage over younger learners, but after years of L2 acquisition, the younger generally catch up and surpass the older (Sang, 2017). However, when it comes to second language learning, Abdukadyrova & Suyunova (2019) claimed that it is tough to compare adults and children. Aside from biological differences, the learning environments for adults and children are also diverse. In informal language learning contexts, children have greater opportunity for intense exposure to the language since they are not under pressure to speak smoothly and properly. On the other hand, older students have a higher percentage of success because they can put a variety of abilities or tactics connected to memory or problem solving into practice. Even though so, learners should be aware that there is an age effects in their L2 learning, and that it varies depending on the domain (Yang, 2019).

In a study about view of age effect on second language acquisition, Suhaimi (2016) drew a conclusion that adult learners get a head start in terms of learning speed, especially when it comes to grammar. They will ultimately be surpassed by children who have had sufficient exposure to the L2. In the same study, he also said that in informal learning situations, younger learners are capable of adopting a native-like accent and develop native

grammar skills. From the time they are born until they are four years old, children learn language in a fairly systematic and cross-linguistic manner (Herschensohn, 2012). Children are more likely than adults to acquire higher levels of accomplishment in both speech and grammar, regardless of whether they are native speakers.

### Discussion

Numerous studies have been conducted throughout the years to determine the relationships between age and second language acquisition. While other aspects like motivation and personality might contribute to achievement, the role of age cannot be ignored. Some believes that adults are better learners when it comes to second language acquisition, while the others beg to differ. The premise that age plays a factor in second language acquisition is that the younger someone starts learning the language, the better their chances in acquiring it.

The notion that “younger is better” is supported by the idea that young learners pick up languages more quickly than adults. Penfield (1959) stated that a child’s brain plasticity contributes to higher ability, particularly in language learning. This theory is then popularized by Lenneberg (1967), and later known as CPH or Critical Period Hypothesis. This theory has a significant influence on second language acquisition research and development. In Critical Period Hypothesis (CPH), it is stated that someone’s second language acquisition ability is affected by age, with the optimal period being before puberty.

Li (2015) claimed that despite the fact that humans may learn languages at any age, the Brain Plasticity Theory and Critical Period Hypothesis suggest that children who study a second language before puberty are more likely to have a native-like accent than older learners. In spite of that, the study conducted by Hopp & Schmid (2013) revealed that it is not enough to learn a language from birth to ensure nativelikeness in bilingual speech output.

Scientists have discovered that age is inversely related to final achievement. Theoretical and experimental data can only have an influence on it at the experimental stage (Zhang, 2022). The presence of the critical period in second language learning is not refuted in his study, but it is demonstrated that the critical period has a detrimental influence on language, intonation, and rhythm. Meanwhile, in a statistical critique and reanalysis by Vanhove (2013) it was revealed that the age of acquisition of a second language is not limited by a critical period. Although CPH is commonly accepted in one’s mother-tongue or first language acquisition (Granena, 2016), it is concluded that one of the empirical challenges in SLA is the Critical Period Hypothesis (Rezaie, 2015).

Some research findings reveal that the assumption of “the younger the better” has certain limitations. To begin with, the concept of “the younger the better” may be more appropriate to learners learning the L2 in more naturalistic situations than to learners learning the L2 in more formal settings, such as the second language classroom (Elise, 2022). Many elements influence a learner’s language learning. The age of learners acquiring a language is not a determining factor. In other words, linguistic capacity or language learning ability do not deteriorate with time. Learning a second or third language, in fact, keeps the mind of an older language student busy. This suggests that language acquisition is beneficial to people of all ages (Le & Thuy, 2022).

Zhao & Morgan (2004) claimed that learning a second language differs neurologically, cognitively, and psychologically in children, adolescents, and adults. While adult learners have matured cognitive abilities and self-discipline that enable them to apply a more efficiency in the acquisition of a greater volume of understandable input during the same exposure time period, children are typically seen to be innately better learners. However, in addition to their biological distinctions, adults and children also learn languages under different circumstances.

Even though they learn in identical environments, older and younger learners’ second language acquisition process may differ. As stated by Abdukadyarova & Suyunova (2019), in informal language learning settings where there is less pressure to speak smoothly and properly and where developmental errors are not condemned but are instead freely accepted, young learners have more opportunity for intensive exposure to the language. On the other hand, adult learners could experience a sense of inadequacy and embarrassment after discovering their lack of language proficiency, which could destroy their motivation and readiness to take advantage of opportunities to use the new language effectively.

The amount of input or exposure to the target language appears to be linked to the question of what is the ideal age for second language learning (Stefánsson, 2013). Scholars are still grappling with how age affects a language learner’s ability to communicate when exposure to the target language is insufficient. In terms of how age affects second language acquisition, it is claimed that children learn more effectively while adults pick things up more quickly (Xu, 2023). As a result, different teaching strategies should be used with students of various ages. Although age does have a factor in second language acquisition, it is critical to give learners sufficient exposure to the target language throughout their learning process.

## D. CONCLUSION

The study of the impacts of age on second language learning has piqued the interest of numerous scholars throughout the years. Some researchers feel that early exposure to a second language allows young learners to have more exposure to a wider range of L2s, which will help them improve their competence. That view supports the notion that “younger is better.” Several studies, however, suggest that the premise that age influences L2 acquisition is only partially valid. Although it is true that learners who begin learning a foreign language when they are younger are more likely to obtain a native-like accent, there are numerous people who have studied a second language after puberty and have achieved a native-like pronunciation. Because they are not under pressure to speak fluently and correctly, young learners have a wider chance for intensive language exposure. Older learners, on the other hand, have a better success rate because they can put a range of talents or strategies related to memory or problem solving into practice.

Despite this, learners should be aware that their L2 learning is affected by their age, and that this varies depending on the subject. It is undeniable that age plays a significant role in language acquisition; however, other factors such as motivation, attitude, confidence, inhibition, risk taking, identity, learning styles, economic situation, and social background, which create differences between genders and ages, should be included in future research and should not be overlooked (Al Ghabra, 2015). Newport (2018) also states that age effects are smaller and mitigated by other variables. To summarize, it is evident that age plays a substantial influence in language learning; nevertheless, other aspects should be considered as well. There are other factors that might influence one’s language acquisition process. Age is simply one of several elements that might influence a person’s second language acquisition.

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