

The Effects of Age Factor on Learning English Language: A Case Study of Sudanese Private and Public Secondary Schools in Khartoum State, Sudan

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ABSTRACT

The current paper aims at studying the age factor in Sudanese public schools and private schools where the starting age differs in both. Also, it aims at finding out whether the late or early starting of learning English language influences the learner's acquisition to language. Moreover, the study aims at showing the difference between learners of English language in private schools and learners in public schools. The tools used for data collection were questionnaire for EFL Sudanese teachers and a test for Sudanese secondary school students. The research was conducted with a total of 30 male students attending Sudanese public schools and private schools. By using the mixed-method research approaches, the findings revealed that most respondents agree that the early learners are better than late ones, that is to say that students of private schools who start learning English at an early age had better mastery of English than those of public-school students who start at a late age. Finally, the study recommended that investigating the effects of age factor on learning English language is a very important phenomenon and may apply in other countries such Egypt, Saudi Arabia etc. This study is the first of its kind to investigate the effects of age factor on learning English language, particularly, in the context of Arab countries.

1. Introduction

Language is essential for communication. It is acquired through the outer environment and cultivated by learning. This way is regarding the first language, but for the second language, there is an essential question about the most suitable age for learning the second language for perfect mastery in the future. It is commonly believed that children are faster than adults in learning foreign languages.

Supporting this idea, Eric Lennberg (1967/1995) mentioned in the critical period that he agrees about the innate ability and mentioned that it would successfully work if it was done during the critical period before puberty (i.e., around the age of 12 or 13 years). He believed that language acquisition might be more difficult after puberty because the brain loses the ability of adaptation.

Children can gain a high level of mastery over an L2, whereas adults cannot. Children acquiring an L2 in the L2 environment are more likely to sound like native speakers than adults are. Adults may appear to make more significant progress initially, but children nearly always surpass them (quoted in Al-Dali,1997).

There is a critical period through which the brain is flexible or can adapt when exposed to the language, that is why learning can occur naturally and effortlessly. The period lasts up to puberty; hence, adolescents and adults show traces of foreignness in producing the L2, and the language learning process becomes artificial for them. This idea means that for L2 learners to

succeed in learning another language this should be before puberty because the brain has the adaptation for L2; while after puberty the brain loses this adaptation, that is to say, L2 learning success is related to whether learning is in the period of pre-puberty or post-puberty (Oyama 1976, Seliger, Krashen, et al, 1975).

Despite the benefits of L2 learning at an early age, in some countries such as Sudan, their students still start L2 learning at a late age, which negatively affects their future learning. In this research, the researcher examined EFL learning in Sudanese public schools and private schools. In Sudanese schools, they start learning English at a late age, while in private schools, they begin at an early age. So, age being a non-linguistic factor is related to the success of L2 learning. This study will try to examine this age factor in public schools and private schools where the starting age differs in both.

In public schools, besides starting to learn English at a late age, they are surrounded by their native Arabic environment, whereas in the private schools, they start the English language at an early age, and the English environment surrounds them. This situation continued for 15 years for private schools, while six years for public schools.

1.2 The Focus of the study

The current study focuses on the effects of age factor on learning English language in Sudanese Private and Public Secondary Schools in Khartoum State /Sudan

1.3 Statement of the problem

In the past, the learners in Sudanese public schools started learning English at a late age, which is at the age of 11/13, which is seen too late compared to private schools where they start at the age of 4/5. This late starting affects the learners' acquisition, which is seen during their developing stages. They are not learning the English language successfully. Their performance is weak, which stands as an obstacle when they enter the university where they face this problem in different faculties, especially scientific faculties like medicine, surgery pharmacy, etc. and all faculties which require knowing the English language

1.4 Research Objectives

This study intends to achieve the following objectives:

- a) To investigate the effects of age factor on learning English language in Sudanese Private and Public Secondary Schools in Khartoum State /Sudan.
- b) To cast a new light on the importance of the effects of age factor on learning English language

1.5 Research Question

To meet the stated objectives, the following research questions were raised:

Is there a significant difference between Sudanese private school students who start learning English at the age of 11/12 compared with those of private school students who start learning English at the age of 4/5?

1.6 Hypothesis of the study

It is hypothesized that students of private schools who start learning English at an early age have a better mastery of English than those of public-school students who start at a late age.

1.7 Significance of the Study

- a) The current research may promote competitive teaching and learning as well as developing students' potential life and assist students to become cognized of the ways for more effective learning.
- b) The study may also help students to develop strategies and ways to become more motivated and autonomous learners.
- c) 3. The study is also important for test and text designers as well as for vocabulary acquisition researchers: for the former because they are better informed to create materials and tests suitable for different levels and educational needs, and for the latter, because empirical data from different groups of subjects can provide a baseline for comparison and help to identify patterns of terms acquisition and development
- d) This study is targeting teachers of English, students, syllabus designers, and decision-makers. The finding of this study will be of great use to the ministry of Education in their decision regarding the better starting age for learning the English language in public schools

2. Literature Review

2.1 The effect of age on learners' second language achievement

The majority of Sudanese secondary high school students fail to reach native-speaker levels of ability compared to private school students whom most of their students reach the native-like level of proficiency. It is essential to ask whether age effects are evident in such learners. Do private learners who begin learning as children generally reach higher levels of the second language than those of public schools who start as adolescents or adults? This question has been addressed in research that has compared the proficiency reached by second language learners who began as children with learners who began as adults.

Robertson (2002) explains a pilot scheme in England and Wales. She makes a comparison between two groups of students with five years of instruction. One group had begun a speech task. Oyama(1976) reports a powerful effect for age arrival but almost no effect for several years in the United States. She found that the youngest arrivals performed in the same range as native-speaker controls. Other studies have investigated the effect of age pronunciation. (For example, Asher and Garcia,1969;). Support the younger-is- better position.

2.2 Critical period hypothesis

In the field of linguistic, the critical period hypothesis remains a controversial topic when related to the process of language acquisition. The hypothesis explains that there is an ideal period during human life where they can acquire many languages, after which further language acquisition becomes much more complicated and effortful.

The critical period hypothesis states that this period the brain is capable of acquiring many languages but, if the learning didn't take place during this period the brain will not be able to be adapted to any language and the individual will never achieve a full command of the language, especially grammatical system.

Education is a very important service for the life of a human being. Sudan has a long educational history developed from the traditional form (Religious education) to a contemporary one. The educational ladder in Sudan was changed many times, from 4-4-4 to 6-3-3 in 1972, then again to 2-8-3 in 1992 to comprise two-year pre-school level, 8-years basic education level and three years' secondary school level. Secondary school level can be an academic, technical or vocational education in a bid to reform the educational system to meet the education need.

2.3. Teachers' Role in Sudan

The English language teacher is the primary generator of language and what he/she does in the class could help or hinder students. Teachers are fundamental resources in educational institutions everywhere in the world. They play a key role not only in education and students' life but also in the growth and well-being of the nation. In brief, teachers are nation builders because the strength of every profession in a country grows out of the knowledge and skills they instill in children. Yet, despite the vital role teacher's play in enlightening and inspiring the next generation of leaders, they have very poor working conditions, which do not help them to fulfill this mission well (Wolfenden, et al., 2013).

Cameron (2001) pointed out that "Teachers are dedicated professionals WHO have an enduring impact on students. Becoming an instructor can enable you to leverage your strengths and fervor as a frontrunner within the education field If you're trying to create a positive distinction within the lives of adolescents, you'll wish to contemplate this bounties profession. Each day you may exercise your creative thinking, patience and communication skills as you gift participating lessons. As a mentor and leader, students are impressed by your commitment to serving to them develop their distinctive abilities and intellect."

Verplaetse (1998) stated that the teacher can present some part of the lesson, such as when working with linguistic accuracy. At other times, he is the facilitator and communicator, but he does not always interact with the students, he often establishes situations that prompt communication between and among the students. The students interact with one another. They practice this in forms of pairs, small groups and the class as a whole. In addition, as communicating in the target language needs motivation, students should be motivated to learn English. Therefore, the teachers can achieve this goal by giving the students opportunities to express their ideas and share their experiences (Jafari, 2013).

In Sudan, it is clear that, secondary schools' teachers need real support and clear skilled development ways from all aspects to enable them to develop their teaching performance (United Nation, 2010).

Education in Sudan is free and compulsory for children from age 6 to 12 years. Primary education consists of eight years, followed by three years of secondary education. The former educational ladder 6+3+3, was changed in 1965. The primary language at all levels in Arabic. Schools are concentrated in an urban area, center. Many in the south and west have been damaged or destroyed by years of civil war. Sudan has many public and private schools. Nineteen universities and several

private ones. Instruction in some is Arabic, while in others, it is in English. The literacy rate is 70.2% of the total population, male 79.6%, female 60.8%.

When the University of Khartoum was opened in 1902 amidst military pomp by Horation Herbert Kitchener, formerly governor-general of Sudan, English was the medium of instruction and the official language of Sudan. By the end of British and Egyptian colonial rule in 1956, followed by Arabic's ascendancy, it saw the popularity of English. By late 1960, instruction in English was being phased out in schools. All teaching in Sudan is now in Arabic. There are no official statistics for the number of English speakers in the country, but it is safe to say that they are few and far between, especially among youth. On the streets of the capital, a conversation in English is usually held with a grandfather taught before the so-called Arabization. countryhttp://www.sudantribune.com/spip.php article 5826.

3. Methodology

3.1 Research Design

In this study, the researcher used mixed methods research approach which defines as “those that include at least one quantitative method (design to collect numbers) and one qualitative method (design to collect words), where neither type of method is inherently linked to any particular inquiry paradigm” (Creswell & Plano Clark, 2011, p.2). Based on this definition, this type of research design with specific assumptions that identify and guide the direction of study and choose the appropriate quantitative and qualitative for collecting and analyzing data. As Creswell (2014) opined, the researchers use mixed methods because of “its strength of drawing on both quantitative and qualitative research and minimizing the limitations of both approaches” (p.218). Also, it consists of four basic designs which are the convergent parallel design, an explanatory sequential design, the exploratory sequential design, the embedded design. For conducting this study, the researcher used the explanatory sequential design called “a qualitative follow up approach” (Morgan, 1998, p.100). It illustrated as “the researcher begins by collecting a quantitative phase and follow up on specific results with a second phase. The second, qualitative phase is implemented to explain the initial results in more depth, and it is due to this focus on explaining results that are reflected in the design name” (p.82). The quantitative phase in this study came in from Islamic teachers’ surveys while the classroom observations represented the qualitative phase to gain a greater understanding of the research problem.

3.2 Study variables

The independent variable included in this study was the effects of age factor on learning English language whereas the dependent variable included in the study was Sudanese secondary schools in private and public secondary schools in Khartoum State.

3.3 Instruments

For gathering qualitative data, the researchers use questionnaire to find out the perceptions of experienced teachers in the field of EFL teaching, 30 specialists in teaching EFL were required to answer the questionnaire related to the best suitable age for learning EFL. Items of the questionnaire varied from both learners’ proficiency in speaking, vocabulary, grammar, reading, and overall performance. It consists of 14 items, using the five Likert scale ranging from strongly agree (5) to strongly disagree (1). (b) Test for students: English language test was designed and administered to two groups of students from Public and private schools Questions aimed at testing students’ skills in reading, writing, grammar, and vocabulary.

3.4 Participants

The target population for this study was students from ALGadedda high school (30 students). Grammar international high school (30 students) and TEFL experts about (30 teachers) from both schools.

3.5 Data Collection

The general research approach was experimental investigated and examined one independent variable of age factor. SPSS was used to analyze the data collected by the questionnaire and the test. Quantitative data was gathered by survey questionnaires and analyzed using descriptive statistics.

4. Results and Discussion

To test the hypothesis of the study, which stated that students of private schools who start learning English at an early age have a better mastery of English than those of public school students who start at a late age, analysis of both tools' results was conducted SPSS. The results of the English language test are shown in table (1).

Table (1) t-values of the Public School and Private school students of the Language skills test as a whole and in each sub-skill.

Language skills	Mean (Pub.)	Mean (Priv.)	Std. Deviation (Pub.)	Std. Deviation (Priv.)	t. Values	Significant
Grammar	20.93	35.73	4.488	1.760	16.784	0.00**
Vocabulary	7.3103	9.4667	0.73030	4.488	8.380	0.00
Reading	25.55	29.77	3.225	0.568	38.994	0.00
Writing	13.28	18.13	2.852	1.137	29.251	0.00
Total	67.07	93.10	8.771	2.869	20.698	0.00

It is revealed from the t-value in the above table that there is a statistically significant difference at 0.01 between the mean scores of the private school students and those of public ones in the overall skills and in each one favoring the private school students. The total mean score of a private school in overall skills is (93.10), while one of the public school is (67.07). So, this difference supports the validity of the research hypothesis.

Results of the questionnaire is shown in table (2)

Statement=14	Strongly Agree		Agree		Uncertain		Disagree		Strongly Disagree		M	Std
	N	%	N	%	N	%	N	%	N	%		
1. The most suitable age to start learning EFL is the age of 5-6	12	40	9	30	0	0	5	16.7	4	13.3	3.67	1.49
2. Performance of students who begin learning EFL at an earlier age 5-6 is better than those who start later 12-13	18	60	6	20	1	3.3	2	6.7	3	10	4.13	1.35
3. Younger students, the better they will learn EFL	18	60	8	26.7	0	0	4	13.3	0	0	4.33	1.02
4. Young learners speak English more fluently than adults	16	53.3	9	30	0	0	3	10	2	6.7	4.13	1.25
5. Young students are much better than adults in acquiring vocabulary	12	40	10	33.3	1	3.3	5	16.7	2	6.7	3.83	1.31
6. young students learn grammar easily than adults who need to know structure & rules of grammar	14	46.7	10	33.3	1	3.3	4	13.3	1	3.3	4.07	1.17
7. Performance of students who start learning EFL at the age of 12-13 and have studied the language for four years is weak	10	33.3	12	40	4	13.3	2	6.7	2	6.7	3.87	1.16
8. Adult learners are better than younger ones in reading skills	8	26.7	10	33.3	8	26.7	2	6.7	2	6.7	3.67	1.15
9. It is better for learners to start L1 together with L2	14	46.7	6	20	2	6.7	6	20	2	6.7	3.80	1.40
10. Students who start learning English at the age of 12-13 are better in grammar rules than younger ones 5-6	15	50	7	23.3	2	6.7	3	10	3	10	3.93	1.38

11.learning EFL in kindergarten help younger students to acquire the language fluently	14	46.7	10	33.3	1	3.3	3	10	2	6.7	4.03	1.24
12.The best age to learn EFL is 12-13	3	10	2	6.7	5	16.7	10	33	10	33	2.27	1.28
13.Students in private schools communicate better than those in public schools	19	63.3	10	33.3	0	0	1	3.3	0	0	4.57	0.67
14. The four skills of language develops easily with learners who start at age 5-6 better than those who start at late age 12-13	21	70	9	30	0	0	0	0	0	0	4.70	0.466

Results obtained from data analysis of the questionnaire, as shown in table (2), revealed that most respondents agree that the early learners are better than late ones as appeared from most items responses. For example, in the first item, 70 % agree that the best suitable age to start learning EFL is the age of 5-6, whether 30% do not agree. In item no. 12, 66% disagree with the idea that the best age to learn EFL is 12/13, 16.7 % agree, and 16.7 % are not sure. As for language skills such as speaking, 83.3% agree that young learners speak English more fluently than adults, while 16.7 % disagree with it. A full agreement is found in the four language skills, too, as 100 % agree that the four language skills develop easily with learners who start at age 5-6 better than those who start at the late age of 12-13. Regarding vocabulary acquisition, it is found that 73.3 agree with the idea that young students are much better than adults in acquiring vocabulary, whereas 23.4 % disagree, and 3.33% are not sure. Those results prove the validity of the research hypothesis. While in structure proficiency, it is found that 73.3% agree that students who start learning English at the age of 12-13 are better in grammar rules than younger ones 5-6, and that opinion supports various studies findings, especially in structure mastery of late beginners.

It is revealed from the study findings that the hypothesis is proved as students of private schools who start learning English at an early age had better mastery of English than those of public school students who start at a late age. The findings of this research are in concordance with other related ones, especially at the point of the earlier, the better in learning English as was proved in these studies (Al Dali 1997; Shehadeh & Dwaik, 2010, & Gawai, 2012). They all echoed the same idea, which emphasized that starting learning English at an early age had better effects on learners' mastery and skills than those who start late. Hu (2016) also agreed with their conclusions and suggested providing foreign languages at an early age when he mentioned that the young learners would learn a foreign language better than older learners in the ultimate attainment, though older learner is regarded as a fast and an efficient language learner. Immersing young learners into foreign language learning earlier will help them hold a favourable attitude on language learning in the long run. Therefore, we should teach learners' foreign language as early as possible, especially at an early age. When they first enter the school, foreign language courses should be introduced for them in the class. It would help them form foreign language beliefs like their mother tongue. Because of their personality, they will show their interest in learning it. They can memorize words quickly because of their brain and can be easy to achieve a native accent. It is widely believed that young learners show their superior learning quality to acquire a second language than older learners based on CPH.

The findings of this study supported the two viewpoints of the CPH, which highlighted the importance of the puberty period and how young learners become native-like speakers in pronunciation, phonology, and intonation. After puberty, adults become better learners in grammar and syntax. Gawi (2012) outlined the two opposing viewpoints concerning the role of the "critical period" in foreign language learning. The first viewpoint supports the idea that children who have not reached puberty and have more flexibility of the brain, are "better" language learners and can learn an FL better than adults. The second viewpoint claims that adults who reach the age of puberty are more mentally developed and can profit from certain grammatical explanations and deductive thinking that obviously would be pointless for a child. Hence, they are ready to think about and comprehend the many complexities of syntax. Another emphasis to the previous point which is related to the high proficiency and quick acquisition of right pronunciation and intonation for younger learners was discussed by Johnstone (2002) as he stated that they are likely to find it easier to acquire a good command of the sound system of the language, not only the pronunciation of individual sounds but also patterns of intonation. Uysal and Yavuz (2015) agreed with the previous discussion as they pinpointed that studies show that early language acquisition is necessary to reach native-like proficiency, especially pronunciation. While there is a consensus on the presence of a critical period, there is no single age, but acquiring a language decreases over time.

5. Conclusions

Finally, this study tried to find out the effect of age factor on English language learning Sudanese students. Collecting the data needed for this study was done through a questionnaire and a test. The summary obtained from the test and the questionnaire are revealed in the following statements;

- a) Most respondents agree that the early learners are better than late ones. 70% agree that the best suitable age to start leaning EFL is the age of 5/6, while 30% disagree with.
- b) As for language skills such as speaking, it was found that 83.3% agree that young learners speak English more fluently than adults while 16.7% disagree with.
- c) All agree that the four language skills develop easily with learners who start at the age 5/6 than those who start at late age 12/13.
- d) It is found that 73.3% agree with the idea that young students are much better than adults in acquiring vocabulary words. While 23.4% disagree with and 3.33% are not sure.
- e) In structure proficiency, it was found that 73.3% agree that students who start learning English at the age of 12/13 are better in grammar rules than young ones age 5/6 .

The findings of this study support the two view points of the CPH, which highlighted the importance of the puberty period and how young learners become native- like speakers because of the flexibility of their brain which also allows them to learn 2 or more languages at the same time.

6. Pedagogical Implications

This study has provided a meaningful recommendation for future research which includes the following:

Throughout the study, the following recommendations are raised:-

- a) Ministry of education in Sudan should make contribution to strengthen the capacity of learners to learn English as a foreign language from early stages in all public schools.
- b) 2- English language teachers should work hard to increase awareness of the importance of teaching English language from early age in public schools.
- c) 3- Ministry of Education in Sudan should work hard to remove obstacles which public learners face and develop their system of education.

7. Recommendations for further research

A further research should concentrate on the barriers which hinders the teaching of English language at early stages in public schools in Sudan.

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