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“Age Differences In English Language Acquisition”

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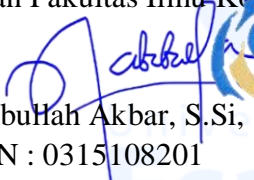
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DAFTAR ISI

SURAT TUGAS LPPM.....	2
SURAT TUGAS DEKAN	3
LEMBAR PENGESAHAN.....	6
<i>Abstract.....</i>	<i>8</i>
Introduction	9
Discussions.....	11
Age and Second language Acquisition	11
Age and Rate of Acquisition	12
Educational policy	13
Learning strategies.....	14
Contextual factors	14
Age and L1 transfer	14
Social factors and L2 achievement	15
L2 acquisition is complex.....	15
Five Hypotheses About Second Language Acquisition	16
The Acquisition-Learning Distinction.....	16
The Natural Order Hypothesis.....	17
The Monitor Hypothesis.....	17
The Input Hypothesis.....	17
The Affective Filter Hypothesis.....	17
Conclusion	18
References.....	19

AGE DIFFERENCES IN ENGLISH LANGUAGE ACQUISITION

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Abstract

Despite its certain role as a lingua franca, second language, and the most studied language learnt from the Elementary until Higher Education world wide, still in Indonesia context, English is seen as foreign language since the result of the Youth Pledge had formulated that the official language to be used is Bahasa Indonesia. It is paramount to see English as a foreign language in Indonesia context but there still have been one important thing needs to be taken into account like age difference in second language acquisition theory. It leads to the different point of view proposing that young learner is better than adult learner and vice versa. The real consequence of this two different standpoints is, in the 2013 National Curriculum, the Ministry of Education had issued a statute emphasizing that English is no longer as a mandatory subject to be taught to the Elementary students. However, this regulation is more likely to be changed as the new minister of education planned to re-adjust English as a compulsory subject for Elementary school children. This paper tries to delibertaly discuss about the age difference in second language acquisition and provide reflection on how young and adult learner acquire English as a foreign language. It is to scrutinize both the theory and practice of teaching English to the young and adult learner. Besides, it is to disclose who is better in acquiring a foreign language among them, and more particularly, this paper tries to provide scientific reasons to be used as consideration for the school leader and stakeholder to take standpoint whether it is worth trying to teach English to the young learner.

Key words: *age difference, second language acquisition, young and adult learner*

Abstrak

Meskipun memiliki status sebagai Bahasa Pemersatu/Lingua Franca, Bahasa kedua, dan sebagai Bahasa yang paling banyak dipelajari di seluruh dunia mulai dari tingkat Sekolah Dasar sampai pada Perguruan Tinggi, namun pada konteks di Indonesia, Bahasa Inggris dipandang sebagai Bahasa Asing karena hasil dari Sumpah Pemuda telah menyepakati bahwa Bahasa Resmi yang digunakan adalah Bahasa Indonesia. Pada konteks di Indonesia, sangat penting sekali untuk menjadikan Bahasa Inggris dengan status sebagai Bahasa asing saja namun ada hal penting lainnya yang juga perlu dipertimbangkan seperti perbedaan usia dalam teori pemerolehan Bahasa. Hal ini menghadirkan perbedaan pendapat dari ahli yang menyatakan bahwa pelajar Bahasa usia muda lebih baik dalam memperoleh Bahasa dibandingkan pelajar usia dewasa dan sebaliknya. Masalah yang nyata ditimbulkan dari perbedaan pandangan ini

adalah, di dalam Kurikulum Nasional 2013, Kementerian Pendidikan mengeluarkan peraturan yang menekankan bahwa Bahasa Inggris dipandang tidak wajib untuk diajarkan pada anak-anak Sekolah Dasar. Akan tetapi, peraturan tersebut sepertinya akan dirubah karena Menteri Pendidikan yang baru merencanakan akan Kembali menghidupkan Bahasa Inggris sebagai mata pelajaran wajib bagi para siswa Sekolah Dasar. Artikel ini mencoba mendiskusikan secara hati-hati tentang perbedaan usia dalam pemerolehan bahasa kedua dan memberikan refleksi tentang bagaimana pelajar Bahasa usia muda dan dewasa memperoleh bahasa Inggris sebagai bahasa asing. Artikel ini mencoba menggali baik secara teori dan praktik pengajaran Bahasa Inggris kepada pelajar muda dan dewasa. Selain itu, untuk mengungkapkan diantara mereka siapa yang lebih baik dalam memperoleh bahasa asing, dan lebih khusus lagi, artikel ini mencoba untuk memberikan alasan ilmiah untuk digunakan sebagai pertimbangan bagi pemimpin sekolah dan pemangku kepentingan untuk mengambil sudut pandang perihal layak atau tidak mengajarkan bahasa Inggris kepada pelajar Bahasa usia muda.

Kata Kunci: perbedaan usia, pemerolehan Bahasa kedua, pelajar muda dan pelajar dewasa

Introduction

learning a foreign language is paramount and undoubtedly has many beneficial for the students but taking this for granted to be taught in Indonesia context without considering age differences related factor seems to be theoretically debatable. In Indonesia context, English is primarily seen as a foreign language albeit it had become a subject need learning from the elementary until higher education level.

Experts agreed that individual learners learn differently depending on some factors like learning opportunities, the motivation to learn, individual differences and learning styles in second language acquisition.

A common assumption is that children are better language learners than adults and that, therefore, learners will be more successful if they start learning a second language when they are young. and the common idea is that younger children learn second language easily and quickly in comparison to older children (Ellis, 2009)

It is commonly believed that children are better language learners than adults in the sense that young children typically can gain mastery of a second language, whereas adults cannot. This is reflected in what is known as the Critical Period Hypothesis (CPH) (Selinker, 2008)

The relationship between age and success in SLA, though complex in nature, is linked to the Critical Period Hypothesis (CPH). CPH, also known as the sensitive

period, is defined as the period during which a child can acquire language easily, rapidly, perfectly, and without instruction. (Ellis, 2015)

However, while there is some truth in this assumption, the research evidence shows that the effects of age on second language acquisition are complex. (Ellis, 2015) In the general sense, it is believed that younger learner have more advantages than the older in acquiring the language. It is, however, remain a big question since there have been different perspectives on age related factors in acquiring second or foreign language and one of the prominent theories regarding this issue is language input.

Language input is another factor linked to age. The learner improves when he or she receives second language input at a level of comprehensible input ($i+1$). This comprehensible input may change with age where older learners get an advantage over younger ones. (Krashen, 1982)

Some learners start learning a second language in early childhood while many others have to wait till, they go to school (often secondary school). The study of the influence that learners' starting age has on L2 acquisition is motivated by both theoretical and practical considerations. It is a source of empirical evidence about the nature of human beings' language learning capability and how this may change as they grow older.

It also provides educational policy makers with information that they can use to decide when to introduce the teaching of a foreign language into the school system and also what instructional approach might be best suited to learners of different ages. (Ellis, 2015) and learning strategy is absolutely necessary to bridge the needs of students with learning objectives. (Alfian, 2017)

Studies in second language acquisition have made language teachers and curriculum designers aware that language learning consists of more than rule memorization. More important, perhaps, it involves learning to express communicative needs. The details of this new conceptualization of language learning have resulted in methodologies that emphasize communication. In other words, pedagogical decision-making must reflect what is known about. (Selinker, 2008)

Besides, to reach a better result of English language teaching, it is surely needed good approach, method and technique that can make a good synergy among the components of education such as; policy makers, head masters, teachers, students.

(Alfian, 2019) and age differences in English language acquisition is worth discussing and need to be considered by the decision making as its implementation could give both positive and negative effect to the language learner.

Discussions

Trying to reflect to English teaching in Indonesia context, discussion on this paper will primarily be related to a literature review since it can be used for making claims about what we know and do not know about a phenomenon and also about what new research we need to undertake to address questions that are unanswered (Zawacki, 2020) It is therefore, the discussion in this paper is taken from literature review and it is hoped to be generally linked to the English teaching phenomena occurs in Indonesia.

Age and Second language Acquisition

Some researchers have distinguished prepuberty learners, adolescents, and adults (i.e. post- puberty learners). However, this constitutes a somewhat crude way of characterizing ‘age’; there is a big difference, for example, between a four-year-old and a ten-year-old child and perhaps an even bigger one between a 17-year-old and a 50-year-old adult learner. (Ellis, 2015)

In Indonesia Context, English has intentionally been taught for the elementary students started from the first grade up to sixth grade to later be continued until University. From a theoretical perspective, the key question is why young learners are capable of higher levels of attainment than older learners (after controlling for the number of years of exposure to the second language). One possibility is that younger learners are better equipped to engage in implicit learning and older learners rely more on explicit learning.

Implicit learning is a slow process that requires massive exposure to the second language so no immediate advantage is apparent for younger learners. In fact, explicit learning may lead to more immediate success. However, over time, implicit learning wins out because it is more likely to enable learners to develop high levels of L2 proficiency. (Ellis, 2015) besides, implicit language learning takes place without either intentionality or awareness. (Ellis, 2009) Explicit language learning is necessarily a conscious process and is generally intentional as well. It is conscious learning where

the individual makes and tests hypotheses in a search for structure. It is a conscious, deliberative process of concept formation and concept linking. (Ellis, 2009)

It is no wonder that in Indonesia English subject is started to be taught for the young learner in order to prepare Elementary students to English subject as implicit learning and it is hoped that they are able to master English well. Regarding implicit and explicit learning, it is more likely to be aligned to what topic need to be taught since the key of implicit learning is about massive exposure to the target language. Moreover, the activity needs also to be well planned by which students are given huge opportunity to use the second language for their daily basis. Teacher also needs to design classroom management for giving the students to many different learning situations in which language learning activity is intentionally created as lively as possible.

The phenomenon of teaching English to young students in Indonesia has not fully considered the difference between implicit and explicit learning. This causes some schools to teach English with a variety of materials and does not emphasize that if English is to be taught to elementary school children, then what must be made a basic consideration is that students must be conditioned that they are learning the language and not learning a subject.

Age and Rate of Acquisition

In general, older learners learn more rapidly than child learners at first except possibly in pronunciation. Older learners only have an initial advantage but, over time, child learners catch up and surpass them. (Ellis, 2015)

Overall, then, older learners have an initial advantage over younger learners, especially in grammar and vocabulary. This can be explained by the more advanced abilities that come with the formal operations stage of cognitive development; older learners are better equipped to make use of conscious learning strategies. Children, however, have an advantage in implicit learning and over time this enables them to catch up and overtake older learners. (Ellis, 2015)

Moreover, it may be premature to dismiss the possibility that age affects the process of acquisition. Child learners are likely to rely on implicit learning while older learners are more likely to make use of explicit learning. It is reasonable to suppose that

the more analytical approach of older learners will have some impact on the route of acquisition. (Ellis, 2015)

Regarding this issue, although in general, young language learners are superior to adult learner, in terms of grammar and vocabulary abilities, adult learners are superior. This forces teachers to ensure that the material is age-appropriate. In Indonesia, there are still many schools that teach English to young learner with teaching vocabulary and grammar as major focus that should be more optimal if these materials are taught to adult learner. It is in line as proposed by Ellis that whereas short-term phonological memory may be of special importance for young learners, language analytical ability appears to be more important for older learners. (Ellis, 2015)

Educational policy

In many countries, language instruction traditionally began in secondary school (i.e. around the onset of puberty), but increasingly countries are opting to start at the elementary-school level. This has been motivated by the belief that younger learners are better equipped to learn a second language than older learners.

Educational policy in Indonesia has adopted the notion that the younger learners are in a better stage in learning second language. However, this is not quite correct as older learners develop more rapidly than younger ones and the advantage that child learners hold in terms of ultimate attainment only emerges after massive amounts of exposure to the second language.

Provision for language instruction in most school systems is insufficient to enable the potential advantage that young starters hold to manifest itself. In other words, it is unlikely that starting foreign language instruction early will confer any real benefit. (Ellis, 2015)

The research on age and L2 acquisition suggests that policy makers would do well to consider carefully before introducing L2 instruction at the elementary-school level to avoid false expectations. At best, it might assist the development of a more nativelike pronunciation, but there is no clear evidence that it holds any advantage for other aspects of L2 acquisition. (Ellis, 2015) One of the most obvious ways of encouraging learner participation in the classroom is through small group work. A number of studies have reported that students working in small groups produce a greater

quantity of language and also better quality language than students in a teacher-fronted, lockstep classroom setting.(Ellis, 2012)

The analysis suggests that the child operated with structures associated with particular verbs rather than classes of verbs, that the structures were independent of each other and that recency in the child's production also played a role. (Wood, 2010)

Learning strategies

Oxford dictionary defined learning strategies as behaviors or actions which learners use to make language learning more successful, self-directed and enjoyable. There are, however considerable problems in deciding exactly what constitutes a 'learning strategy'. Researchers differ in whether they should be restricted to strategies directed at attempts to learn or should also include communication strategies (i.e. strategies such as 'requesting clarification' used to resolve a communication problem). They also differ in whether they see them as involving conscious application on the part of the learner or as performed automatically without consciousness. One possibility—compatible with Skill-learning. (Ellis, 2015)

Contextual factors

The likelihood of transfer occurring also depends on the context of learning. This influences the input the learner is exposed to and, crucially, the extent to which transfer is manifest in L2 implicit or explicit knowledge. A distinction can be made between the macro-contexts of learning (for example, classroom vs naturalistic) and the micro-contexts (for example, the learner's interlocutor or the specific task used to elicit samples of language use)

Age and L1 transfer

Learners who start learning an L2 at a young age generally achieve a more native-like accent than those who start later. Some child learners especially those who start before the age of three become totally native-like in their pronunciation of the L2. This can be accounted for in part, at least by the fact that younger learners rely less on their first language and exhibit less transfer than older learners.

Social factors and L2 achievement

The social context in which learners live and work has an effect on how successful they are in learning an L2. This is especially true of learners in a second language context—i.e. a context where the majority or official language is the target language as in the case of L2 learners of English who are living in the United States or United Kingdom. However, it is also true of learners in a foreign language context (i.e. a context where the target language is not the official or majority language as, for example, with Chinese learners of English in China). In both cases, social factors determine the opportunities that learners have to engage with the L2 and their motivation to do so.

L2 acquisition is complex

All theories acknowledge the complexity of L2 acquisition. It is complex because a multitude of factors influence how an L2 develops: individual difference factors, such as language aptitude and motivation; the learner's L1; the nature of the input that learners are exposed to; the kinds of interactions they participate in; the social context in which learning takes place; and whether or not form-focused instruction is available. These factors interact in different ways with different learners, influencing the rate at which learning takes place, the ultimate level of achievement, and also the process of acquisition itself. The sheer complexity of the factors involved and of the interactions among them is the main reason why no general theory of L2 acquisition has been forthcoming.

Learning a first language is an amazing accomplishment. It is a learning task perhaps like no other. At the onset of the language-learning odyssey, a child has much to determine about the language that she or he hears. At the end of the journey, every child who is not cognitively impaired has an intact linguistic system that allows him or her to interact with others and to express his or her needs. (Selinker, 2008)

In foreign language instruction, very often the only language that learners are exposed to is the one in the classroom. There are three sources of input: (a) teacher, (b) materials, and (c) other learners. (Selinker, 2008)

One of the most widely recognized facts about second language learning is that some individuals are more successful in learning a second language than other individuals. Some of the factors that may be responsible for these differences, focusing

in particular on nonlanguage factors, such as age, aptitude, motivation, attitude, and socio-psychological influences. In addition to some learners being more successful language learners, there is also the well-known phenomenon of fossilization. (Selinker, 2008) It has always been assumed that, in a second language learning situation, learners rely extensively on their native language. (Selinker, 2008)

Five Hypotheses About Second Language Acquisition

The Acquisition-Learning Distinction

It states that adults have two distinct and independent ways of developing competence in a second language. The first way is language acquisition, a process similar, if not identical, to the way children develop ability in their first language. Language acquisition is a subconscious process; language acquirers are not usually aware of the fact that they are acquiring language, but are only aware of the fact that they are using the language for communication. The result of language acquisition, acquired competence, is also subconscious. (Krashen, 1982)

The second way to develop competence in a second language is by language learning. We will use the term "learning" henceforth to refer to conscious knowledge of a second language, knowing the rules, being aware of them, and being able to talk about them. In non-technical terms, learning is "knowing about" a language, known to most people as "grammar", or "rules". Some synonyms include formal knowledge of a language, or explicit learning. (Krashen, 1982)

Some second language theorists have assumed that children acquire, while adults can only learn. The acquisition-learning hypothesis claims, however, that adults also acquire, that the ability to "pick-up" languages does not disappear at puberty. This does not mean that adults will always be able to achieve native-like levels in a second language. It does mean that adults can access the same natural "language acquisition device" that children use. As we shall see later, acquisition is a very powerful process in the adult. (Krashen, 1982)

The Natural Order Hypothesis

The order of acquisition for second language is not the same as the order of acquisition for first language, but there are some similarities. (Krashen, 1982)

The Monitor Hypothesis

The Monitor hypothesis posits that acquisition and learning are used in very specific ways. Normally, acquisition "initiates" our utterances in a second language and is responsible for our fluency. Learning has only one function, and that is as a Monitor, or editor. Learning comes into play only to make changes in the form of our utterance, after it has been "produced" by the acquired system. This can happen before we speak or write, or after (self-correction). (Krashen, 1982)

The Input Hypothesis

The important question is: How do we acquire language? If the Monitor hypothesis is correct, that acquisition is central and learning more peripheral, then the goal of our pedagogy should be to encourage acquisition. The question of how we acquire then becomes crucial. (Krashen, 1982)

We acquire, in other words, only when we understand language that contains structure that is "a little beyond" where we are now. How is this possible? How can we understand language that contains structures that we have not yet acquired? The answer to this apparent paradox is that we use more than our linguistic competence to help us understand. We also use context, our knowledge of the world, our extra-linguistic information to help us understand language directed at us. (Krashen, 1982)

Our assumption has been that we first learn structures, then practice using them in communication, and this is how fluency develops. The input hypothesis says the opposite. It says we acquire by "going for meaning" first, and as a result, we acquire structure. (Krashen, 1982)

The Affective Filter Hypothesis

The Affective Filter hypothesis states how affective factors relate to the second language acquisition process. (Krashen, 1982) Research over the last decade has confirmed that a variety of affective variables relate to success in second language acquisition. Most of those studied can be placed into one of these three categories:

- (1) Motivation. Performers with high motivation generally do better in second language acquisition (usually, but not always, "integrative")
- (2) Self-confidence. Performers with self-confidence and a good self-image tend to do better in second language acquisition.
- (3) Anxiety. Low anxiety appears to be conducive to second language acquisition, whether measured as personal or classroom anxiety. (Krashen, 1982)

Conclusion

To sum it all up, age is one of the most affecting factors that determine the way an individual learns second language. The different age in the second language is basically cannot be seen in the general sense since there are some different finding of a result regarding with the different age. One of the researches can show that the younger is better in acquiring the second language, still in the other side the other research found that the older is better in acquiring the second language. The young learners are considered fluent in communication of the second language and achieve native like accent. Learners after the age of puberty do not acquire native like accent of a second language but have complex learning pattern. Research suggests that children and adults L2 learners pass through different developmental states in second language learning. Learning depends on the cognitive maturity and neurological factors.

Thus, it can not be taken into general conclusion that the better in acquiring a second language is the younger or vice versa. We could only say that the different age is really affecting second language acquisition in term of the skill or component in language itself. We could only say that the younger is better than the older in the several skills like phonological skills while the older is better in syntax. The young learner can acquire the language easily because they were in the period in which they are good in imitating the language. In addition, the young learners tend to acquire the language faster than the older because they do not have enough capacity both to analyze and synthesize the language to be the complex one. Hence, they acquire the language easily, rapidly, and perfectly.

However, the writer agrees that there must be different stage of literacy than the older who acquires the language. So in brief he would say that the younger is better and so is the older in acquiring the second language, since it is laid on the ways and the

exposure opportunities they have in acquire the target language. Strictly discussed, dealing with the different age in acquiring the second language, it also needs to consider some variables that can really affect, like motivation, anxiety, self confidence, attitude, learning styles and even it has been focused on health, classroom practices and learning styles.

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