



ADULTS AS LIFELONG LANGUAGE LEARNERS

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Abstract

Lifelong language learning has been emphasized for adults as one of the most significant competences for the 21st century is being multilingual. This research is grounded in clarifying whether the age factor is an obstacle for adult learners in terms of learning foreign languages, since many adult learners have prejudice about not being able to succeed in learning another language because of their ages. In this regard, this paper summarizes the literature based on importance of lifelong learning, the factor of age, adult learners and second language learning for adults.

Keywords: Lifelong language learning; adult learners; age; andragogy.

INTRODUCTION

Learning a foreign or second language is utterly crucial in almost every part of the world for different needs and purposes, since today's society with much more global movement of people and more accessible worldwide communication, L2 is seen as a survival necessity rather than a school subject. Therefore, it is considerably important for encouraging people to learn other languages regardless their age, gender, religion, background, social situation and previous educational experience and achievement. Everyone in the world has equal rights for learning foreign languages as a lifelong activity since multilingualism becomes one of the topical issues all around the world. In this regard, lifelong language learning is a significant requirement rather than a possibility or a luxury to be considered.

LITERATURE REVIEW

Definition and Importance of 'Lifelong Learning'

Chinese proverb put emphasis on the importance of lifelong learning by saying: "Give a man a fish, and you feed him for a day. Teach a man to fish, and you can feed him for a lifetime." Consequently, this issue based on lifelong learning is not new to be considered. As Rogoff and Lave (1984) state that learning is required to be the part of living, a natural consequence of being alive and in touch with the world, and not a process separate from the rest of life.

Lifelong learning occurs as a natural human process from birth to death. There are many definitions have been proposed regarding to lifelong learning. Lifelong learning is possible to be defined as learning that is pursued throughout life: learning that is flexible, diverse and available at different times and in different places. This definition is concerned with Delors' (1996) four 'pillars' of future education; learning to know (mastering learning tools rather than acquisition of structured knowledge), learning to do (equipping people for the types of study required now and in the future including innovation and adaptation of learning to future work environments), learning to live together and with others (peacefully resolving conflict, understanding other people and their cultures, fostering community capability, individual competence and capacity, economic resilience, and social inclusion), and learning to be (means contributing learner's complete development in terms of mind and body, intelligence, sensitivity, aesthetic appreciation and spirituality).



In the UK the National Institute of Adult Community Education (NIACE) defines it as “practicing, studying or reading about something. It can also mean being taught, instructed or coached. This is so you can develop skills, knowledge, abilities or understanding.” Lifelong learning is defined by The European Lifelong Learning Initiative as “...a continuously supportive process which stimulates and empowers individuals to acquire all the knowledge, values, skills and understanding they will require throughout their lifetimes and to apply them with confidence, creativity and enjoyment, in all roles circumstances, and environments” (Watson, 2003). Moreover, according to Schuller and Watson (2009), lifelong learning is related with “people of all ages learning in a variety of contexts- in educational institutions, at work, at home and through leisure activities”. Thus, learning can no longer be distinguished into a place and time to acquire knowledge at school and a place and time to apply knowledge at workplace.

As a conclusion, lifelong learning is a survival necessity that starts from birth to death regardless their age, gender, religion, background, social situation and previous educational experience and achievement. Moreover, it is crucial to enable individuals overcome the challenges as we are living in extraordinarily rapid pace of social, technological, cultural, economic, educational changes of competitive world. Therefore, this issue causes requirement of lifelong learning for the betterment of both individuals and the world.

Benefits of ‘Lifelong learning’

Lifelong learning is of key significance for individuals of all ages and provides crucial benefits for them, society and the world as well. Since having rapidly progress in globalization, growth of scientific and technological progress in the more modernized world has necessitated lifelong learning.

According to Nancy Merz Nordstrom, M.Ed.,(2008), lifelong learning provides benefits for fully developing natural abilities, being open-minded, creating curiosity towards learning new information, increasing people’s wisdom, making the world a better place with literate people, being able to adapt to changes, finding meaning in lives as it raises people’s awareness, being active contributors to society, making new friends and establishing valuable relationships, and enriching life self-fulfillment.

The European PROGRESS Community Action Programme has asserted that lifelong learning enables people to be better informed and more active citizens, contributes to their personal well-being and satisfied, supports their creativity and innovation. Moreover, studies based on lifelong learning have pointed out that participation in lifelong learning has a positive effect on life satisfaction (Feinstein et al., 2008a), optimism and subjective well-being (Moody, 2004; Hammond and Feinstein, 2006; Jenkins, 2009). Tucket and McAuley (2005) pointed out that lifelong learning may also assist individuals to develop the skills and knowledge to make informed choices about their lives (cited in Hyde M & Phillipson C., 2014:7).

Adult Education and Lifelong Learning

Factors that influence lifelong language learning: Cross (1981) has identified three main types of factors that provide barriers towards lifelong learning faced by adults: attitudinal, situational and institutional. Attitudinal barriers reflect negative perceptions related with their lack of ability, motivation and interest in gaining new knowledge. Situational barriers concern with personal factors beyond the control of the learner like poor health, caring responsibilities and shortage of time and money. The other barrier is institutional which includes organizational practices. These practices may discourage people from participation in learning. However, it is important to note that although this is a useful classification, adult learners might face with multiple barriers at different points like age; therefore, it is crucial to know that if ‘age’ affect adult learners’ language learning abilities or not. Although this characteristic is easier to define and measure than other characteristics of individuals like personality, aptitude or motivation, the correlation between a learner’s age and his/her success in second language learning is so debatable.



Is age a real obstacle for adult learners for learning L2?: Age has often been considered a major factor in second or foreign language learning, and various hypotheses have been proposed based on the correlation of age of acquisition and degree of fundamental mastery of the second language. Therefore, a number of studies have been carried out to determine the ideal age for learning a second language. Thus, if there is an optimum age range for learning another language, L2 learning cannot be lifelong learning process.

Various studies have been carried out in order to investigate the issue of age regarding language learning. Critical Period Hypothesis has been one of the most prominent theories ever since the beginning of 1970s. The idea of "Critical Period" was proposed and introduced by Penfield & Roberts (1959). Critical Period Hypothesis suggests that there is a suitable time in human development when the brain is predisposed for success in language learning. These early CPH proponents concentrated on the children's first language acquisition. According to the findings it has been claimed that a child's brain is like plastic compared to adult's brain, so child can be a specialist in learning to two or three languages as easily as one. Moreover, Penfield (1959) states that the plasticity of child's brain makes for superior ability especially based on acquiring units of language. According to this view, language learning that takes place after the end of the critical period may not be based on the innate biological structures believed to promote first language acquisition or second language learning in early childhood. Furthermore, regarding to the studies in the field of neurophysiology, Lenneberg (1967) claims the brain loses its plasticity after lateralization¹; therefore, learning another language will be difficult as the lateralization of the language function is normally completed at puberty. Along the similar lines to Penfield and Lenneberg, Lamendella (1977) asserts that learning L2 might be more efficient during early childhood. Thus, results from the studies suggest that early exposure is an advantage for language learners.

On the other hand, nowadays technology including PET², MEG³ and other forms of brain scanning have provided researchers to inspect the brain activity under the influence of different stimuli avoiding direct surgical intrusion. Brain scanning in the recent neurolinguistic research revealed that the recognition of foreign language pronunciation happens in the same place within the Broca's area⁴ when languages are learned before eleven, however, if language acquisition happens after the age of eleven, two different parts in the brain are involved in the process. It has been proved that the language acquisition before the age of eleven blocks the accomplishment of other sounds (Elbro, et al., 2004:24). Consequently, it is not possible to conclude that age is an obstacle for adults in terms of learning another language.

Moreover, the evidences from Johnson & Newport and Birdsong, Johnson (1992) and Shim (1993) revealed that adult learners are able to achieve desired high proficiency and even higher than some young learners. Moreover, another study was conducted by Gallardo del Puerto & Lecumberri (2006). The sample consisted of three different age groups of Basque schoolchildren who were instructed equal amount of hours of formal instruction in English language. The finding of the study indicated that the learners with an earlier onset age did not show better performance than the ones who started learning English around puberty. Even the cognitive development of adult learners resulted in an advantage where phoneme discrimination was taken into consideration (Gallardo del Puerto & Lecumberri, 2006:125). It was pointed out that the stable and continuous exposure of the formal instruction provided adult learners to outperform regarding to the younger ones (Gallardo del Puerto & Lecumberri, 2006:127).

¹ A process by which the two sides of the brain develop specialized functions

² Positron Emissions Tomografi (Elbro, et al., 2004:19)

³ Magnetoencefalogram (Elbro, et al., 2004:22)

⁴ An area in the human brain involved in language acquisition (Elbro, et al., 2004:15)

Robertson (2002) claims that adult learners can learn faster and more efficiently than young learners because of their greater memory storage and greater capability of their conceptual system provide them lots of benefits in learning L2. Furthermore, Ausebel (1964) points out that although young learner may be good at acquiring native like accent in a new language, they are less rigid in understanding new learning tasks since adults have a much more L1 vocabulary; therefore, acquiring thousands of new concepts is not required in L2 as children do. The other advantage for the adults is concerned with the adults' ability in making conscious grammatical generalization and applying them into suitable exemplars. Hence, the relative cognitive maturity of adults and their experiences which are more than young learners in L1 provide them an initial benefit according to young learners in at least some aspects of L2 performance.

Even it is also utterly crucial to point out that all theorists who strongly support the "Critical Period" hypothesis and the researchers who have found evidence related to the negative correlation between age and L2 learning do not reject the possibility that adult learners can achieve success in learning L2 like Joseph Conrad who is a native speaker of Polish and became a successful writer in English language. In addition, educational studies claim that learners who began learning a second language at the primary school level were not able to succeed better than those who began in early adolescence, and it has been asserted that there are various evidences that show that adults can reach high levels of proficiency in second language learning: consequently, "Is it possible to say that there is no critical period for second language learning for adults?"

Characteristics of Adult Learners: Adult learners differ from young learners with their life and work experiences. Adult learners are the learners with years of experience and information whose learning style and pace of learning has probably matured. Therefore, they are not empty vessels. Their values, beliefs and opinions have been established, and they are able to relate new knowledge or information with the previously learned information and experiences. Adult learners are willing to apply new information or skills to current problems or situations and they do not wish to learn what they will never use. Thus, teachers must be aware of the differences in adult learners and young learners to be able to understand how adult learners learn and how to teach them effectively.

Hammerly (1991) points out that although adult language learners are generally known as their lack of ultimate mastery of language structure, adults are better than young learners considering their greater cognitive maturity, better learning strategies and study habits, better focus and goal orientation, a longer attention span, the ability to make a greater variety of associations, and better short-term memory. Moreover, Knowles (1984) claims that adult learners are able to direct their own learning as they tend to be self-directed; when they assume new social or life roles, they are ready learn; they are willing to apply new learning immediately; and adults are generally motivated to learn due to internal factors rather than external factors (Knowles, 1984, p.12).

Promoting Adults' Language Learning: Teaching adults effectively requires various issues to take into consideration and various theories and models have attempted to clarify adult learning since 1920s. This situation has caused arisen the theory of "andragogy"⁵ which is opposed to pedagogy, teaching of children. Noe (2010) stated that andragogy facilitates a relationship of mutuality and reciprocity between learner and teacher like being involved in designing the learning experience and in evaluating the learning experience (cited in Caruth, 2013).

Malcolm S. Knowles (1973), a pioneer in adult learning, revealed the following points regarding to his work on the theory of "andragogy". It has been asserted that adults need to know why they are learning, learn through doing, be problem solvers, learn effectively when the subject is of immediate use, prefer social interaction, want to use their life experiences in the classroom and want to integrate new ideas with the existing knowledge or experience. Consequently, considering their needs and purposes their lifelong language learning can be fostered by planning activities where adults can direct

⁵The art and science of how adults learn



their own learning, using active participation and groups for social interaction, using a variety of teaching and learning methods, making the learning relevant to their needs, spending less time lecturing and guiding them work on solving problems, and providing a supportive learning environment with multiple resources, breaks and opportunities for asking questions and correcting mistakes (cited in Rasmussen C., 2015). As a result, Knowles' theory of andragogy is the most accepted model of adult learning.

As Post W. Helen (1999) claims adult learners learn effectively when they want to develop a new skill, to acquire new information, to fulfill inner desires and to improve their own profession competences; therefore, it is crucial to provide meaningful and comfortable learning environment. Moreover, using variety of activities including visual stimulation will help adult learners learn L2 effectively as well. Emphasizing training's applicability to be able to focus on their issues, concerns, needs or interests is required to be taken into account. Furthermore, keeping them actively involved, encouraging them to share their experiences or knowledge, getting feedback by reinforcing the positives and redirecting the negatives, providing opportunities to practice what is learned to assist retention like role-plays, and using a variety of teaching methods like encouraging group discussions.

Challenges in teaching L2 to adults: General philosophy of language teaching is needed to be taken into account since teaching language to adults is substantially different from teaching to young learners; therefore, teachers should not apply for their own previous experiences and teach their students in the way they themselves learned as children.

Schapiro (2003) claims that although Knowles' theory of andragogy is the most accepted model of adult learning, it is not perfect because of having several weaknesses like tending to ignore issues of power and social justice, in society and in the educational process; the need for critical reflection as a necessary component of an adult learning process; the crucial place of dialogue and discussion as means for learning; and a recognition of multiple ways of knowing and learning (cited in Cercone, K., 2008).

Cercone, K. (2008) reveals that although "andragogy" represents an attempt to understand the difference between adult and childhood learning, it does not give the total picture of how adults learn since many variables influence how individuals develop as adults. As everyone is unique, their characteristics related to culture, life experiences, learning styles, needs will be different, so these differences should be required to take into consideration for planning and implementing learning activities for adults for fostering their learning rather than creating obstacle.

Merriam & Caffarella (1999) state that adult learners are different from young learners. Since many adult learners have responsibilities (e.g., families and jobs) and situations (e.g., transportation, childcare, domestic violence and the need to earn an income). It is important to note that these issues can interfere with the learning process. Therefore, as adults' life can be possible to be complex due to career, family and other personal choices, adults' educators should take into consideration for being able to deal with the arisen challenges effectively.

CONCLUSION

This article has reviewed several aspects of adult learning, especially in relation to lifelong language learning. Second or foreign language learning is an utterly crucial survival necessity rather than a school subject in today's society with much more global movement of people and more accessible worldwide communication. There is a knowledge explosion as the society continuous its advance into the information age. Therefore, education based on learning another language has become a lifelong experience. Regarding to the necessity of learning another language researchers have sought whether adult learners can succeed in learning other languages. Although many studies have been carried to reveal that there is a suitable time (Critical Period) in human development when the brain is predisposed for success in language learning, it has been concluded that age is not an obstacle for



adults in terms of learning another language. Therefore, with the increasing number of adult learners, interest in how adults learn continues to grow, and research gradually continues in the area of adult learning theories.

Actually the points that have been discussed in this article are prominent truisms, but it is important to create awareness to pursue learning throughout life for the betterment of the future life of individuals and the betterment of the world as well. Since whatever we have learnt at schools will not be enough during our whole as we are living in increasingly developing world. Therefore, the researcher strongly supports that teachers are required to create awareness for the learners to foster language learning throughout their life in order to be able struggle against the arisen problems like being illiterate to find out good solutions depending on their gained knowledge during their life. Thus, no one can deny the issue of lifelong language learning as it becomes a key concept in thinking about education and training worldwide. As similar to what Einstein said "Once you stop learning, you start dying."

SUMMARY

This paper is concerned with the issue of lifelong language learning by adult learners as a foreign or second language since one of the most significant competences for the 21st century is being multilingual. Thus, the aim of this research have been intended to find out whether the age factor is an obstacle for adult learners in terms of learning foreign languages as the results from the studies suggest that early exposure is an advantage for language learners. Therefore, this situation causes adult learners to have prejudice about not being able to succeed in learning another language. However, by the help of nowadays technology like PET, MEG and other forms of brain scanning have provided researchers to inspect the brain activity, and it has been revealed that age is not an obstacle for adult learners to learn another language a lifelong activity since it has been proved that adult learners are able to achieve desired high proficiency and even they can be more successful than young learners.

Moreover, it has been pointed out that all theorists who strongly support the "Critical Period" hypothesis and the researchers who have found evidence related to the negative correlation between age and L2 learning do not deny the possibility that adult learners can succeed in learning L2. Although early exposure is better, there is not an optimum age range for learning another language. Otherwise, L2 learning would not have been lifelong learning process.

The foremost issue that is required to be taken into consideration is how lifelong language learning is facilitated effectively for adult learners. Therefore, this paper focuses on theoretical information based on lifelong language learning, characteristics of adult learners to be able to deal with them effectively, promoting adults' language learning and dealing with challenges in teaching L2 to adults to be able to eliminate the arisen problems.

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