

The Optimum Age to Start Teaching English as a Second Language

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Abstract:

Determining the ideal age to start teaching English is one of the important topics facing educators in most countries of the world. The current study aimed to investigate this important topic. It study consists of two parts. The theoretical part included the consideration of the important axes of teaching second languages from different scientific aspects. The study also included the applied part by targeting a sample of (111) teachers in primary schools in the city of Mosul, males and females. The study used a questionnaire that included a question about the appropriate age to start teaching English. The frequencies and percentages were calculated to achieve the final results, which showed a great emphasis on the preference to start teaching English in the early stages of the primary stage.

Keywords:(Optimum age, English Language, Second language).

العمر الامثل للبدء بتدريس اللغة الانكليزية كلغة ثانية
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المخلص:

يعتبر تحديد العمر الامثل للبدء بتدريس اللغة الانكليزية من المواضيع المهمة التي يواجهها التربويون في معظم دول العالم وقد هدفت الدراسة الحالية الى البحث في هذا الموضوع الشائك إذ تتكون الدراسة الحالية من جزأين فقد تضمن الجزء النظري المحاور المهمة لتعليم اللغات الاجنبية ومن جوانب علمية مختلفة كما تضمنت الدراسة الجزء التطبيقي من خلال استهداف عينه مكونه من (١١١) من المعلمين في المدارس الابتدائية في مدينة الموصل ومن الذكور

والاناث واستخدمت الدراسة استبانة تتضمن سؤالا حول المرحلة العمرية المناسبة للبدء بتدريس اللغة الانكليزية وقد تم احتساب التكرارات والنسب المئوية للتوصل الى النتائج النهائية والتي اظهرت وجود تأكيد كبير على افضليه البدء بتدريس اللغة الانكليزية في المراحل الاولى من المرحلة الابتدائية. الكلمات المفتاحية: (العمر الامثل، اللغة الانكليزية، اللغة الثانية).

Preliminary:

It is well known that language represents the most important tools of communication and dialogue between nations, especially in the current era in which the world has become as a small village as a result of the unprecedented revolution in communication between countries. It is noticed that whoever masters the tools of others, especially their languages, becomes the owner of one of the basic tools through of which he can deal with others and understand their culture and lifestyles in a way that serves the process of development. Since it is difficult at the present time to isolate himself from societies and not communicate with them. Consequently, Iraq by virtue of its geographical and economical location, constitutes an essential part of the world have begun to communicate in English language as a foreign language, which has become the most important way for transferring knowledge in the current era. Therefore, in recent decades, the need to master English language, which represents the language of science, medicine, inventions, tourism and economics, has increased. Furthermore, mastering English language has become an inevitable skill for everyone who wants to learn and interact with everything new in these fields from its original sources.

Moreover, it is necessary to move towards learning more than one foreign language in order to open up to the different cultures of the world, enhance cultural communication with other countries and peoples of the world, and facilitate the economic development and cultural process in the country.

Therefore, there is an increased emphasis on teaching of English language as second language in Iraq in order to enhance learners ability to express themselves in English with easy and clearness. Accordingly, it can be said that teaching an second language can be of great value to the community as a whole and to the individuals as a mean of communication at all times and in all places.

An important topic that has attracted educationalists and scholars attention for a long period of time is the optimum age to start teaching second language. This is so because successful second language learning is decided, somehow, by the age at which teaching of the language in question starts and by that we intend to achieve. Such an argumentative topic has raised many questions some of which are still waiting for convincing answers and for a very long time. These questions have led scholars and educationalists to direct their efforts so as to find the answers and to decide up on the preferable age to start teaching second language which represent an important factor in the process of second language teaching.

1- The Problem to be Investigated:

One of the most popular ideas is that young children learn an second language readily and easily then older children or adults. Also, there is a noticeable percentage of failures in English in the schools of Iraq and elsewhere, and because of these failures, difficulties and problems, many scholars in the field support the idea that adolescents and adults can learn second language without such problems and failure.

In other words, determining the appropriate age to start teaching second language is an argumentative issue that face decision makers in the Ministry of Education in Iraq. This what encouraged the researcher to conduct the current study to survey the opinions of teachers and those directly involved in teaching English in some of Iraqi primary schools to determine whether the first grade (6 years) or the fifth grade (10 years) is better to start teaching English. Since, teaching English in Iraqi primary schools used to start in the fifth primary grade, i.e. at the age of 10 years, and after the year (2003) the change was made to start teaching English in the first primary grade, i.e. at the age of 6 years.

Accordingly, the study problem was formulated with the questions: What is the opinion of English language teachers about the optimum age to start teaching English language in Iraqi primary schools? Are there any statistically significant differences due to the gender of teachers in this regard?

2- **Aims of the Study:**

The current study with its theoretical and applies field, aims to achieve the following:

- a. Identifying the experiences of Arab and foreign countries in terms of the age at which they start teaching second language in schools.
- b. Determining the opinions of English language teachers regarding the optimum age to start teaching English language.

3- **Population and the Sample of the Study:**

The population of the study represented by English language teachers in Iraqi primary school.

While, the study sample consisted of (111) English language teachers in Mosul city. The number of female teachers was (58) representing (52%), while the number of male teachers was (53), representing (47%).

4- **Limits of the Study:**

The current study is limited to English language teachers in Mosul primary schools during the summer vacation of 2024, as teachers have completed an academic year with all its experiences and difficulties.

5- **Tools of the Study:**

The study tool was an open questionnaire which directed to English language teachers in Mosul city. The face validity of the questionnaire was achieved by presenting it to a number of experts in addition to using Person's coefficient for internal consistency validity of the tool. While, the researcher used Cord Richardson formula to verify the tool reliability, which showed that the reliability of the tool was (73%).(Middleton, 2019, 7)

Theoretical Framework

1- Second Language Psychology:

Many researchers has been achieved to determine the optimum age to teach second language and there is a consensus that the attempt to teach second language to a child based on his mother tongue at a childhood period may led to more ambiguity and make him feel of difficulties. Therefore, it seems to be better to delay second language teaching until well instillation of mother tongue in the child mind like: speech habits and vocabularies and this will be done in the intermediate childhood period. On the other hand the psychological point of view that the delay of starting second language learning until fourteen or fifteen years old is not considered a good idea because all students have passed a stage and they have been less prepared to learn Second language.(Husain & Zedan, 1982, 152)

Accordingly, a number of researchers and educators have supported this idea. Lenneberg (1964) in his book explained that the difficulties faced by the

learners of second language increased at a certain age, and therefore the learner must try to acquire the original standards of the second language before that age. Based on this hypothesis, children tend to acquire second language better than adults, because children have the mental ability to absorb new information as a part of their natural growth. (Palea & Bostina-Bratu, 2015, 428)

2- Second Language Acquisition:

The process of acquiring language from the human mind includes complex phonetic lexical and syntactic process which are interacted with each other. In order to explain this, several theories have been developed to explain the mechanism of acquiring and learning language, which have divided into two sections. Some of them believe that language is innate, while the other group believes that language is conventional and its acquisition is behavioral (Addamigh, 2010, 39). While scientists specialized in modern human theories have proven that they have relied on explaining language acquisition through three main hypothesis, as follow:

a. Innate Hypothesis:

The innate hypothesis considered the language as a nonverbal behavior rather than a mental ability that is born with humans and explains why children are able to form new sentences that they have never heard before? This ability is called “the language acquisition tool”. Thus, language acquisition is not as

behaviorists believe, which processed by storing and initiating in the mind, where the child hears sounds and words then imitates them, while these linguistic symbols are related with meanings in his mind, then he acquires the ability to construct it into sentences. Consequently, the innate hypothesis seems to be the most appropriate explanation for language acquisition, despite the emergence of some other theories after that. Where it is confirm that the human mind controls the complex systems of language through an innate part in the brain that works from an early age to recognize the linguistic system from linguistic system in order to help child in a short time to generate and compose sentences in an unlimited number, controlled by the role of the surrounding language. The effect of this innate part is not limited to the mother tongue only, but it is also affective in acquiring second language for young children. (Mitchel & Malys, 2004, 264)

However, this hypothesis indicates that there are two levels of language:

- The deep- structure level, which is the mental meanings.
- The surface-structure level, which is the external appearance of the language.

On the other hand, there are two levels of linguistic production:

- The competence level
- The performance level, which is the linguistic form that speaker actually use.

And there is no doubt that innate ability is important in the stages of language acquisition.(Al-Damaa, 2011, 759)

b. Behaviorist theory:

Pablov is regarded as a pioneer of the behaviorist theory. However, Skinner, who wrote a book of “Linguistic Behavior” which attempted to build a new theory in linguistic learning, as his book contains the essence of this hypothesis in explaining language. Adding to that he assumed that language is not a mental process, but rather a behavioral process like any other human behavior. Therefore, the child learns language by imitating the adults around him, who constantly correct his mistakes until he achieve the complete mastery stage by imitation and continuous correction of behavior.(Littlewood, 1984, 39)

Furthermore, the audio-lingual method of teaching is derived from the principles of behaviorists, as it emphasizes on teaching colloquial language through dialogue and exercises. So, the educational applications that the behavioral hypothesis depends on, can be summarized as follows:

- Repetition and exercise: which is called Pattern Drills which aims to teach the language by forming linguistic habits in an unconscious manner.
- Mastery is based on the fact that learning is a response to stimulus and responses are related to the conditional stimulus, which is represent what learners perform during linguistic performance.

- The presence of motivations: the stronger the motivation, the more the desired learning will be achieved.
- Adjusting the elements of educational situation and identifying them appropriately in the form of main or sub-units and according to the level of learners in order to achieve educational goals.(Al-Damaa, 2011, 706)

c. **Krashen's Quintet Hypothesis:**

Krashen presented a multifaceted explanation for language acquisition that included both mental and environmental aspects. Adding to that, his opinion explain second language acquisition according to five hypothesis as follows:(Krashen, 1987, 120)

- **Acquisition-Learning Hypothesis:**

It includes two different paths to second language acquisition: the acquisition path and the learning path. The first is occurs unconsciously (meta-cognitive) which is similar to the process of children acquisition of their first language. On the other hand, learning takes place within awareness, such as knowing grammar rules. So, Krashen believes that learning path is less important than acquisition path.

- **Monitor Hypothesis:**

It indicates to the fluency in second language is due to the extent of acquisition and learning works as a monitor based on the rules of perception

in order to correct the outputs of acquired system, this occurs before or during linguistic performance, and it is possible to happen later.

- **The Natural Order Hypothesis:**

This hypothesis explains the similarity of second language learners' mistakes in addition to the errors of children when they learning their mother tongues.

Consequently, this hypothesis believes that language acquisition can be predicted, and occurs according to a discoverable order. In addition it believes that there is a similarity in acquisition between the mother tongue and the second language.

- **Input Hypothesis:**

It is based on the fact that the inputs must be meaningful and appropriate to the needs of students, as the learners cannot acquire the language if they do not understand the meaning contained in the inputs. Furthermore, it believes that intensive inputs are necessary for success in acquiring second language.

- **Affective Filter Hypothesis:**

Krashen believes that there a set of factors which have a facilitating or complicating role in the language acquisition process, and these factors are learners' motivation, self-confidence, and anxiety. And, the more flow of second language the acquisition will increase.

3- Critical Period:

In 1964 Lenneberg presented his ideas about the critical period for learning through language acquisition, as he showed that language acquisition has a critical period in which the child must be exposed to linguistic stimuli, otherwise it will be difficult for the learner to acquire and master it. Consequently, he assumed that this critical age is twelve years old.(Al-Damaa,2011,763)

On the other hand, Chomsky agreed with Lenneberg regarding to the existence of this period, although determining the age at which the period ends remains controversial. Some say the critical period is determined by seven years old, others say it is eleven or twelve years old, while others say it is start with puberty. On the other hand, the most famous people interested in learning second language tend to believe that the younger the age, the better and faster the acquisition, this is due to the mental superiority of the younger learners.(Krashen, 1979, 102)

Nevertheless, Leyngyel and Singleton (1995) assert in their book about the effect of age on learning second language, that younger learner is better regarding to the long run, but they admit that there are some cases in which language acquisition can be made at a later age, that is, after the critical period for language learning has passed. While Oyama (1975) believes that even if adult can learn a second language proficiently, their pronunciation and the quality of their linguistic competences will not be at the level of those who

learn it at an early age. Thus, it is noted that the opportunity to learn decreases as the learner gets older.(Bialystock & Hakuta, 1994, 93)

In general, this scientific fact about the critical period in a human's language learning shows the extent of the influence of age on the second language acquisition, as the ability to acquire language correctly and quickly increases with younger age, and this ability decreases with age increasing. Therefore, starting to teach second language at an early stage has been increasingly important in recent decades. To sum up, the hypothesis of critical period, as defined by Scoval, is that the best time to learn second language is in the first years of a child's life, and after the first twelve years of his life, so, any person will find difficulties in acquiring a new language.(Scoval, 1988, 75)

4- Arab and international Experiences in Teaching Second Language:

This topic addresses the trends of educational system in some Arab and international countries, as it shown in the following tables, which formulated depending on (Al-Damaa,2011) :

Table(1)

Arab Experience in Teaching Second Language

Country	The Language	Age/ grade at which language teaching start before change	Age/ grade at which language teaching start after change	Year of change
U.A.E	English	First primary		
Arab Republic of Egypt	English French	First primary		Since 2003
Kingdom of Bahrain	English	Third primary	First primary	Since 2008
The State of Qatar	English	First primary		
Kingdom of Jordan	English	First primary		Since 2001
Syrian Arab Republic	English French	Fifth primary	First primary	Since 2003
State of Kuwait	English	First primary		Since 1993
Oman	English	First primary		Since 1999

Republic of Yemen	English	First intermediate	Fourth primary	Since 2005
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Table(2)

International Experience in Teaching Second Language

Country	The Language	Age/ grade at which language teaching start before change	Age/ grade at which language teaching start after change	Year of change
Germany	English	Third primary		Since 1998
Italy	English French German	Third primary		Since 1985
Sweden	English	First to fifth primary		Since 1995
Switzerland	English	Fourth and fifth primary		Since 1975
Bulgaria	English Russian German Italy Spanish French	First primary		Since 1998
Turkish	English	Fourth and fifth primary		Since 1997
China	English	Third primary		Since 2001
Taiwan	English	First intermediate	First Primary	Since 2003

Overall, most of the mentioned countries have adopted the communicative approach in teaching the second language.

Discussion of the Results:

- The result of the first objective: The optimum age for teaching English language in general

After the researcher distributed her research questionnaire to the research sample, the results were extracted by finding the percentage and were included in Table (3) as follows:

Table(3)

Percentage of the Optimum Age to Start Teaching English

	The Optimum Age/ Grade to Start Teaching English	No.	%
1	First grade (6 years old)	99	89%
2	First grade (10 years old)	12	11%
	Total	111	100%

It is clear from the table above that (99) of male and female teachers indicated that the optimum age to start teaching English is (6) years old i.e. in the first primary grade, with a percentage of (89%), which represents the

highest percentage, while (12) male and female teachers indicated that the optimum age to start teaching English is (10) years old i.e. the fifth primary grade, with a percentage of (11%), which represents the lowest percentage. This means that the most likely opinion for teaching English is at the age of (6) years, as learning the principles of the English language at an early age helps the child to master its basics as he grows older, which makes him more receptive and efficient in learning a foreign language.

- Result of the second objective: The optimum age to start teaching English according to the respondents' gender variable:

The questionnaires answered by male English teachers were separated from the questionnaires answered by female teachers, and the opinions about the optimum age to start teaching English were counted, as it shown in Table (4):

Table(4)

Percentage of the Optimum Age to Start Teaching English Regarding to Respondents' Gender

Gender	No.	The Optimum Age	No.	Percentage	Total
Male	53	6 Years	49	92%	100%
		10 Years	4	8%	

Female	58	6 Years	50	86%	100%
		10 Years	8	14%	

The Conclusion:

To make second language learning harmonize with the timetable of child development is a move in the right direction. But readiness for any learning is never purely a matter of biological maturation, there are, arguments on neurological grounds which suggest the advisability of an early start. From a psychological point of view it is less easy to pronounce with authority on this. It is hardly even theoretically possible to envisage one optimum period, nor is it in the interest of a sound language teaching policy in the primary school to over-emphasize the merits of an early start.

Learning languages have many facts and in a life time an individual may require different languages. To suggest that languages can be learnt 'only' when young is disproved by the fact that there are many adults who have learnt other languages at different stages of life.

Furthermore, it is not necessary to justify the teaching of languages in the primary years as an optimum period. What we need is:

- 1- To show that it is socially and educationally desirable.

2- It must be shown that it is sound from the point of view of the development of children and that there are no contra-indications on psychological grounds for teaching a language at this stage.

3- In addition, it can be demonstrated that the learning of languages in the early years has certain special merits this would add further weight. In other words, instead of searching for the optimum age in general, it should be sufficient to show that the primary years of child life are a good period for starting a second language, since it is offering certain special advantages.

Recommendations:

1- The necessity of focusing on teaching English in the early stages of primary school and making it one of the basic subjects in the educational system.

2- The necessity of paying attention to the teaching methods specific to teaching English in the early primary stage and using the communicative method in teaching the language.

3- Activating the role of the teacher and developing and training teachers in order to deliver English to primary school students in a more effective and efficient manner.

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