

A Review of Studies Dealing with the Vocabulary Acquisition and its Relation to the Age

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ABSTRACT

Pemerolehan bahasa, khususnya pemerolehan kosakata telah diteliti dan ditulis secara ekstensif selama bertahun-tahun. Kosakata atau yang lumrah didunia diperbincangkan disebut *vocabulary* merupakan himpunan kata yang dimiliki oleh seseorang atau entitas lain, atau merupakan bagian dari suatu bahasa tertentu. Kosakata seseorang didefinisikan sebagai himpunan semua kata-kata yang dimengerti oleh orang tersebut atau semua kata-kata yang kemungkinan akan digunakan oleh orang tersebut untuk menyusun kalimat baru. Kekayaan kosakata seseorang secara umum dianggap merupakan gambaran dari intelejensia atau tingkat pendidikannya. Penambahan kosakata seseorang secara umum dianggap merupakan bagian penting, baik dari proses pembelajaran suatu bahasa ataupun pengembangan kemampuan seseorang dalam suatu bahasa yang sudah dikuasai. Lalu, bagaimana sebenarnya pengaruh pemerolehan kosakata terhadap usia? Jawaban tepatnya adalah dengan mengkaji dan menelaah beberapa penelitian-penelitian terdahulu, dipahami bahwa siswa pada usia remaja lebih cepat menangkap bahasa terlebih pada kosakata, sebab siswa dapat menangkap sesuatu hal yang baru ia dapat secara spontan. Terakhir, hasil dari teori yang didapat mengenai pemerolehan kosa kata kedua digunakan sebagai teori fundamental bagi para guru bahasa. Teori tersebut digunakan untuk menemukan efektifitas pembelajaran. Dalam hal ini pendidik dapat menciptakan inovasi strategi pengajaran yang sesuai dengan pembelajaran kosakata dan hubungannya dengan usia anak didiknya.

Keywords: *Pemerolehan Kosa Kata & Usia (Aging)*

A. Introduction

For a large majority of learners, the significant goal of studying is being comprehend to communicate a new language. If the learners do not wish to learn completely on non-verbal skills, mastering second vocabulary is not just important, but crucial in learning a foreign language, even in an English speaking environment. When teachers and speech-language pathologists talk about second vocabulary acquisition, they are referring to the set of words that a child knows after his/ her first

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language acquisition or specifically first vocabulary acquisition. Vocabulary can be split into two types: receptive vocabulary and expressive vocabulary. A child's receptive vocabulary consists of the words the child understands when he/she hears or reads them. A child's expressive vocabulary consists of the words the child uses when he/ she speaks.

As discussed in the first post, vocabulary was for long an overlooked aspect of learning a new language. During the last decades, however, the vocabulary has moved from the periphery into a central position. Even a quick look at the recent linguistic research,² reveals that more and more attention has been given to this disregarded "Cinderella of foreign language learning".³ It can be found that this attention truly well-deserved, as we are confident that vocabulary, including not just words but also their meaning, orthography, pronunciation, context and conjugation, is in the very essence of the process of learning a new language.

B. Theoretical Descriptions

1. Vocabulary Acquisition

Vocabulary is crucial in teaching and learning through which meanings, ideas, and feelings can be conveyed. Vocabulary has a significant role in teaching and learning any language. Learning vocabulary is an important aspect of language development. Some scholars consider vocabulary knowledge as the most important factor in academic achievement for second or foreign language learners. Researchers indicate that vocabulary knowledge is closely linked to reading proficiency, and additionally it leads to greater success in school.⁴

Further, vocabulary has an important role in the development of the four language skills: speaking, listening, reading and writing. Vocabulary can provide clarity and can enable the speaker to diversify language. Wrong use of vocabulary can lead to misinterpretation, while correct use of vocabulary makes it easier for people to read and write better, understand the main ideas and speak correctly (as

²Keith S. Folse, *Myths about Teaching and Learning Second Language Vocabulary: What Recent Research Says*, (*TESL Reporter* 37:(2), 2004), p. 1-13.

³Ludo Beheydt, *The Semantization of Vocabulary in Foreign Language Learning*, (*System* 15(1)), p. 55-67.

⁴A. Tozcui and J. Coady, "Successful Learning of Frequent Vocabulary through CALL also Benefits Reading Comprehension and Speed", (*Computer Assisted Language Learning*, 17 (5), 2004), p. 473-495.

cited in Iheanacho.⁵ In this respect, Allen indicates that the reason for the importance of vocabulary is that: “Through research, the scholars are finding that lexical problems frequently interfere with communication; communication breaks down when people do not use the right words”.⁶ Then, according to Knight, vocabulary acquisition is considered by many to be the primary problem in second language learning.⁷ He indicates that the majority of students studying second languages and their teachers cite vocabulary as their first priority. The recognition of the importance of vocabulary in language learning by many researchers has encouraged the search for effective pedagogical methods of teaching new words.

While, Krashen in Schutz defines, “The product of a subconscious process very similar to the process children undergo when they acquire their first language”.⁸ Second language acquisition is a complex process which depends on a number of factors, such as cognitive development, cultural background, personal abilities, motivation, socio-economic background, age and the level of native language acquisition. Age is one of the important factors which influence second language acquisition. In addition, the age has strong influence on the level of native language acquisition and thus has additional meaning for the study process. Multiple researches have been performed in order to trace the relations between the age and second language acquisition. All these studies agree that age has an extremely important influence on language learning and that different researches in this field may greatly contribute to the theory and practice of second language acquisition. Finally, as the conclusion A lot of authors such as Ellis, Larsen-Freeman, and Mayberry and Lock state that younger learners are more successful in language study than aged ones.

⁵C. Iheanacho, “Effects of two multimedia computer-assisted language learning programs on vocabulary acquisition of intermediate level ESL students”, (Ph.D) Dissertation: The Virginia Polytechnic Institute and State University, 1997), p. 13.

⁶V. F. Allen, *Techniques in teaching vocabulary*, (New York, N.Y.: Oxford University Press), p. 5.

⁷Knight, “Dictionary Use while Reading: The Effects on Comprehension and Vocabulary Acquisition for Students of Different Verbal Abilities”, *The Modern Language Journal*, 78, 285-299.

⁸Ricardo Schutz, “Stephen Krashni's Theory of Second language Acquisition”, (Online. 30 de janerode 2006), p.12, (<http://www.sk.com.br/sk-krash.html>)

2. The Knowledge of Vocabulary Acquisition and its Relation to the Age

Age is one of individual learner variable which has been most thoroughly investigated in Second language acquisition. In relation about it, there is a specific and limited period of time for acquiring vocabulary. There are two version hypothesis concern about this:

- 1) The strong version is that language must be learnt by puberty or it will be never be learnt from subsequent exposure.
- 2) The weak version is that after puberty, language learning will be more difficult and incomplete.

Next, during the first few years of life, as babies begin to say their first words, it is easy to keep track of their growing vocabularies. Children typically understand or recognize more words than they actually use when speaking. For example, a toddler might only say five different words (e.g., dada, mama, doggie, bottle, more) but be able to understand many others—like pointing to the light when Mommy asks, “Where is the light?” or beginning to cry when Daddy says, “Bye-bye” as he leaves for work. Vocabulary development does not stop once a child can talk. In fact, children learn many new words once they start reading and going to school. The chart below shows typical vocabulary development across several ages. Notice how quickly vocabulary grows over the first six years of life:⁹

Table 1:
Second Vocabulary Acquisition and its Aging Effect

| No | Aging (in Years) | Vocabulary |
|----|------------------|--|
| 1 | 1 to 1,5 | Toddlers develop around a 20-word vocabulary during this time. |
| 2 | 2 | By the time a child is 2 years old, he/she will have a 200–300-word vocabulary. |
| 3 | 3 | Vocabulary grows to be about 900–1,000 words by the time a child is 3 years old. |
| 4 | 4 | The typical 4-year-old child will have about a 1,500–1,600-word vocabulary. |

⁹Jr. Robert E. Owens, *Language development: An introduction (fourth edition)*, (Boston, MA: Allyn and Bacon, 1996), p. 77.

| | | |
|---|----|--|
| 5 | 5 | By the time a child reaches school age and heads to kindergarten, he/she will have between a 2,100- and 2,200-word vocabulary. |
| 6 | 6 | The 6-year-old child typically has a 2,600 word expressive vocabulary (words he or she says), and a receptive vocabulary (words he or she understands) of 20,000–24,000 words. |
| 7 | 12 | By the time a child is 12 years old, he/she will understand (have a receptive vocabulary) of about 50,000 words. |

There was a famous case about critical period hypothesis. In 1970s, Genie, a young girl, who was found living in conditions of extreme neglect and isolation and received very little contact with other humans from birth to the age of 13. She was once again re-introduced to society and began to acquire some language, but she failed to acquire the syntax and morphology of children who do receive input from early age.¹⁰ According to the result of above research, it was assured that the best time to acquire second language should be before puberty.

David Singleton expressed an idea that “younger learners to do better in the long run in the matter of second language lexical acquisition is no more than a tendency”.¹¹ In addition, other factors have also a very strong impact on language acquisition. A lot of authors state that surrounding and social factors have a very important impact on the study success. For example, if the person learns language in the class during lessons, his result will be different from the person’s results person who lives in the language environment and has an opportunity to hear the target language all the time. In addition, some specialists believe that older learners have better language competency and have better abilities for problem solving and thus can achieve better results in language acquisition. As age has been considered as an important factor in language learning, there is a lot of research on how age effects second language acquisition (e.g. Oyama, 1976; Birdsong, 1992; Patkowski, 1980; DeKeyser, 2000). It is generally believed that

¹⁰Rymer, *Genie: an abused child's flight from silence*, (New York: Harper Collins, 1993, google scholar), p. 55.

¹¹David Singleton, “Age and the Acquisition of English as a Foreign Language”, 2003, p. 22.

children enjoy an advantage over adults in learning languages because of their “plasticity”. Suggesting that age is one of the internal factor of fossilization, Ellis said that when learners reached the critical age, their brains lost plasticity.¹² In 1989, Johnson and Newport had done a research about the relationship between the effects of maturation and the ability of an individual to acquire a second language. The participants were forty-six native Chinese and Korean speakers. All of them had arrived in the United States between the ages of 3 to 39 and had learned English as a second language. The subjects were divided into four groups depending on the age of arrival. The exam about the grammaticality of a variety of English sentences was given to test participants. The data from this test showed that there was a positive correlation between the participants’ age of arrival in the United States and the performance on the test.

On the contrary, many researches indicate different results about age and language acquisition. Some researchers show older people learn the second language better than younger people. On the other hand, some researchers show younger people learn the second language better than older people. Furthermore, a study done by an academic at the Collegium de Lyon in France found that the assumption that children are good at learning a second language is a “myth”. Young children would get confused if faced with more than one language from a young age.¹³ The study done by Krashen, Long, and Scrarella shed insights on the relationship between age, rate, and eventual attainment in second language acquisition.¹⁴ They investigated child-adult differences in final achievement in second language acquisition by comparing adult and children acquiring second language in natural, informal environments, and classroom, formal environments. The conclusion of this study indicates that adults learn morphological development and syntactic faster than children. And younger children acquire the second language slower than older children.

¹²Ellis, N., “Vocabulary acquisition: The Implicit ins and outs of Explicit Cognitive Mediation”, 1994, In N. C. Ellis (Ed.), *Implicit and explicit learning of languages* (pp. 211-282). London: Adademic Press, p. 20.

¹³I. S. P. Nation, *Teaching and Learning Vocabulary*, (Boston: Heinle and Heinle Publishers, 1990), p. 77.

¹⁴Krashen, D.S. Long, M.A. and Scarcella, R. C., (1979). Age, rate and eventual attainment in second language acquisition. *TESOL Quarterly*, 13(4), 573-582. Retrieved April 21, 2009 from <http://www.jstor.org/stable/3586451>.

Another study done by Snow and Hoefnagel-Hohle showed that the result of the testing does not support the critical period hypothesis for acquiring language.¹⁵ The participants in this research were distributed in two groups which were beginners and advanced. Participants were tested in ten aspects of Dutch which included sentence judgment and story comprehension. The result of the research showed that it failed to support CPH. Moreover, even though Snow stated that “Young children learn language quicker than older children”.¹⁶ Results showed that an eight-year-old child studying a language for a year has the same result with a 14-year-old child who studied this language for several weeks.

In conclusion, some researchers supported the critical period hypothesis because children could use the language spontaneously, but some researchers are against it. They thought adults can learn better than or equally as well as children.

C. Research Question

In accordance with the theoretical review above, in order to provide guidance for this research which specified the correct processing, acquiring and analyzing of data, it needs to formulate question of research. Thus question of research of this research is:

1. Does the age has the significant relation to vocabulary acquisition?
2. How is the differences among the early stages, puberty and after puberty or olderly stages? Who is best?

D. Research Methodology

The researcher uses the descriptive qualitative method. It means that the research is based on the characteristics of phenomena and the data were analyzed using the description not numbers. It means that the researcher only intends to describe the data obtained as they are found in the fields. It is based on the problem statement. Here, the researcher got the data by reading detailed some of previous and current findings relate to the topic. The results of findings that the researcher read

¹⁵Snow and Hoefnagel-Hohle, “Age differences in the pronunciation of foreign sounds. Language and Speech”, 1978, in press.

¹⁶Snow Krashen, The “Fundamental Pedagogical Principle” in Second Language Teaching. *Studia Linguistica* 35(1) & (2): 50-70.

and detailed is used to conclude whether the knowledge of vocabulary acquisition has significant relation to the age of someone.

According to Lexy J. Moleong, data analysis is process to managing data, organizing it in order a pattern, category and unit breakdown of basic, so in the end gathered of data.¹⁷ Then, Gay stated that 4 steps for analyzing qualitative data, they are data managing, reading/ memoing, describing, classifying, interpreting, and representing the findings in a written report.¹⁸ Here, the researcher takes summering data analysis such as:

1. Reading the detailed some of previous and current findings relate to the topic.
The results of findings that the researcher read and detailed is used to conclude whether the knowledge of vocabulary acquisition has significant relation to the age of someone.
2. Analyzing what the researcher has been read.
3. Classifying the data.
4. Interpreting the data that had been found systematically.
5. Representing/ writing data result of research completely and intact.

E. CONCLUSION

Based on the result of the research done, the researcher would like to write the conclusions of this research as the following: It is clear that age (or age-related factors) is a major variable in the acquisition of a second language for school. The interconnection between age and second language acquisition is evident and it is necessary to trace peculiarities of this connection. This study aims to trace correlation between the success of language acquisition and learners' age.

1. In the early stages of acquisition, older students are faster and more efficient than younger students. So, according to the result of many previous studies or research, it was assured that the best time to acquire second language should be before puberty. A lot of specialists believe that the younger the learner is, the easier the study process goes. In reality the relationship between and success in

¹⁷Lexy J. Maleong, *Metode Penelitian Kualitatif*, (Bandung: Remaja Rosda Karya Offset, 1999), p. 131.

¹⁸L. R. Gay and Peter Airasian, *Educational Research: Competence for Analysis & Application*, (USA: Prentice Hall, 2000), p. 239.

learning second language is complex. From the one side, Critical Period Hypothesis theory states that early age is the best age for language acquisition, from the other side mystery in native language contributes greatly to the successful acquisition of the second language.

2. Older students have the advantage of cognitive development in their first language to assist them with acquiring school skills in the second language. This early advantage diminishes after the first year for adults, but remains for older children and adolescents for continuing development of their second language skills.
3. Adolescents past puberty are likely to retain an accent in the second language. Otherwise, they are capable of developing complete second language proficiency.
4. When schooled only in the second language, students in the 8-12 age range on arrival may be the most advantaged acquirers of school skills in the second language, since they have some first language skills to transfer and they still have time to make up the years of academic instruction lost while acquiring basic second language skills and beginning to acquire school skills in the second language. Even though adolescents can acquire second language school skills at a fast pace, they have less time to make up lost years of academic instruction easily.
5. It is important to note that the effect of age diminishes over time as the acquirer becomes more proficient in the second language. Differences are generally found through the first five years after arrival. It takes language minority students in any type of program a minimum of four years to reach native speakers' level of school language proficiency and may take as many as eight or more years, depending on age on arrival and type of school program, as well as sociocultural factors and the individual characteristics of each second language acquirer.

F. Suggestion

Considering the importance of understanding the effect of aging to the second vocabulary acquisition, better to make some suggestions. For students who are willing to conduct a research on the same topic, it will hopefully give a clear understanding in analyzing many previous studies that has the same topic then find out the result. Their results then will be very useful as the fundamental guidance for

teachers in how they teach effectively based on the aging of the learners or students. Fortunately, they can create many innovative learning strategies and techniques in empowering the learners' second vocabulary acquisition. It is also hoped that there are other students who will conduct study on related topic from different angle, hoping that there will be new findings dealing with the second vocabulary acquisition study. Finally, the researcher hopes that this research can be used as reference for those who are interested in studying this topic.

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