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## PSYCHOLOGICAL ASPECTS OF FOREIGN LANGUAGE LEARNING AT AN EARLY AGE

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**Abstract.** *The article examines the psychological aspects of learning a foreign language at an early age. The features of cognitive processes of young learners' development are determined. The role of educators and parents in shaping favourable conditions for personal development is emphasized.*

**Key words:** *psychological aspect, cognitive processes, early age, foreign language.*

**Introduction.** Today, the question of studying foreign languages is relevant in Ukraine. Being on the way to European integration, knowledge of a foreign language is one of the most important conditions for the implementation of Ukraine to this process. The importance of investigating psychological aspects of learning a foreign language in kindergartens and primary schools is determined by dissatisfaction with the level of first-year students' preparation, and since the period of 6-7 years old is considered to be the most favourable for mastering a foreign language [4], it is necessary to identify conditions that enhance the effectiveness of the educational process in this context.

**Analysis of recent researches and publications.** In general terms research studies do not support the idea that children are "sponges" when learning a second / foreign language, at least, as far as rate of achievement is concerned. However, teachers and researchers report that young children present very positive attitudes towards learning foreign languages and are very motivated (Blondin *et al.*, 1998; Burstall, 1975; Cenoz & Lindsay, 1994; Clyne *et al.*, 1995; Donato *et al.*, 2000; Hawkins, 1996; Hurrell & Satchwell, 1996; Johnstone, 1996; Nikolov, 1999; Satchwell, 1996; Teachner, 1991). Young learners could be motivated because the teaching methodology used in kindergartens and primary schools focuses on communicative skills rather than

on the formal structures of the language [5, p. 70]. Young learners could also present more positive attitudes and be more motivated because of their general positive attitude towards learning, as opposed to the rejection of the school system typically associated with older learners.

**The purpose** of this research is to identify the psychological features of learning a foreign language at an early age and the conditions that increase the effectiveness of this process.

**The methods** of investigation are the following: the studying and critical analysis of the literature on the problem; methods of deduction and synthesis.

**Results.** Young learners are widely perceived to acquire languages in a qualitatively different way from adolescents and adults. Young learners before a certain age seem to pick up a new language with ease and success, whereas older learners often fail to do so [7, p. 2]. Cognitive and psycholinguistic research on second language learning focuses on the development of knowledge and know-how built from meaningful, continuous practice. According to cognitive accounts, early stages of second language comprehension and production rely strongly on simplification, transfer from first language, and overgeneralization as knowledge accumulates and is restructured through hypothesis formation and testing. Backsliding and sudden burst of rapid progress are also a part of the process. First and

second language acquisition differ in the extent to which they are under the control of biological or cognitive processes of development [6, p. 29]. This is because they begin with different initial representations and frequently occur at different points in cognitive development. To some extent, first language acquisition unfolds as a function of a biologically, or innately, prescribed set of constraints. Second language acquisition, in contrast, has more room for cognitive factors to influence and direct the course of its development. In both cases, however, it is the cognitive processes of analysis and control that are responsible for propelling the system toward greater mastery.

An important distinction has been confirmed in recent cognitive and neurobiological explanations of second language acquisition reflecting a dual procedural / declarative dimension widely accepted in cognitive science. Two systems exist side by side: a rule-based analytic procedural system, and a formulaic, exemplar-based declarative system. In the first system, storage and powerful generative tools operate together to compute well-formed sentences; in the second one, a large memory system is responsible for drawing on some rules operating on unanalyzed wholes or chunks [7, pp. 2-3]. Young language learners use memory-based processes, whereas adult language learners rely on rule-based learning. The acquisition of implicit competence is affected by age in two ways: 1) biologically, the plasticity of the procedural memory for language gradually decreases after about the age of five; and 2) cognitively, reliance on conscious declarative memory increases both for learning in general and for learning a language from about the age of seven. Learners may apply compensatory mechanisms to counterbalance decline in implicit learning: learning new vocabulary, for example, relies on declarative memory.

The early introductions of foreign languages in kindergartens and primary schools has expanded in Europe in the last 30 years. Foreign language teaching

in pre-secondary education presents great diversity. Some projects are at the stage of small-scale experiments while others have been generalized. Projects also differ in terms of the age of introduction, the intensity, the specific teaching methodology used and many other contextual factors. The early introduction of a foreign language in the school curriculum increases the total amount of time that learners have at their disposal and many parents and educators also consider that young learners are specially gifted to learn foreign languages. An analysis of the effectiveness of early foreign language teaching can cover different areas such as attitudes and motivation, code-mixing and code-switching, the development of metalinguistic awareness or the influence of contextual factors.

When studying the effect of age it is important to distinguish between second and foreign language situations, i. e., between situations in which there is exposure to the target language with or without formal instruction and situations in which exposure to the language is limited to the school context and usually to very few hours per week [1, p. 78]. Learners in foreign language contexts have very limited exposure to the language and typically have non-native teachers and no communicative need to use the foreign language outside the classroom. These specific conditions are different from those of learners immersed in a foreign language context from a very early age who generally achieve native-like competence in the second language.

Research on early bilingualism has consistently found that bilingual children process languages more effectively than their monolingual peers and the constant management of two competing languages enhances executive functions and results in a higher level of metalinguistic awareness. Thus, another important aim may involve the development of metacognitive skills and learning strategies to support children in learning new languages not only in foreign languages programmes

but also as adolescents and adults [7, p. 8].

Most experts believe that when a child is introduced to a foreign language at an early age their chances of becoming more proficient in the target language will be higher. However, it is not necessarily true to say "the earlier the better". It is suggested that the most efficient time to learn another language is between 6 and 13 [8]. The research conducted by Opal Dunn [2], an educational consultant, has proved that young children are natural language acquirers; they are self-motivated to pick up language without conscious learning, unlike adolescents and adults. They have the ability to imitate pronunciation and work out the rules for themselves. Any idea that learning to talk in a foreign language is difficult does not occur to them unless it is suggested by adults, who themselves probably learned a foreign language academically at a later age through grammar-based text books.

Second language proficiency generally is represented by two types, spoken and academic. Academic proficiency refers to various skills, including word reading, spelling, reading fluency, reading comprehension, and writing. Spoken proficiency generally precedes academic proficiency and refers to the development of conversational vocabulary, grammar, and listening comprehension [3, p. 270].

Let us consider the advantages of second-language learning at an early age [2]. *Firstly*, young learners are still using their individual, innate language-learning strategies to acquire their native language and soon find they can also use these strategies to pick up a foreign language. *Secondly*, young learners have time to learn through play-like activities. They pick up language by taking part in an activity shared with an adult. They firstly make sense of the activity and then get meaning from the adult's shared language. *Thirdly*, young learners have more time to fit a second language into the daily programme. School programmes tend to be informal and learners' minds are not

yet cluttered with facts to be stored and tested. They may have little or no homework and are less stressed by having to achieve set standards. *Fourthly*, children who have the opportunity to pick up a second language while they are still young appear to use the same innate language learning strategies throughout life when learning other languages. Picking up third, fourth, or even more languages is easier than picking up the second one. *Fifthly*, young learners who acquire language rather than consciously learn it, as older children and adults have to, are more likely to have better pronunciation and feel for the language and culture. When monolingual children reach puberty and become more self-conscious, their ability to pick up language diminishes and they feel they have to consciously study a second language through grammar-based programmes. The age at which this change occurs depends greatly on the individual child's developmental levels as well as the expectations of their society.

There are three stages of picking up a foreign language [2]:

- silent period. When babies learn their native language, there is a "silent period", when they look, listen and communicate through facial expression or gestures before they begin to speak. When young children learn a second language, there may be a similar "silent period" when communication and understanding may take place before they actually speak any foreign language words. During this time parents should not force children to take part in spoken dialogue by making them repeat words. Spoken dialogues should be one-sided, the adult's talk providing useful opportunities for the child to pick up a language. Where the adult uses parentese (an adjusted form of speech) to facilitate learning, the child may use many of the same strategies they used in learning their native language:

- Beginning to talk. After some time, depending on the frequency of foreign language sessions, each child (girls

often more quickly than boys) begins to say single words ("cat", "house") or ready-made short phrases ("What's that?", "It's my book", "I can't", "That's a car", "Time to go home") in dialogues or as unexpected statements. The child has memorised them, imitating the pronunciation exactly without realising that some may consist of more than one word. This stage continues for some time as they child picks up more language using it as a short cut to dialogue before they are ready to create their own phrases.

• Building up a foreign language. Gradually children build up phrases consisting of a single memorised word to which they add words from their vocabulary ("a dog", "a brown dog", "a brown and black dog") or a single memorised language to which they add their own input ("That's my chair", "Time to play"). Depending on the frequency of exposure to a foreign language and the quality of experience, children gradually begin to create whole sentences.

Children learn a foreign language by [8]:

- having more opportunities to be exposed to a foreign language;
- making associations between words, languages, or sentence patterns and putting things into clear, relatable contexts;
- using all their senses and getting fully involved; by observing and copying, doing things, watching and listening;
- exploring, experimenting, making mistakes and checking their understanding;
- repetition and feeling a sense of confidence when they have established routines;
- being motivated, particularly when their peers are also speaking / learning other languages.

Young children find it more difficult to pick up a foreign language if they are not provided with the right type of a foreign language learning environment, accompanied by adult support using "parentese" techniques [2]. Young children need to feel secure and know that there is

some obvious reason for using a foreign language. Activities need to be linked to some interesting everyday activities about which they already know, for example, sharing an English picture book, saying a rhyme in English, having an "English" snack. Activities are accompanied by adult language giving a running commentary about what is going on and dialogues using adjusted parentese language. English sessions are fun and interesting, concentrating on concepts children have already understood in their native language. In this way children are not learning two things, a new concept as well as a new language, but merely learning a second language to talk about something they already know. Activities are backed up by specific objects, where possible, as this helps understanding and increases general interest.

**Discussion.** Foreign language learning at an early childhood is essentially a personal and social process. In the light of our present knowledge about foreign language learning, there can be no doubt that children at an early age, especially in natural contexts, but also in tutored contexts, can learn and do learn a foreign language. The conditions for effective foreign language learning at an early age are taking into account the individual psychological and age characteristics of young learners, formation a sense of confidence and motivation for success.

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## ПСИХОЛОГІЧНІ АСПЕКТИ ВИВЧЕННЯ ІНОЗЕМНОЇ МОВИ У РАНЬОМУ ВІЦІ

Грабовська І. В.

**Анотація.** У статті досліджуються психологічні аспекти вивчення іноземної мови у ранньому віці. Визначаються особливості розвитку когнітивних процесів учнів дошкільного та молодшого шкільного віку. Підкреслюється роль учителів та батьків у формуванні сприятливих для розвитку особистості умов.

**Ключові слова:** психологічний аспект, когнітивні процеси, ранній вік, іноземна мова.