

The Role of Informal English Language Teaching in Childhood on English Knowledge and Attitude towards English Language in Adulthood

Marzie Mobtada, Islamic Azad University Science & Research Branch, Iran
Aliakbar Saif, Islamic Azad University Science & Research Branch, Iran

The Asian Conference on Education 2018
Official Conference Proceedings

Abstract

The purpose of this study was to investigate the role of informal English language teaching in childhood on English knowledge and attitude towards English language in adulthood. The research design was of a causal-comparative nature. The statistical population included all the first year undergraduate students of Islamic Azad Universities who had been studying humanities in the academic year of 2015-2016. A sample size of 200 students were selected by multistage cluster sampling method. The research tools were English knowledge test and attitude questionnaire which were developed by the researcher. Statistical analyses using MANOVA was implemented. Findings revealed that the informal English language teaching in childhood, as compared to its absence, leads to more English knowledge and improves attitude towards English language in adulthood. Based on the obtained results, it is recommended that English language learning should be started at an earlier age.

Keywords: English language, English Education, informal teaching, English knowledge, attitude towards English language

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Introduction

In the learning process as well as the success of learners in the second language learning [and foreign language], emotional variables such as attitude, orientation, motivation, and anxiety (Noels, Pelletier & Vallerand, 2000), are as important as other variables such as talent, intelligence, age, and personality (Zainal Abidin, Pour-Mohammadi and Alzawari, 2012). In most researches in the field of foreign and second language learning among the various factors mentioned, the age starting of language learning and the attitude of learners towards language learning are considered to be the most important factors involved.

Attitude plays an important role in language learning. Success or failure of learners in learning a language is not just related to learning capacity and cognitive abilities of people, attitude also plays a very important role (Zainol Abidin, Pour-Mohammadi and Alzawari, 2012).

Even the attitude towards a language influences one's orientations towards that particular language. According to Karahan (2007), a positive linguistic attitude allows learners to adopt a positive orientation towards learning English.

Due to the importance of individual's attitude towards language learning process and the success and failure rates in this field, many related studies have been carried out over the past years. Researches have been done by individuals such as Gardner (1985), Yang (2012), and Ahmed (2015) to highlight the key role of this variable in the process of learning and teaching foreign and second languages. Various studies have shown that age and its related factors are considered as the most important variables in the field of language learning. The early years of life are the most influential years in human life for the acquisition of languages. In the early years of life, emotional, physical, cognitive, psychological, and also linguistic changes take place very rapidly. Foreign language education is expanding to children all over the world, and as a result, the age of language learning has also declined in many countries for a variety of reasons, such as political, economic, and educational ones. Although the results of language teaching have not been completely discovered in the early years of life, education is still widespread in the early years of life (Gursoy, 2011).

There is no consensus on the teaching of English as a foreign or second language in childhood between specialists and researchers. A group of them defended education in this era, and the other group is opposed to it. Researches have done by Fathman (1975), Dominguez and Pessoa (2005), Orhan Kocaman, Nurgul and Kocaman (2012) and Li (2014) support foreign and second language learning in childhood. In addition, individuals such as Johnson and Newport (1989), Asher and Garcia (1969; quoted by Marinova-Todd, Bradford Marshal and Snow, 2000), Khalifa Gawi (2012) who advocate a critical period hypothesis (CPH), and agree to learn English in childhood. Another group of professionals, such as Snow and Hoefnagel-Hohle (1978), Rivera (1988), quoted by Marinova-Todd, Bradford Marshall and Snow (2000) who oppose

the critical period hypothesis, consider adults in comparison with children as having great advantages in learning foreign and second languages.

In addition to the starting age of education, it is also very important to consider the type of attitude that individuals are taking with regard to the time they start teaching as well as the environment and the instructor. In relation to the points discussed above was decided to investigate the role of informal English language teaching in childhood on English knowledge and attitude towards English language in adulthood.

Method

Society and Statistical Sample

The research design is a causal-comparative. The statistical population of this study is the first year undergraduate students of Islamic Azad Universities based in Tehran, who had been studying humanities in the academic year of 2015-2016. The sample size was calculated based on Krejcie and Morgan table to be 200 people. The sampling method was a multi-stage cluster type. The sample was randomly selected from all the branches of Islamic Azad University located in Tehran, according to the number of sampled students (Islamic Azad University- South Tehran Branch and Islamic Azad University- Central Tehran Branch).

Tools

English Language Knowledge Test: In order to prepare the English language test and determine its content validity, first of all the table of specifications for a summative test in English was prepared; English books of second and third grades of senior high school of old system of Iran's education. To prepare English language test, the following books were used according to the specifications table: English books of second grade of senior high school; second and third grades of senior high school and college English books of old system of Iran's education, complementary books, preparation books for university entrance examination, and final exam questions. Later on, a test of four option multiple choice according to the rules for preparing multiple choice questions (Saif, 1395) was designed. This test taking into account the psychometric criteria included 100 questions for implementation and preliminary study (Pilot Study) were designed. Then, this test was carried out after the confirmation of professors on a small group of statistical sample of educational science students from the Faculty of Psychology and Educational Sciences of Islamic Azad University- Central Tehran Branch involving 26 students. Later on, in order to analyze the test questions, the difficulty coefficients and the discriminant coefficients of the questions were calculated. Therefore, very difficult or very easy and defective questions were removed and the final test in the form of 50 questions test for running on two groups of the main sample from the statistical population was prepared. The validity of this test was also considered through content validity using the specifications table as well as the opinion of the experts in this field (supervisor professor). This test has a decent validity. The reliability of this test was also reported

through the internal consistency method, using the Kuder-Richardson method (KR21) of 0.91.

Attitude Questionnaire: In order to prepare the survey questionnaire, the Attitude/Motivation Test Battery (Gardner, 2004), an English version of 104 items, was selected among the available tools. Gardner's questionnaire (2004) has been developed and expanded to address the need to measure emotional variables, and has evolved following long-term researches which many of them are based on English-language students who have learned French as a second language. According to the literature review of the present study, this questionnaire was used more than other ones and also by various researchers. Then, from different items of this questionnaire, those who were appropriate with regard to the title, goals, and questions of the present research were selected, and other appropriate items were added to them. This questionnaire is a self-reporting tool and is a closed-ended response test. Therefore, the questionnaire consisting of 20 items was developed to assess the attitude towards foreign language, with a focus on English. Each item is a simple sentence that is set in the form of a Likert scale with four-choice responses. The entire spectrum is totally in agreement to completely disagree; I completely disagree with number 1 and I totally agree with number 4 points. This process of counting according to the items meaning are reversal in questions numbers 3, 7, 14, 15, and 16; therefore, the minimum score is 20 and the maximum one is 80. Validity of this questionnaire was determined through content validity by using the opinion of experts in this field, it has a proper validity. Its reliability was also reported through the internal consistency method and using the Cronbach's alpha of 0.92.

Methods of Data Collection

In order to collect information, two groups of first year undergraduate students of Islamic Azad University were selected randomly from Tehran branches, who had been studying humanities in the academic year 2015-2016. The first group consisted of students who had done English studies before formal education, so that when they entered the English language classroom at school, they had a background in learning English and the other group included students who entered the English language class of school without any prior English language learning. A questionnaire with demographic information was distributed amongst students. The data were coded and later analyzed by SPSS software.

Data Analysis Method

In order to analyze the data, a multivariate analysis of variance (MANOVA) was used. Bartlett, Box's M, and Levene tests were also used to examine the assumptions.

Findings

In order to answer the research questions, the Multivariate Analysis of Variable (MANOVA) was used. Before using MANOVA, the assumptions were checked. The results of Bartlett's test ($F= 17.99$, $P < 0.001$) shows that there is a sufficient

correlation between dependent variables. The results of Box's M test were significant for the variance-covariance matrix homogeneity assessment in dependent variables ($F= 0.33$, $P < 0.05$); accordingly, homogeneity condition of the variance-covariance matrix was not observed, but due to the equality of group size versus failure to adhere to this assumption is not sensitive.

Table 1: Leven's Test Results

Variables	F	df1	Df2	Sig
English Language Knowledge	24.31	1	198	0.001
Attitude Towards English Language	0.14	1	198	0.70

As it can be seen in Table 1, the results of Leven's test for defining the assumption of equality of dependent variables variance indicates that the variances in attitude scores are equal and there is no significant difference between the two groups ($P > 0.05$), but the variances are not the same in knowledge scores ($P < 0.05$). Multivariate analysis of variance is not sensitive to the lack of compliance with this assumption due to the equality of group size. Currently all the assumptions are examined and the next table shows the main result of the multivariate analysis of variance.

The results of the Wilk's Lambda test show that the difference between the groups mean in the composite dependent variable is significant [$F = (2 \text{ \& } 197) 23.43, P < 0.001, \text{Partial}\eta^2 = 0.19$]. This means that there is a significant difference between the linear composition of the mean of dependent variables in the two groups. After applying Wilk's Lambda, which is meaningful, the results of the analysis related to the effects between the subjects were examined, which can be seen in Table 2.

Table 2: Results of multivariate analysis of variance of group effects (teaching) on dependent variables

Resources	Dependent Variable	SS	df	MS	F	Sig	Eta Squared
Group	English Knowledge	5110.605	1	5110.605	44.208	0.001	0.183
	Attitude Towards English	1250	1	1250	12.52	0.001	0.060
Error	English Knowledge	22889.75	198	115.605			
	Attitude Towards English	19757.68	198	99.786			

As it is seen in Table 2, there is a significant difference between the two groups of trained and not trained subjects in English knowledge [$F = (1 \text{ \& } 198) 44.208, P < 0.001, \text{Partial}\eta^2 = 0.183$]. In this way, the English knowledge scores of people

trained in childhood are significantly higher than those who have not been trained in childhood. The group variable explains 18.3% of variance of English knowledge.

There is a significant difference between the two groups of trained and not trained subjects in attitude towards English [$F = (1 \text{ \& } 198) 12.52, P < 0.001, \text{Partial}\eta^2 = 0.060$]. In this way, attitude towards English score of those who are trained in childhood are significantly higher than those who have not been trained in childhood. The group variable represents 6% of variance in attitude towards English.

Discussion and conclusions

According to the results of this study, those who studied English in their childhood (6 to 12 years old) had more English knowledge than those who began to learn from school. The results of this study are similar to those of Orhan Kocamen and Nurgul Kocamen (2012), Dominguez and Pessoa (2005), Li (2014), and Khalifa Gawi (2012), but they were not consistent with the research of Gorjian, Mahmoudi and Mir (2010). In the study of Gorjian, Mahmoudi and Mir (2010), there was no significant relationship between attitude, age, gender, and English language learning; in this study, although age does not affect the language learning, but in Iran, the age variable can be associated with social and psychological limitations which is examined that it may affect the process of language learning, so it may not be coherent because of various factors, such as differences in statistical populations and samples, time and environment of testing and ignoring some other influential factors. Therefore, the results of these studies indicate the success of children in learning English. Considering childhood as a golden age to learn a variety of concepts and subjects, including foreign or second language, it is vital to take advantage of children's abilities at this time. Also, according to critical period hypothesis that children's success is due to neurological and biological factors, during this period, children have very good rote memory and this ability is very effective to help success. In addition, the children's rote memory capacity is also high and does not let them rely on rote learning. Also, the child's brain in the early stages of adolescence absorbs new sounds and patterns easily; thus, learning English as a foreign language plays a key role in children's educational programs. In addition, children can learn other languages similar to their mother tongue without the need to use the grammatical rules consciously; similar to the mother tongue, hearing is the first source of children's learning, which first only stored what they heard and then they speak of what they have only heard for a long time, precisely the process that they adopt in native language (there are differences of opinion with respect to different theories). With using natural approach, English language environment and not teaching in classroom, children learning process is more successful than adult, although children are not ready for classroom learning and will not succeed. It should also be considered that age is only one of the important factors in learning a language and neglecting other effective factors leads to deceptive conclusions. Factors such as teaching method and, the learning strategies adopted, and the learning environment are also very important; therefore, given the role that the age factor plays in learning English, starting to teach English to children of ages under 12 years old, in order to enhance their English

knowledge in adulthood, it is essential that the results of this study have been in the same direction.

One of the other studied variables is attitude towards English. According to the results of present study, those who studied English in their childhood (6 to 12 years old) had better attitude towards English language than those who had started their learning from school. The results of this study are consistent with Karahan's research (2007). As a matter of fact, age was the only factor which have been used by Karahan, but in this study, in addition to considering the age, the place where the training began; school or institute, it was considered as the main factor. Attitude is considered as an essential component of language learning. Teachers and educators of English as a foreign language need to be aware and respect students' feelings, beliefs, orientations, personality traits, and behaviors before thinking about their cognitive abilities. Also, educational programs and classroom activities should be created and implemented according to the students' individual needs and differences in order to create a positive attitude towards English. Therefore, due to the important role that the attitude plays in the academic achievement of learners, various studies and researches in this field is of great importance; consequently parents and educational leaders are encouraged to start teaching English from childhood. It is also suggested to English teachers and educators not to ignore learners' attitudes towards English language, but to respond to them and be aware of students' prior perceptions and attitudes towards English language.

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