Children versus adults in learning a second language

Many of us have witnessed their children growing up and acquiring their first language without formal instructions. Children pick up languages effortlessly and exceed fluency in a timely manner. Yet, and after a certain age, the process of language acquisition (SLA) decelerates and becomes more complicated. Therefore, many believe that children are better learners than adults when it comes to acquiring a second language. This argument is not necessarily true since the concept of second language acquisition is complex and it involves many theories and systematic studies.

Essentially, first language acquisition and second language acquisition are two different cases, and therefore; making a clear distinction between the two is essential to understand the concept of second language learning. Since first language acquisition is considered normal for children and abnormal for adults, the distinction will usually be made between first/second language learning in children and second language learning in adults. The study of the distinction between children and adults’ SLA has led to the formation of many hypotheses including the critical period hypothesis (CPH).

The critical period hypothesis can be defined as "a biologically determined period of life when language can be acquired more easily and beyond which time language is increasingly difficult to acquire" (Brown 57). Although there hasn’t been a consensus about a certain age number, many scholars claim that the process of acquiring a second language declines after puberty. Unlike adults, children are able to achieve a native-like accent because their speech muscles are still developing. Therefore, they are more likely to pick up correct articulation of
letters and words from different languages than adults. However, in some cases, children fail to acquire their first language due to the lack of a certain stimuli in their environment. According to the behavioral approach, one of the school thoughts on first language acquisition, language learning is based on linguistic response reinforcement rather than age. Such arguments tend to draw a lot of doubts on the application of the critical period hypothesis and its relation to achieve fluency.

Another important factor that affects the process of acquiring a second language in adults and children is the role of the cognitive abilities. Jean Piaget expands on the role of intellectual development in a child and its relation to acquiring a second language (Brown 65). He proposes that leaning a language is a gradual process. Initially, children learn the language unconsciously through sensory inputs such as audio and visual aids. Their cognitive abilities are still underdeveloped; therefore, they are not aware of their acquisition process. On the other hand, adults are cognitively mature and completely aware of their learning. According to many studies, both implicit learning and mature cognition are varied cases and can, equally, lead to language fluency. However, what may constitute a key difference in this regard is the learning context; for example, children learn the language by superficial imitation in a communicative context. Yet, adults learn the language by means of memorization and drilling without a meaningful context. Consequently, the lack of a meaningful learning context can usually obstruct the learning process for adults.

The study of second language acquisition in adults and children is a broad topic. In fact, there are no easy answers in the field of language acquisitions, but there are core concepts that
need to be comprehended in order to grasp the big picture. That is, it is important to become aware of the key differences and similarities between children’s and adults’ language learning. The ultimate question should not be about “who” is better in learning a second language as much as it should be about “what” makes a good second language learner and what are the distinct features of child’s and adults’ second language acquisition.

**The prevalence of bilingualism**

The existence of language diversity is becoming part of any modern society. Languages are important means of survival, communication, and success. The more languages we know, the better we discover, understand, analyze, communicate and produce. Acquiring a second language is a result of many factors. People can learn a second language through formal instructions and intrinsic/extrinsic motivation. In addition, kids who are born in a bilingual family usually grow up bilingual. Acquiring a second language can also occur in case of immigration due to the need to communicate with the speakers of the dominant culture.

For example, studies show that Latino groups, which are the most growing minority in the US, have the highest rate of bilingualism. In the other hand, white Americans and African Americans are usually considered “exclusively monolingual” (Farley, Haaja 363). The dominance of Latino minority over other minorities in the US made Spanish the second most spoken language in America as it’s spoken by 34 million of the total US population. In this sense, immigration has played a key role in spreading bilingualism as an essential means of communication between the different groups within the society.

Today, bilingualism is not seen as un-American. More and more Americans are sending their children to dual language schools. Indeed, there is a growing appreciation toward
bilingualism and its impeccable rewards. Professionally speaking, Bilingualism is an asset, and sometimes, a necessity in workplaces. Moreover, scientifically, it has practical benefits on the human brain. For instance, it boosts the cognitive abilities and promotes creativity. Studies show that bilingual kids are usually more capable than monolingual kids in performing certain intellectual tasks such as puzzles and problem-solving games. To sum up, there is a growing demand for bilingualism in today’s modern world, but most of all, and regardless of our linguistic differences, such linguistic diversity should be celebrated and transmitted through generations.

The nature of errors in adults’ second language acquisition

The process of learning involves making mistakes and errors, including the process of learning a second language. In fact, the recurrence of mistakes is not a defect; rather, it is a sign of comprehension and development. For adults, it is important to understand the source of errors in acquiring a second language in order to discover our innate linguistic structure. First of all, errors and mistakes are two different concepts. Making a mistake while using the language is usually considered a slip of tongue rather than a systematic error. Native speakers make mistakes but they are able to correct themselves instantly since they are competent in the language. On the other hand, errors are usually made by second language (L2) learners due to their incompetent performance in the target language. A good example of errors is the awkwardness of the structure in a written or a spoken form. The question to be raised is: does the absence of errors reflect full competence in the target language? Not always, because many SLA learners tend to avoid certain problematic areas and structures in the target language.
People may wonder why are certain errors made, and what are the underlying causes of such errors. The answers of these questions are usually the essences of the learners’ analysis in the field of SLA. Researches have concluded some key sources of errors in SLA, such as the **interlingual transfer** from the native language. The previous linguistic background of the SLA learner can heavily affect the process of language acquisition. Also, errors can be a reason of an **intralingual transfer**, i.e., a transfer within the target language. Many SLA learners tend to over generalize a certain grammatical rule such as using negative forms –do not- with an auxiliary verb –can/cannot. **The context of learning** is another essential source of errors. Learning a second language within classrooms, family, or communities have a great impact of the learner’s acquisition process. The linguistic milieu can greatly affect the learner’s accent, word choice, and his/her general use of the language.

Another interesting area of study is the case of fossilization. Second language learners go through gradual developmental stages of their second language learning until they reach the stage of fossilization. In other words, fossilization occurs when the linguistic development process reaches a consistent stage where the learner has acquired the fundamental principles of fluent communication. This phenomenon carries both positive and negative impacts on SLA. Having a foreign accent, which is not necessary a negative impact, is one example of fossilization due to learning SLA after puberty (Brown 270). Fossilization can also be the case with some SLA learners who have strong commands of the target language yet they still have persistent grammatical errors in their speech. Although there is still an ongoing debate over fossilization and stabilization in SLA, what matters is that there is always a room for improvement.
Lastly, it is important to put in mind that the ultimate goal of second language learning is to attain the fluency of sound communication. Having too much attention on language errors can be severely discouraging and may obstruct the process of learning a second language. Nevertheless, being able to self-correct, and setting goals to focus on the weak areas in the target language are rewarding attributes L2 learners should ultimately acquire.