THE EFFECT OF AGE ON SECOND LANGUAGE VOCABULARY ACQUISITION

Ashirova Mashxura Bakjon qizi
A student at Chirchik State Pedagogical University

Kosimova Kumush Golib kizi
EFL teacher at Chirchik State Pedagogical University

Abstract: This paper explores the impact of age on the process of acquiring vocabulary in a second language, focusing on both theoretical insights and practical implications. Research in the fields of linguistics, cognitive psychology, and language pedagogy suggests that age plays a significant role in language learning efficiency, particularly in vocabulary development. Younger learners are believed to possess greater neuroplasticity, allowing for faster and more intuitive acquisition, while older learners often rely more on metacognitive strategies and explicit learning techniques. The study examines age-related differences in memory capacity, phonological processing, and motivation, as well as external factors such as teaching methods and learning environments. By comparing the vocabulary acquisition patterns of different age groups in Uzbekistan, the paper aims to identify age-sensitive approaches to language instruction and to contribute to the development of more effective language education policies. The findings are relevant for educators, curriculum designers, and policymakers aiming to enhance second language learning outcomes across age demographics.

Keywords age factor, second language acquisition, vocabulary development, language learning strategies, cognitive development, critical period hypothesis, adult learners, young learners.

INTRODUCTION

In recent decades, the study of second language acquisition (SLA) has increasingly focused on the role of age as a determining factor in the success and efficiency of language learning. Vocabulary acquisition, as a fundamental component of linguistic competence, is especially sensitive to cognitive, neurological, and motivational changes associated with age. Researchers have long debated whether there exists a "critical period" during which language learning is most effective, and to what extent vocabulary acquisition is influenced by this developmental window. This issue becomes particularly important in multilingual and educationally diverse contexts such as Uzbekistan, where English and other foreign languages are taught across various age groups in schools, universities, and adult learning programs.

Age affects vocabulary acquisition through several interconnected mechanisms. Younger learners tend to acquire new words implicitly through exposure and repetition, often benefiting from greater neuroplasticity and phonological memory. Conversely, older learners typically rely on explicit learning strategies, such as conscious memorization, contextual analysis, and translation. These strategies are often supported by a more developed understanding of grammatical rules and linguistic structures. However, the decline in working memory and processing speed that may accompany aging can pose obstacles to efficient vocabulary retention and retrieval.

RESULTS

In addition to biological and cognitive aspects, socio-affective variables also contribute to differences in vocabulary learning across age groups. Motivation, anxiety, self-confidence, and cultural attitudes toward language learning can enhance or hinder lexical development. For instance, young children may be more willing to experiment with language and make mistakes, whereas adults might be more cautious or inhibited. On the other hand, adult learners often demonstrate stronger goal-orientation and self-regulation, which can compensate for cognitive limitations.

This paper aims to analyze the effect of age on second language vocabulary acquisition from both theoretical and empirical perspectives. It draws upon current findings in applied linguistics, psycholinguistics, and education to understand how age-related differences manifest in vocabulary learning outcomes. Furthermore, it evaluates language learning policies and practices in Uzbekistan to determine whether they align with research-based principles of age-appropriate instruction. By comparing learning outcomes across different age cohorts, the study seeks to offer practical recommendations for teachers and curriculum developers who design language instruction for various learner populations.

The relationship between age and second language vocabulary acquisition is multifaceted, encompassing neurological, cognitive, affective, and social dimensions. One of the most widely discussed concepts in the literature is the Critical Period Hypothesis (CPH), which posits that there is a biologically determined window during which language learning occurs most naturally and efficiently. While the CPH is more strongly supported for phonology and syntax, its relevance to vocabulary learning remains debated. Some studies suggest that lexical learning remains robust well into adulthood, albeit through different mechanisms compared to childhood acquisition.

Younger learners, particularly those below the age of 12, often exhibit superior phonological processing and greater ease in acquiring native-like pronunciation and intonation. Their vocabulary learning is largely incidental and based on immersive experiences, such as songs, stories, and games. These learners typically do not rely on

conscious strategies but acquire new words through contextual exposure and frequent use. This process benefits from the high degree of brain plasticity characteristic of early childhood, which allows for rapid formation and reorganization of neural connections.

In contrast, older learners tend to engage in deliberate vocabulary learning. Adolescents and adults often apply metacognitive strategies such as repetition, association, word mapping, and using dictionaries. They are also more likely to use translation from their first language, which, while effective in some cases, may inhibit deeper lexical processing. However, mature learners compensate for reduced neuroplasticity with increased analytical ability, literacy skills, and awareness of grammatical structures, which can aid in processing and retaining more complex vocabulary.

Memory also plays a critical role in age-related differences. Working memory capacity, which peaks in early adulthood and gradually declines with age, significantly affects the ability to store and retrieve new words. Younger learners may retain vocabulary more intuitively, while older learners require structured review sessions to reinforce lexical knowledge. Long-term memory, on the other hand, tends to remain stable or even improve with age, suggesting that older learners may retain learned vocabulary more consistently if adequately practiced.

Motivation and emotional factors further distinguish age groups. Young children are typically motivated by enjoyment and social interaction, while adults are more likely to be instrumentally motivated, learning a language for career advancement, travel, or migration. High levels of motivation have been shown to override cognitive limitations, especially in adult learners. Nonetheless, older learners may face affective barriers such as anxiety, self-doubt, or lack of time, which can negatively impact vocabulary acquisition.

METHODS

Contextual and environmental variables also influence age-related learning differences. In Uzbekistan, for example, formal English instruction begins in early primary education, yet opportunities for immersive and communicative practice are often limited. Adult learners may face even greater obstacles due to professional obligations or lack of access to formal education. Thus, the success of vocabulary acquisition is not solely dependent on age, but also on the quality and relevance of the learning environment, availability of resources, and the use of age-appropriate pedagogical approaches.

This section has demonstrated that age influences second language vocabulary acquisition through a combination of biological, cognitive, and social factors. The

following conclusion will synthesize these findings and propose practical recommendations based on the analysis.

The effect of age on second language vocabulary acquisition is complex and shaped by a dynamic interplay of neurological, cognitive, emotional, and environmental factors. While younger learners possess certain biological advantages—such as higher neuroplasticity and stronger phonological memory—that facilitate incidental and natural vocabulary acquisition, older learners bring distinct strengths to the process, including strategic awareness, analytical thinking, and goal-oriented motivation. These differences do not imply that one age group is inherently superior to another in language learning but rather that the learning process unfolds differently depending on the learner's age and circumstances.

DISCUSSION

This thesis has shown that vocabulary learning does not strictly adhere to the constraints of the Critical Period Hypothesis. Although early exposure may lead to more native-like lexical fluency, older learners are fully capable of acquiring a wide vocabulary range through structured and intentional learning strategies. Age-related cognitive decline, such as reduced working memory capacity, can be mitigated through pedagogical interventions such as spaced repetition, multimodal learning, and contextual usage. Moreover, emotional and motivational factors—often stronger in adult learners—can significantly enhance vocabulary retention when instruction is personalized and meaningful.

The findings of this research carry important implications for language education in Uzbekistan and beyond. Given the diverse age range of learners in formal and informal educational settings, language instruction should be tailored to developmental characteristics. For younger learners, playful immersion, story-based input, and interaction-rich environments are essential. For adolescents and adults, instruction should focus on explicit vocabulary-building strategies, frequent practice, and integration with real-life needs such as academic or professional communication.

Language policy planners and educators should reconsider one-size-fits-all approaches and instead implement differentiated instructional models that align with the age-related needs and strengths of learners. This may include developing age-specific materials, training teachers in age-sensitive methodologies, and ensuring access to language-rich environments for all learners.

In conclusion, age is not a barrier to second language vocabulary acquisition but a variable that requires thoughtful pedagogical adaptation. Future research in Uzbekistan and similar multilingual contexts should continue to investigate age-related factors in vocabulary learning, not only to improve individual outcomes but also to enhance the overall effectiveness and inclusivity of language education systems.

REFERENCES:

1. Ellis, R. (2008). *The study of second language acquisition* (2nd ed.). Oxford University Press.
2. Lightbown, P. M., & Spada, N. (2013). *How languages are learned* (4th ed.). Oxford University Press.
3. Singleton, D., & Ryan, L. (2004). *Language acquisition: The age factor* (2nd ed.). Multilingual Matters.
4. Nation, I. S. P. (2001). *Learning vocabulary in another language*. Cambridge University Press.
5. DeKeyser, R. M. (2000). The robustness of critical period effects in second language acquisition. In M. P. Garcia Mayo & R. Hawkins (Eds.), *Second language acquisition and the critical period hypothesis* (pp. 199–233). Routledge.
6. Komilova, M. (2024). LANGUAGE AND SOCIAL INEQUALITY: A PRAGMATIC PERSPECTIVE. *University Research Base*, 809–813. Retrieved from https://scholar.kokanduni.uz/index.php/rb/article/view/732
7. Komilova, M. (2024). THE POWER OF CONCEPTS: EXPLORING THEMES AND THEIR MANIFESTATIONS IN LITERARY TEXTS. *University Research Base*, 814-817.
8. NO, P. (2025). The role of cognitive linguistics in language evolution.
9. NO, P. The role of cognitive linguistics in language evolution.
10. Rajapova, M. (2023). BADIIY USLUB VA ALLEGORIYANING O'ZIGA HOS XUSUSIYATLARI TADQIQI. *Педагогика и психология в современном мире: теоретические и практические исследования*, *2*(9), 121-124.