

# The Younger, the Better?

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**Abstract:** ‘The younger, the better’ is a strong slogan in some second language learning contexts. It is subject to heated debates on age constraints and advantages in second language learning and bilingual education. This study choose to focus on either second-language learners or students in bilingual education and investigate their language ideologies. The empirical data of this essay should help people to discuss the view of the assumption ‘the younger, the better’ in corresponding contexts.

**Keywords:** ‘The Younger, The Better’; Bilingual Education; Second-Language Education; Language Ideologies

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## 1. Introduction

The slogan about ‘the younger, the better’ have been a heated debates in young learners’ second language education. There are many researchers hold different viewpoints that compare with older learners, whether young learners have better performance in second language learning or not. For example, Singleton (1995) claims that ‘the older is faster, but the young is better’ in second language learning. However, Manan and Khadija-Tul-Kubra (2017) believed that age is not the only factor of language development. That means the age is not the only element to evaluate the quality of second language learning. Therefore, the concept of ‘the younger, the better’ is partly right in second language learning. Because some researchers might exaggerate its importance and ignore other significant factors in second language learning. The purpose of this empirical project is that through to explore the same age learners’ language ideologies proved the perspective about ‘the younger, the better’ is not the only element to influence the learners’ success achievement of second language learning. Besides, this qualitative research employed the Strauss and Corbin’s (1998) Grounded Theory approach to investigate two same age L2 (second language) young learners motivation and attitudes and their impact on the success achievement of second language learning.

## 2. Literature Review

### 2.1 ‘the younger, the better’

Some researchers put forward the viewpoint of ‘the younger, the better’ , which means that age has a certain impact on learners’ second language learning. Such as, Carroll (1999) proposed that learners need a long time to learn a language, sooner rather than later. Similarly, Cook (1991) believed that the learners are learning the second language in their early age, they will speak it like the native speaker. All of these ideas are related to the Critical Period Hypothesis (CPH). To be specific, the human brain is malleable, especially from 2 years old to adolescence, in this period language acquisition can occur naturally (Huang, 2013). It means that this stage is appropriate for learners to leaning second language. However, some lingists observed that although the language learning ability will continuously decline by the age, the learners’ second language learning is not necessarily restricted to critical periods. Because the combination of these factors will affect the learners’ learning outcome.

### 2.2 Language Ideologies

Jeon (2007) claimed that language ideologies are the ideas, beliefs and values about language that held by a group of

people. In brief, language ideologies are beliefs and feelings about language that shape the way people use language, and it 'constructed from the sociocultural experience of the speaker' (Kroskrity, 2004). Besides, Irvine (2012) considered that 'language ideologies are conceptualizations about languages, speakers, and discursive practices'. Different from others ideologies, language ideologies have been deeply affected by political and moral interests, while it shaped in a cultural setting. Thus, to investigate the language ideologies is not only need to understand the language itself and the way of speaking of the speaker in a particular situation, but also need to know the role of language in a social or cultural world. Because of learner language ideologies are malleable (McGroarty, 2010). So, it is very important to explore how language ideologies (motivation and attitudes) are expressed through second language learners' language in this research.

### **3. Research Design**

#### **3.1 Research Context**

This empirical project was conducted a qualitative case study of two third grade primary school students, who were enrolled in the same international primary school in the city of Xi'an in China. These two students are the English as the second language learners. They are the same age and have same English learning experience. Their language ideologies might reflect other important factors which influence on second language learning, except age factor.

#### **3.2 General Objective**

Through to analysis the language ideologies of two L2 young learners, proved the age factor is not the only element to influence the learners' success achievement of second language learning.

#### **3.3 Research Question**

How does the young learners' motivation and attitudes affect on their second language learning?

#### **3.4 Participants**

This empirical project is a case study that includes two third grade international primary school students. One is a boy named Yuan Wang, another is a girl named Xing Xu, and they are classmates. Their native language is Chinese and their ages range 8. As the second language learners, they started learning English at 6 years old (first grade in primary school). As the same age L2 young learners, and both have three years English learning experience. Compare with peers, their English level are between fine and excellent and Xing's English grades are higher than Yuan's.

#### **3.5 Research Assumption**

If young learners as early as possible learning second language, they will learn English better.

#### **3.6 Instruments**

This research mainly uses semi-structured interview (see appendix), it includes five main questions. This instrument covered the learners' motivation and attitudes about their second language learning.

#### **3.7 Research Procedure**

This empirical project includes two parts. Firstly, using the semi-structured interview to collect the research data. The participants were interviewed individually. In order to help the participants to answer the questions more accurately, the main questions were read by the participants before the interview. Secondly, using the Grounded Theory approach to analysis the data.

#### **3.8 Research Method and Analysis**

'Grounded Theory approach is an inductive theory that allows the researcher to develop a theoretical account of the general features of a topic and simultaneously grounding the account in empirical observations or data' (Martin & Turner, 1986). This research guided by Strauss and Corbin's (1998) Grounded Theory approach, and mainly analysis the cases of two students' motivation and attitudes affect on their second language learning.

In this empirical project, firstly, the researcher interviewed these two pupils and transcribed the whole interview. During

the transcription process, the researcher can review the research data about two students' motivation and attitudes. Then, through used the opening coding techniques to identity these concepts. Next, the researcher fining the interrelationships between concepts and categories in axial coding. Finally, the researcher found the core category in selective coding. The most important is check the coded. In order to ensure the result consistency and authenticity, the researcher can constantly to compare the provisional concepts and categories with transcription.

## **4. Findings and Discussion**

### **4.1 Learners' Motivation**

Motivation is a key factor in order to accomplish a particular activity, and it plays an important role in second language learning (Hall, 2011). Gardner (2011) suggests that learners' second language learning process will affected by their learning motivation, which means learners' motivation will strongly associated with their learning process and achievement.

Excerpt 1:

Y: I think pass the exam is an important thing for me...

Excerpt 2:

X: After primary school, I will go to study in America. I believed that I need to study English hard, and I wish I will get good grades in every examinations.

Through the interview, it can be seen that because of different goals, Yuan and Xing have different learning motivation. Which means that their learning motivation will drive them to take suitable approaches to learning, use different learning attitude as well as carry on performed learning plan to meet their needs. To a certain degree, due to different learning motivation, they will get different learning results. For instance, Xing's English grades are higher than Yuan's. From this, it can reflect that the young learners' learning motivation also as a significant factor affects by their second language learning.

### **4.2 Learners' Attitudes**

Gardner and Lambert (1972) take a in-depth research about to explore learners' attitudes influence on second language learning. And they found that if learners with a positive attitude to learning, they will get success achievement in English learning, and vice versa. Similarly, Bartram (2010) believed that attitude is considered a key factor in learning process, which affects and contributes learners to learning second language.

Excerpt 3:

Y: ...I think as long as I finish my homework on time, I will pass the exam...

Excerpt 4:

X: Over the past year, in order to have excellent performance, I recite the English text, take lots of listening practices as well as keep a diary in English, and insist to do it every day.

In this interview, because the two young learners have different learning goals, they might take different learning attitudes in second language learning. Excerpt 6 fully shows that Xing's behaviors represent the positive attitude of her in second language learning. Meanwhile, it will contribute to she has excellent performance in English learning. Compared to Xing, Yuan's learning attitude are indifferent. It might influenced by his learning goal or motivation, while also affect on his learning results. Through the interview, it can conclude that young learners' different learning attitudes will lead them to have different learning process and learning achievement. Thus, as a necessary factor in language learning, attitude has enormous implications for learners' second language learning. Which means that the age factor is not the only element to influence learners' second language learning.

## **5. Conclusion**

This research proposed an assumption that if only young learners as early as possible learning second language, they will learn better. However, based on the above research, it can be seen that although 'the younger, the better' is a strong

slogan in some second language learning contexts, age factor is not the only element in learners' success achievement of second language learning. Therefore, through research, it can show that as the significant factors in language learning, the learners' motivation and attitudes are have enormous implications for learners' second language learning. There is no denying that age does have a certain impact on the learning of second language. But except age element, the impact of other factors (policy, environment, teachers) on learners' second language learning is also worth exploring in future study. Finally, this research has some limitations, such as the change of learners' beliefs, parents' attitudes as well as learners' learning environment need to be considered.

#### **Appendix: Semi-structured interview (some guiding questions)**

1. Do you want to improve your English proficiency?
2. Are you interested in learning English?
3. What is your goal in English learning?
4. In order to completing the goal, what would you do?
5. How do you improve your English academic performance?

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