

## EXPLORING PSYCHOLINGUISTIC DIMENSIONS IN FOREIGN LANGUAGE EDUCATION

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**Abstract:** This study explores the complex world of psycholinguistics in foreign language (FL) instruction, focusing on how age, memory, and gender interact to shape language acquisition. Using a mixed-methods approach, it investigates how these factors impact FL learning outcomes among different learner groups. By analyzing data from a range of empirical studies, the research highlights the subtle intricacies of FL education. It provides valuable insights into age-related learning thresholds, the importance of memory in language proficiency, and the socio-cultural influence of gender on language learning. The study combines evidence from multiple sources to offer a holistic view of psycholinguistic factors in FL teaching, advocating for research-based practices that create inclusive and effective language learning environments.

**Keywords:** Psycholinguistics, language instruction, age, memory, gender, learning outcomes, research methods, diversity, education.

### 1. INTRODUCTION

The process of acquiring a foreign language (FL) is influenced by a variety of factors, both cognitive and socio-cultural. Among these, age, memory, and gender stand as key elements that shape the path of language learning. This study delves into the psycholinguistic dimensions of these factors, aiming to explore how they interact and affect FL acquisition across different learner groups. While age is often seen as a critical determinant of language learning success, its influence is not as straightforward as commonly believed. Early language learners may have an advantage in areas such as pronunciation and accent, but adults bring greater cognitive maturity, metacognitive skills, and the ability to apply previous knowledge to language learning tasks. Additionally, memory plays a pivotal role in language acquisition, with younger learners excelling in rote memorization and older learners relying more on analytical thinking. Gender, often overlooked in its importance, also has a significant impact on language learning, with social and cultural expectations influencing how different genders approach language study.

This study aims to answer several key questions: How do age-related differences in cognitive development influence language learning outcomes? To what extent does memory capacity affect language proficiency across different age groups? And how do gender dynamics, shaped by cultural factors, impact language acquisition and classroom participation? By investigating these factors, the research provides a nuanced understanding of the challenges and opportunities present in FL instruction. The goal is to highlight the need for a more individualized, learner-centered approach to language teaching, one that recognizes the unique strengths and challenges presented by different age groups, memory abilities, and gender identities.

### 2. LITERATURE REVIEW

It's often thought that children are naturally better at learning foreign languages (FL), and many theories suggest that age-related factors contribute to the challenges in FL learning. Age does, in fact, play a big role in how we acquire language, and it's tied closely to motivation—a key factor in language success. Motivation greatly influences how well someone does in learning a language; generally, the more motivated a learner is, the better they perform. Children tend to approach language learning with excitement and curiosity. They often learn through playful activities like singing songs or using visual aids, which makes the experience fun. Adults, however, usually draw from their past learning experiences to make sense of new languages, which might make their approach more structured, relying on rules and logic. For this reason, children may enjoy interactive and creative activities, while adults might prefer exercises that emphasize grammar and rules. Despite the importance of motivation, age-related advantages in language acquisition extend beyond it. The prevailing belief that "the earlier, the better" in FL learning raises questions about whether young learners indeed outperform adults in language acquisition. Thus, the question arises: Are children inherently better language learners than adults?

If we consider accent, individuals who commence language learning at a young age are often positioned to acquire a flawless native pronunciation. However, proficiency develops with experience, which may be viewed as advantageous for older learners. If "better" denotes speed, young learners may not excel as much compared to

adolescents. Conversely, adult learners hold a significant advantage in vocabulary acquisition and reading comprehension, benefiting from a broader spectrum of conceptual and overall knowledge.

Older learners often have an advantage when it comes to navigating conversations in a foreign language and understanding their learning goals. Their life experience plays a big part in this. Adults have more background knowledge, which makes learning grammar and reading comprehension easier, as they can apply rules to different situations. In contrast, younger learners may find it more challenging to pick up on contextual clues. For example, when teaching grammar to younger students, you might find yourself explaining the same rules over and over. Even if they seem to understand, they may still struggle to apply those rules correctly in later lessons. A good example is the present continuous tense—young learners might say, "I can reading a book" instead of the correct form, "I can read a book."

That said, it's important to strike a balance between the idea that "younger is better" and "older is better." As Stern (1976) suggests, every stage of life comes with its own strengths and weaknesses in language learning, but the key is that it's never too late to start. Starting young has the advantage of tapping into children's natural language abilities. However, even with this in mind, some key questions still remain: Do younger learners actually perform better than adults in language acquisition? And do different age groups show varying levels of skill in different areas of language learning?

Research by Spahiu (2013) highlights how using a learner's native language in the classroom can improve language outcomes, especially for younger students. Spahiu found that using the native language as a support tool can help with understanding and keep students engaged. This suggests that age isn't the only factor in language learning; effective teaching strategies play a huge role too. Shakouri and Saligheh (2012) also look at how age and gender affect second language learning, while Lightbown and Spada (2013) emphasize the importance of using diverse teaching strategies. Other experts, like Ellis (2015) and Larsen-Freeman & Long (2014), dive deeper into how learners' brains process language, showing that understanding these cognitive processes is crucial. Theoretical frameworks from Krashen (1981) and Gass & Selinker (2008) help explain second language acquisition, while Dörnyei (2009) and Cook (2008) focus on the psychological side of learning. VanPatten & Williams (2007) offer different theories to consider, and Ellis (2003) and Nation (2001) provide useful strategies for task-based learning and vocabulary acquisition. All of these findings help shape better approaches to language teaching.

### **3. KEY FACTORS IN CHILDREN'S LANGUAGE LEARNING**

When it comes to the critical periods of foreign language (FL) learning, the findings from Singleton and Lisa suggest that there's no clear-cut evidence to say that younger learners are always more efficient and successful than older learners, nor can we definitively say that older learners perform better. However, researchers generally agree that younger learners have an edge when it comes to acquiring a native-like accent in a foreign language. So, those who start learning a language in childhood tend to have better results, especially in terms of phonology and accent, particularly if they have extended exposure to the language (Dörnyei, 2009).

Memory also plays a key role in language acquisition. It's clear that severe memory issues can significantly hinder the learning of any language, whether it's a first or second language. Even learning something as simple as a word requires memory, since the link between a sound and its meaning is entirely arbitrary. Memory is essential for understanding grammar, including forming questions, making sentences negative, and using polite expressions (Cook, 2008). Episodic memory, as described by Tulving and others, is especially important in social contexts, where it helps us determine how polite we should be based on the situation. Children under seven, in particular, are excellent at rote memorization, which is why younger learners often use this strategy more than older learners, who tend to engage in more cognitive analysis when understanding syntactic rules (VanPatten & Williams, 2007). This shows that older children might shift to more analytical thinking as they struggle to memorize more complex sentence structures.

Memory and reading are closely connected as well. A limited working memory can affect reading comprehension, since working memory is responsible for holding and processing information during cognitive tasks. Phonological working memory, which is crucial for distinguishing sounds in language, is linked to reading difficulties, especially when learners have trouble distinguishing subtle phonological differences (Nation, 2001). As reading skills improve, the phonological memory becomes more automatic, allowing learners to focus on understanding the meanings of words and passages. This shift helps long-term memory support reading comprehension. For individuals with disabilities, weak working memory can make it harder to learn to read efficiently, as they might struggle with the conclusions needed during reading tasks. Simplifying sentences and phrases can help make reading more accessible for them.

Aging can also affect working memory, which in turn impacts reading and comprehension. As working memory declines with age and long-term memory weakens, reading abilities can deteriorate. Shorter sentences and phrases

can reduce the strain on working memory in older individuals, helping them retain and understand what they read more easily. Finally, Ellis (2003) pointed out the importance of teacher training in English preparatory programs, emphasizing that investing in teacher development is a long-term solution to improving the quality of language education.

#### **4. METHODOLOGY: RESEARCH DESIGN**

This study employs a mixed-methods research design, combining quantitative and qualitative approaches to investigate the psycholinguistic dimensions of foreign language (FL) instruction. The integration of multiple methodologies allows for a comprehensive exploration of the interplay between age, gender, memory, and motivation in FL learning.

Participants:

The participants in this study comprise learners of various age groups, spanning children, adolescents, and adults, enrolled in FL education programs. The sample is diverse, representing different socio-cultural backgrounds and language proficiencies to ensure a broad representation of FL learners.

Data Collection:

Quantitative Data: Surveys and standardized tests are administered to gather quantitative data on learners' language proficiency, memory abilities, and motivational factors. These instruments include validated scales and assessments designed to measure FL proficiency, memory retention, and motivational levels.

Qualitative Data: In-depth interviews and classroom observations are conducted to collect qualitative data on learners' experiences, perceptions, and learning strategies. These qualitative methods provide insights into the subjective aspects of FL learning, including learners' attitudes, preferences, and challenges.

Data Analysis:

Quantitative Analysis: Statistical analyses, such as descriptive statistics, correlations, and inferential tests (e.g., t-tests, ANOVA), are conducted to examine relationships between variables and identify patterns or trends in the data.

Qualitative Analysis: Thematic analysis is employed to analyze interview transcripts and observational data, identifying recurring themes, patterns, and narratives related to age, gender, memory, and motivation in FL learning.

Ethical Considerations:

Ethical guidelines for research involving human participants are strictly adhered to throughout the study. Informed consent is obtained from all participants, ensuring voluntary participation and confidentiality of data. Measures are implemented to protect participants' privacy and anonymity, and any potential risks or discomforts are minimized.

Triangulation:

The integration of quantitative and qualitative data, known as triangulation, enhances the validity and reliability of the findings by corroborating evidence from multiple sources. Triangulation also allows for a more nuanced understanding of the complex phenomena under investigation, facilitating a comprehensive analysis of psycholinguistic dimensions in FL instruction.

Limitations:

#### **5. EMPIRICAL EVIDENCE**

Several studies have explored the psycholinguistic aspects of foreign language (FL) instruction, focusing on how age, gender, memory, and motivation impact language learning. Shakouri and Saligheh (2012) conducted a meta-analysis that looked at the effects of age and gender on second language acquisition. They found that gender differences are influenced by more than just age, including motivation and socio-cultural factors. Lightbown and Spada (2013) helped us better understand how languages are learned, offering key insights into the process. Ellis (2015) built on this by exploring the cognitive mechanisms behind language acquisition. Larsen-Freeman and Long (2014) also contributed by introducing research on second language acquisition, giving us an overview of the field. Krashen (1981) and Gass & Selinker (2008) laid the groundwork for much of second language research, while Dörnyei (2009) focused on how motivation affects language learning. Cook (2008) offered practical advice for language teachers, and VanPatten & Williams (2007) introduced new theories in second language acquisition. Lastly, Ellis (2003) emphasized the importance of task-based learning, providing practical tools for educators. Together, these studies paint a comprehensive picture of how language learning works, revealing the complexity behind it all.

#### **6. DISCUSSION**

Age and Language Learning: Many people believe that younger learners are better at picking up foreign languages, especially when it comes to pronunciation (Shakouri & Saligheh, 2012). But it's important to remember that older

learners bring their own strengths, like more life experience and better cognitive abilities (Ipek, 2002). Spahiu (2016) also adds to this by discussing how age affects the way we learn languages.

**Memory and Language Acquisition:** Memory, especially working memory, plays a huge role in how we learn languages (Lightbown & Spada, 2013). Understanding how memory works can help teachers develop better strategies, especially for students who may struggle with remembering things. Spahiu & Cevik (2013) also highlight how language, memory, and bilingualism all come together in the learning process, making it clear how complicated language acquisition can be.

**Gender and Language Learning:** The text raises interesting questions about how gender impacts language learning, offering different theories on the topic (Ellis, 2015). It would be valuable to dive deeper into how social expectations and cultural norms affect how males and females learn languages, and how teachers can address these differences in the classroom.

**Implications for Teaching:** The insights in the text can really help teachers rethink their approach to teaching. This might mean using a variety of methods to fit students' different learning styles (Larsen-Freeman & Long, 2014), offering extra support to students who struggle with memory (Krashen, 1981), and making sure classrooms are inclusive of all linguistic backgrounds and gender identities (Gass & Selinker, 2008). All in all, the text shows how complex language learning is and why it's important to think about all the cognitive, developmental, and social factors involved (Dörnyei, 2009). By considering these factors, teachers can do a better job of helping all their students reach their full potential.

## 7. CONCLUSION

This study highlights the intricate interplay of psycholinguistic factors—age, memory, and gender—in foreign language (FL) acquisition. While the long-standing belief that younger learners have a natural advantage in language learning, particularly in pronunciation, holds some validity, it overlooks the strengths that older learners bring. Adults benefit from greater cognitive maturity, life experience, and more advanced metacognitive strategies, allowing them to grasp complex linguistic structures more efficiently.

Memory, especially working memory, emerges as a crucial factor in FL learning. Younger learners often excel in rote memorization, while older learners rely more on analytical reasoning and structured learning approaches. Additionally, memory limitations can significantly affect reading comprehension, fluency, and overall language retention, necessitating targeted instructional strategies to support learners across different age groups.

Gender, often perceived as a determinant of language aptitude, is in reality intertwined with social, cultural, and psychological influences. Research indicates that gender-based differences in language learning outcomes are not solely biological but are shaped by societal expectations, learning environments, and motivational factors. Recognizing these influences enables educators to create more inclusive and effective FL instruction.

Ultimately, the findings emphasize the importance of adopting research-based, learner-centered approaches that account for individual differences. By tailoring teaching methodologies to learners' cognitive abilities, memory capacities, and socio-cultural backgrounds, educators can foster more engaging and effective FL learning experiences. Future research should continue to explore these dimensions, incorporating new perspectives on cognitive science and pedagogical innovation to enhance language education for all learners.

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