



**HÁSKÓLI ÍSLANDS**

**Hugvísindasvið**

# **Second Language Acquisition**

*The Effect of Age, Exposure and Motivation*

**B.A Essay**

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**May 2014**

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### Abstract

This paper explores the effect of age, exposure and motivation on SLA. The study of second language acquisition has been a popular subject for many researchers for centuries. According to many researchers, it has been strongly believed that starting second language acquisition at a young age makes a difference in language learning. Researchers claim that younger language learners are better equipped to learn a new language and are more likely to achieve native-like proficiency in the target language. However, according to several researches this is not entirely true. Research shows that older learners traditionally learn the target language at a faster rate, initially, and according to several researches older learners are able to achieve native-like proficiency level in the target language. Children, however, generally surpass the older learners with time. In a more recent study, motivation seems to play a vital role in the acquisition of a second language, it is important to motivate students to learn the target language, by implementing their interest in the subject for example If young second language learners do not receive enough exposure to the target language, it may affect long term attainment in the target language. Therefore, motivation and exposure play a more important role in the acquisition of second language than age.

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## 1.0 Introduction

The Human language is a complicated system and it is extraordinary that children are able to learn a complex language system at a young age. There are various rules that one must go through in order to acquire language. These rules are explained with linguistics, which refers to the science of language and explains rules such as phonetics, grammar, semantics and pragmatics (Richards, 1992). The acquisition of a second language requires an individual to go through the same stages as in acquiring their first language. This is however a more difficult process for most individuals, especially adults. Second language acquisition refers to one's introduction to a second language after having received native competence in a first language (Fromkin, Rodman & Hyams, 2003). Some children start second language learning early and it emphasizes the use of the target language where they are taught to read and write. It is essential that children receive a massive amount of exposure to the second language in order for them to successfully learn it. The language system is highly complex and one can only truly appreciate it when one is learning a second language.

People learn a second language for various reasons, for example in school and to expand their communication system. Second language learning takes time, organization and effort and in order to learn a second language one must be fluent in one's native tongue. Traditionally, people have no difficulties mastering their mother tongue but their skills to learn additional languages vary. These variations may refer to the learners' age of acquisition. Many studies emphasize the importance of young age when learning a new language. According to many theorists, the older you get the harder it is to learn a second language. Several studies have suggested that age is a relevant factor when it comes to a foreign accent in the L2, and it may be a factor in the production of L2 consonants and vowels. There is also evidence that age is a factor when it comes to learning English morphosyntax (Flege, Komshian & Liu, 1999). In addition to age being an important factor when it comes to learning a second language, research has also shown motivation to be a strong influence on the speed and ease of one's second language learning. Individuals who are told or expected to learn have the greatest difficulties since they are unable to justify their reason for learning. When children are motivated through other means than external compulsion or expectation they are more capable of learning and find it more enjoyable (Krashen, 1981)

This thesis examines that although age is an important factor when it comes to

second language acquisition, motivation and exposure are an even better indicator for successful second language learning.

## **2.0 Second Language Acquisition**

### **2.1 Defining SLA**

Second language acquisition (SLA) refers to the study of any language in addition to the mother tongue. Even though the term Second Language Acquisition is used it applies to any language that is learned succeeding one's mother tongue (Ellis, 1997). Therefore it applies to a third or fourth language as well. A second language is also referred to as the Target language, which is defined by the Merriam-Webster Dictionary as “a language other than one's native language that is being learned”. One needs to be careful of not confusing the terms *Second language* (L2) and *Foreign-language* (FL) learning. Foreign-language learning is defined as learning a language that is not spoken in the learners community in an instructed environment. This includes learning a language in a school setting. Second language learning, however, does not necessarily take place in an instructed setting (De Bot, Lowie & Verspoor, 2005). Second language learning refers to a more natural approach to learning a language. For example, when an individual learns a new language as a result of living in a community where the language is spoken. (Ellis, 1997).

There are several different ways in which L2 can be acquired and they can either be formal or informal. Formally through school or language courses and informally through street and community (Baker, 2011). Children are becoming more exposed to different languages and cultures everyday. The acquisition of a second or third language is becoming more important because it gives wider access to economic and educational information (Baker, 2011). Businesses are becoming international and knowing a second or third language increases the changes of employment and varied career opportunities (Baker, 2011). Learning a second language can therefore be beneficial and in order to fully understand how the process of second language acquisition works, the following chapters will discuss some relevant theories on the matter of second language acquisition.

### **2.2 Theories of SLA**

The acquisition of second language has been a popular subject amongst linguists for centuries. There are various factors that influence the learning of a second language and it

is therefore important to look at some theories that show how this process works successfully. Some of the earlier theorists base their findings on first language (L1) acquisition since it is perceived to influence second language learning (Ellis, 1997). This section will look into *The Role of Consciousness* when learning a L2, *The Critical Period Hypothesis*, *The Sensitive Period* and *Universal Grammar*.

### 2.2.1 The Role of Consciousness in L2 Acquisition

The role of consciousness has become one of the most debatable issues in SLA. Stephen Krashen and Richard Schmidt have published two opposing positions in regard to consciousness when learning an L2 (Ellis, 1997). According to Krashen, learners have two systems of acquiring an L2, subconscious language *acquisition* and conscious language *learning*. The former system is quite similar to the process used when children acquire their first and second language (Altenaichinger, 2002). It requires communication in the target language where individuals are not concerned with grammatical errors or the form of their utterances. The emphasis is on speaking and listening to the target language without interruption. Conscious language learning is more concerned with rules and error correction than acquisition. Krashen claims that language learning is matured consciously through intentional study of the L2 (Ellis, 1997). However, this claim is debatable since incidental acquisition, which refers to the act of picking up L2 knowledge through exposure, may still involve some conscious attention to input (Ellis, 1997). Schmidt claims that consciousness is used loosely in SLA and he argues that it is important to regulate the ideas that underlie its use (Ellis, 1997). He further claims that whether individuals intentionally decide to learn a language or whether they learn it incidentally, consciousness is always a relevant factor (Ellis, 1997).

Children seem to acquire their L1 without much conscious effort, and ordinarily they are very young when they are fully equipped to use their L1 language. This does not seem to come as easily to L2 learners, especially adults, since they traditionally have to work hard and study the language consciously in order to succeed (Ellis, 1997). Krashen asserts that when students learn an L2 there are three “internal processors” at work: The *organizer* which is responsible for the organization of the “learner's language system”, and provides assistance with correct utterance and grammatical structure. The *filter* is responsible for managing the determinants that might affect a learner's acquisition of the L2, such as anxiety or anger. The *monitor* is responsible for conscious learning and makes it possible

for learners to correct their grammatical mistakes in their speech (Altenaichinger, 2002). The notion that adults are perceived to have more difficulties with acquiring an L2 than children has led researchers to explore why this seems to be a relevant factor.

### **2.2.2 The Critical Period**

The Critical Period Hypothesis (CPH) states that children are perceived to have an innate ability in achieving a native-like proficiency in L2 learning, which adults typically do not have. The CPH was first introduced by Penfield and Roberts in 1959, who claimed that the critical period ended at the age of 9. Lenneberg revised the idea in 1967 and it has since then become a popular topic in the discussion of language acquisition. Lenneberg claims:

Language cannot begin to develop until certain levels of physical maturation and growth have been reached. Between the ages of two and three years language emerges by an interaction of maturation and self-programmed learning (As cited in Singleton & Ryan, 2004, p. 33)

Lenneberg proposed that it is vital for language acquisition to take place during the critical period which ends around puberty. He concluded that the cause of its ending is the “establishment of cerebral lateralization of function”. In other words, Lenneberg proposes that the process that is involved in any language acquisition which takes place after the age of puberty will be different from those involved in first language acquisition (Snow & Hoefnagel-Höhle, 1978). His theory is that any language learning that takes place after an individual reaches puberty is slower and not as successful as L1 learning (Snow & Hoefnagel-Höhle, 1978).

The Critical Period Hypothesis marks the necessity of starting language learning at an early age. According to this theory, younger second language learners are more equipped to learn a new language than older second language learners. The “younger = better” position relates mostly to oral skills and the skill to become a native-like speaker in the target language. Other researchers have concluded that older language learners are more equipped to become successful language learners than adults. According to most researches children are more capable than adults of succeeding in second language learning, however, there is also evidence that suggests otherwise (Singleton & Ryan, 2004). The CPH does not



relate to everyone. Some are able to achieve a native-like proficiency level in the target language even if they start learning as adults. Julie, an English woman who started learning Arabic at the age of 21 was able to perform like a native speaker on several tests (Ellis, 1997). On the basis of these findings, it is impossible to conclude that all adults are less capable than children of learning a second language.

### 2.2.3 The Sensitive Period

The validity of the Critical Period Hypothesis is highly questioned and has led researchers to adopt terms such as the *The Sensitive Period*. The sensitive period indicates a diminished capability for language learning with age. According to this theory, individuals who begin L2 learning after puberty is reached are not as likely to achieve a native-like proficiency level in the target language (Mosokovsky, 2001). According to Mosokovsky (2001, p.1) this is probably due to “maturational processes in the brain”.

As cited in Bialystok (1997, p.121) Johnson and Newport (1989; 1991) and Johnson (1992) conducted a research on the sensitive period in L2 acquisition. Their goal was to study the English proficiency of native speakers of Chinese and Korean. The participants lived as immigrants in the USA and were between the ages of 3 and 39. Their exposure to the target language varied from 3 to 26 years, with the average of 10 years. They also included a control group of native speakers of English. Their study was based on measuring grammar in either oral or written sentences. The participants were also asked to demonstrate their knowledge of 12 grammatical rules. Their results indicated no difference in proficiency between the participants who had arrived in the USA before the age of 7 and the native speakers. They found evidence of a “maturational decline” (Bialystok, 1997, p. 121) from the age of 7 until about 15 which “reflected a universal biological process” (Bialystok, 1997, p. 121) that is, it relates to all languages. Their findings point to the existence of a sensitive period, due to the restriction of language acquisition after the age of 7. In spite of that, their results brought up questions on some aspects of their research, for example the subjects involved. (Bialystok, 1997). First, the younger participants had all been attending American schools and received language instruction, therefore it is not surprising that they outperformed the older learners on English grammar. Second, the participants were all at least undergraduate students at the time of the testing so the younger learners had been exposed to the English language for a longer period of time (Bialystok, 1997). These aspects raise a question as to whether there is a sensitive period for learning a

language. The younger participants performed better on the tests which may be the result of more exposure to the target language.

In addition to exposure to the target language there is another important factor that needs to be taken into consideration. Older L2 learners may develop a different learning mechanism than younger L2 learners because perceivably most adult L2 learners no longer have access to Universal Grammar (Ellis, 1997).

#### **2.2.4 Universal Grammar**

Language ability is comprised of a complicated system so it is quite remarkable that young children are able to learn a language at a young age. Children are perceived to be born with an innate quality that makes it possible for them to learn the complex units that make up a language. In other words, language acquisition is in their genes and is thus more accessible to them (Crain & Martin, 1999). This theory of innate knowledge is referred to as *Universal Grammar*, introduced by Noam Chomsky in 1965 (Craig & Martin, 1999). Chomsky's theory on Universal Grammar (UG) has attracted great attention and has been widely used in literature on both linguistics and applied linguistics. It has been defined as a genetic blueprint that informs us what grammar is correct and what is not (Lydia White, 2003). The theory focuses on the child's initial state, that is, its knowledge before having received any input. As the child grows the input becomes more complex and it is continually being reconstructed until the child “reaches a steady state grammar for the mother tongue” (Lydia White, 2003, p. 2).

The UG theory applies to every aspect of the language, including comprehension and production of the language. Since the 1980's, researchers have been investigating and debating whether UG can also be applied to L2 learning and to what extent (Lydia White, 2003). Garavito (1999) claims that there is strong evidence that older language learners are not as capable as younger language learners due to UG. Although a more recent study shows older L2 learners learn in the same way as L1 acquirers with characteristics allegedly having a UG basis (As cited in Singleton, 2001). Researchers have had some difficulties in reaching agreement as to whether adults generally have access to UG. Several theories have been proposed:

*Complete access:* This refers to a learner's ability to switch from their L1 setting to

the L2 setting without much effort. This theory indicates that full competence in the target language is possible and there is no such thing as the critical period.

*No access:* This theory states that UG is not available to adult L2 learners.

According to this theory adult L2 learners are not capable of achieving full competence in the target language and they are forced to rely on general learning strategies.

*Partial Access:* According to this theory, adult L2 learners have access to some parts of UG but not others. Their language acquisition is partly based on UG and partly by using general learning strategies.

*Dual Access:* This position claims that adult L2 learners make use of both UG and general learning strategies. However, if they use the general learning strategies their UG is at risk of being blocked, which may cause the learner to produce impossible errors and fail to achieve full competence. Therefore they need to rely on UG to be successful in their language learning (Ellis, 1997).

These contradictory positions indicate that the role of Universal Grammar is still uncertain and it raises questions about whether L1 and L2 acquisition are the same or different (Ellis, 1997). This has led researchers to further explore which factors indicate a successful acquisition of an L2 and why some are more equipped language learners than others.

### **3.0 Language Acquisition – Characteristics**

There are factors that affect individuals' capability in learning a language and it is important to understand what differs between individuals when it comes to learning a second language. People are not all equally equipped at learning a second language, even though they come from the same language environment. Some people learn a second language faster than others and this is often related to individual characteristics (Ellis, 1985). Researchers are trying to find out what these characteristics are and why they are so influential in second language learning. It is important to locate these differences as it may be helpful in the teaching of a second language (Ellis, 1985). These characteristics in an individual's personality are for example: *Self-confidence* and *Capacity to empathize*. (Ellis, 1985).

*Self-confidence*: A self-confident person is perceived to be better equipped to learn a second language than a person who lacks self-confidence. Anxiety level and extroversion are the two major characteristics measured. According to studies conducted on the issue, people who have a lower anxiety level and are outgoing are more successful L2 learners than those who are not. Self-confident individuals are more likely to take risks without worrying about others' opinion of them. They are more likely to place themselves in a situation where the target language must be used and they are not afraid to use it.

*Empathy*: Empathy is defined by Webster's dictionary as “the capacity for participation in another's feelings or ideas”. Many investigators have made an effort to link an individual's capacity to empathize with language learning but the results are inconclusive. However, those who are learning a language need to be attentive and willing to listen to others speaking in the target language and have an interest in communication. (Ellis, 1985).

Although individuals differ in their capability in learning a new language the notion that age is a relevant factor has been explored even further. The following chapters will examine some of the theories and researches that have been conducted on the effects of age on L2 acquisition.

#### **4.0 Language Acquisition – The Age Factor**

According to several researches it is perceived that children are better language learners than adults. Children who are acquiring a language in a natural environment are more likely to eventually achieve a native-like proficiency level of the target language than adults. Children who are under 10 years of age are more likely to obtain native-like proficiency in the target language than a 15 year old (Ellis, 1985). The reason for this is not clear and several suggestions have been made in the matter of the child-adult differences in L2 acquisition. These suggestions are for example *Biological factors*, *Cognitive developmental stage*, *Filters* and *Differences in the language environment* (Ellis, 1985).

*Biological Factors*: According to Lenneberg (1967) the “development of specialization of functions in the left and right sides of the brain begins in childhood

and is completed at puberty”. In other words he hypothesized that the ability to acquire and build a new language system deteriorates after puberty. Language function is in the left side of the brain of adults but in children language function is in both hemispheres. As children grow older the left side becomes more and more dominant in language function. This process ends around puberty. Even though this hypothesis is impressive there is evidence that lateralization occurs at an earlier age, even in infants and is therefore most likely not responsible for child-adult differences in L2 acquisition (Ellis, 1985).

*Cognitive Factors:* according to this theory, adults should be better equipped and superior to children in language acquisition since they, generally, have a more mature cognitive system. However adults are dependent upon to rules in grammar and learn the language consciously whereas children learn the language subconsciously and are likely to surpass those who are dependent on rules.

*Affective Factors:* Adults are more self-conscious and aware of themselves than children. They are more concerned with their behavior and appearance, whereas children are less self-conscious and therefore better equipped to handle new and demanding situations. (Ellis, 1985).

*Differences in Language Environment:* This hypothesis states that the child-adult difference in language acquisition may be due to the differences in how children and adults hear the language. Typically, parents speak to their children in a simple way using simple sentences in order for them to understand what is being said. Several studies have shown that when children are learning a second language this method is used while adults do not get the same treatment (Ellis, 1985).

Although most theories indicate that children are better language learners, Krashen and his associates (1979) made some important discoveries:

1. Adults proceed through early stages of syntactic and morphological development faster than children (where time and exposure are held constant).
2. Older children acquire faster than younger children (again, in

early stages of morphological and syntactic development where time and exposure are held constant).

3. Acquirers who begin natural exposure to second languages during childhood generally achieve higher second language proficiency than those beginning as adults (Krashen, Long & Scarcella, 1979, p. 573).

These generalizations made it possible for Krashen and associates to make vital distinction between *rate* and *ultimate attainment*. Older learners have an advantage on rate of acquisition, especially in the first stages of morphosyntactic aspects whereas younger learners are not as fast to begin with but eventually they reach a higher level of ultimate attainment. This theory is one of the most debated topics in the field of L2 acquisition studies (Krashen, Long & Scarcella, 1979).

Krashen's generalization on rate and ultimate attainment was evident in many researches which show that older learners acquire language at a faster rate than younger learners on many linguistic aspects, the children however, generally surpass them as they grow older (Singleton, 1998).

Many studies have compared the level of ultimate attainment in both young and older L2 learners. Researchers have explored the impact of age on numerous aspects of the language, such as lexical attainment. For example, in a study by Singleton in which he explored the levels of rate and ultimate attainment in lexical acquisition in two groups learning French as a L2. He had one group that started the acquisition before the age of 12 and the second group started the acquisition after the age of 12. His results indicated that the older learners performed better at first and they learned the L2 lexicon at a faster rate, initially. However, the younger learners eventually surpassed them and reached a higher level of ultimate attainment. Service and Craik also performed an experiment on lexical attainment in L2 learning in which they investigated two groups of English speaking individuals, one group had a mean age of 25 and the other group had a mean age of 72 (As cited in Singleton, 1998). The participants were asked to identify and learn a list of words, either in Finnish or words that resembled English words. The younger group performed better on the test. However, the older learners did not find the experiment challenging and they were able to learn new words without much effort. This was especially evident in those individuals who had some previous experience with foreign languages. (As cited in

Singleton, 1998). These results suggest that age is not an obstructive factor in lexical attainment in L2 learning and that new words can be learned at any age.

Pronunciation or native-like proficiency level is a prominent factor for researchers to explore since Lenneberg (1967) proposed the Critical Period Hypothesis, which states that children are more likely to obtain a native-like proficiency level in the L2 than adults. Many of these researches, however, suggested that adults are capable of achieving a native-like proficiency level in the target language, just as children. For example in a study by Snow and Hoefnagel in which they explored subjects of different ages who were all learning Dutch as a second language. The subjects were all English-speaking participants who had recently moved to the Netherlands and were learning the Dutch language without any formal instruction. The participants were tested and compared, three times during the research, with two groups: “advanced speakers of Dutch as a second language and native speakers” (Snow & Hoefnagel-Höhle, 1978, p. 1115). Hoefnagel (1978) tested the following five age groups: 3-5 year olds; 6-7 year olds; 8-10 year olds; 12-15 year olds; and adults. She based her tests mostly on speaking abilities. She emphasized pronunciation where she tested morphology, syntax and vocabulary. Additionally, she tested comprehension and production of fluent speech (Snow & Hoefnagel, 1978).

Her results indicated that the older learners learned the language at a faster rate than the younger learners on all the tests. According to Hoefnagel's results the 12-15 year olds along with the adults showed the most rapid learning during the first months of acquisition. As time passed, the adults fell behind and showed little improvement whereas the teenagers had almost reached native-like performance of the target language within a few months. The teenagers kept showing improvement and maintained the highest score on most tests, until the 6-10 year olds surpassed them on “Story comprehension and Spontaneous Speech Fluency” (Snow & Hoefnagel, 1978, p. 1117-1122). The age group that showed little improvement and scored the lowest on the tests were the 3-5 year olds, which makes researchers question the CPH. According to the CPH the optimal age for language acquisition is between 2 and 12 years old. Those who scored the highest on Hoefnagel's tests were 12-15 years old, therefore, according to these results one can conclude that “a critical period extending from age 2 to age 12 does not exist”. (Snow & Hoefnagel, 1978, p. 1122).

Since Hoefnagel's experiment, researchers have explored the native-like proficiency level even further and a number of more recent researches come to the same conclusion, that adults are also capable of achieving native-like proficiency level in L2

acquisition. In a study by Van Wuijtswinkel (1994) in which she explored native speakers of Dutch who had begun L2 acquisition after the age of 12, she had the subjects work through grammatical and syntactic projects and found native-like performance in 8 out of 26 participants in one group and in another group she found native-like performance in 7 out of 8 participants (as cited in Birdsong, 2009).

In another study performed by White and Genesee in 1996 on French native speakers living in Montreal and learning English, the results indicated that the majority of the participants had reached native-like proficiency in the target language. Those who were able to reach a native-like proficiency level in the target language had all been exposed to the English language after the age of 12 (as cited in Birdsong, 2009).

Furthermore, several studies performed by Bongaerts and his colleagues on phonetics and phonology, revealed that native speakers of Dutch can reach a native-like level of proficiency in English and French even though they were not exposed to the target language until late adolescence (as cited in Birdsong, 2009).

These results are an indication that there are other factors that need to be examined in addition to age. One's L1 acquisition is a predictor of one's L2 acquisition. If an individual has not reached ultimate attainment in his native language his chances of acquiring high proficiency in an L2 are diminished. Another important factor is exposure. In order for an individual to acquire high proficiency or even a native-like proficiency in the target language, one needs to undergo extreme exposure of the target language (Foote, 2008).

#### **4.1 Exposure to the Target Language**

David Singleton was skeptical of the notion that there was in fact an age-related factor in L2 acquisition in his earlier treatment. He wanted to include other factors that might effect language learning, such as motivation, instruction and exposure (Singleton, 2003). Singleton points out that it is necessary to view factors such as motivation to learn the target language and whether the learner is receiving formal instruction or whether he has limited exposure to the target language. An individual who is learning a foreign language, which usually takes place in a classroom, does not receive the same amount of exposure to the target language as someone who is learning an L2, where one is typically exposed to the target language on a daily basis (Singleton, 2003).



Singleton (2003) claims that a learner is only able to achieve a native-like proficiency level in the target language if he receives extensive exposure starting at an early age. Therefore the two concepts, age and exposure, are related. In a research concerning instructional second language learning on children who receive early exposure to an L2 and are then put into classes with children who have not received the same exposure, results in the former group only having an advantage for a short period of time after the second group starts to learn the language at secondary level. Singleton (2003) proposes that older learners acquire an L2 at a faster rate than younger learners although he suggests that in a naturalistic learning situation the advantage approximately lasts for a year. If the adult is undergoing a more intense instruction and is more exposed to the target language, the advantage over the younger learners may last several years. In order to come to a reliable conclusion one would have to perform longer-term studies on whether early language learning is beneficial (Singleton, 2003). Munoz performed such an experiment on foreign language learning and came to the conclusion that exposure to the target language is extremely important.

Munoz performed an experiment on formal foreign-language learning in Barcelona where the participants were students learning English as a foreign language. This experiment is called the Barcelona Age Factor (BAF) project. Munoz' research took place at a time when foreign language instruction was being implemented in primary and secondary schools around Spain. Foreign language instruction was moved from grade 6 (11 years) to grade 3 (8 years). This research took 8 years and it took place in Catalonia where Spanish is the majority language. Although in most schools the teaching takes place in Catalan. Munoz examined two groups of students, 8 and 11 years old, who were learning English as a foreign language in school. She also had older participants who attended schools in the state system. In order to assess all four macro skills; reading, writing, listening and speaking, participants were asked to listen to oral data as well as to speak, write and read in English (Munoz, 2006).

Munoz' results indicated that there is in fact an “age-related difference in rate of foreign language learning in a school setting” (Munoz, 2006). However the results did not indicate the younger learners to have an advantage over the older learners, but quite the opposite. The older learners progressed faster than the younger learners. What is more interesting is that the younger learners did not surpass the older learners with time. Most differences were evident in the “cloze test”, which measures reading skills, and the dictation test, which measures listening skills. These tests measure overall ability in the

language. There were however minor differences in listening comprehension and oral interview. “Younger learners seem to catch up with older learners in aural perception, oral production and in some fluency measures on the written composition task” (Munoz, 2006). Therefore listening skills are less effected by age than morphosyntactic skills.

This can best be explained with the amount of exposure. Children need massive amounts of exposure of the target language in order to successfully learn it. In a typical school syllabus there is not much time devoted to learning the foreign language and target language input is kept to a minimum. Older learners have the advantage of being more mature and their cognitive development is superior to younger learners. They are therefore better equipped to learn a foreign language more efficiently and at a faster rate. Munoz predicted that when the younger learners reach a state of cognitive development that is similar to adults and receive the same amount of exposure and time the differences should disappear (Munoz, 2006).

In addition to age and exposure there is another important factor that relates to language learning and that is motivation towards learning the target language. Researchers have only recently started to look into motivation as a factor in language learning, and have come to the conclusion that it is in fact quite important.

## **5.0 Motivation**

Longman's dictionary of contemporary English defines motivation as “eagerness and willingness to do something without needing to be told or forced to do it”. Therefore it is vital to explore one's motivation for acquiring a second language. Whether L2 learners are motivated enough to learn the language is an important factor, it influences the degree of effort that the learners make to learn the L2 (Ellis, 1997).

Motivation to learn a second language consists of three elements. First, the individual spends time and effort to learn the material, by doing their homework and using every opportunity to use the target language. Second, a person who is motivated to learn a second language is eager to achieve his or her goal and is willing to work hard to reach it. Third, the individual enjoys learning the language and is positive towards the act of learning it. Even though it may be challenging at times, a motivated individual is not likely to give up. These three components of motivation are considered necessary for an

individual to become a good L2 speaker. (Dörnyei & Schmidt, 2001). Even though motivation is a relatively new factor in L2 acquisition research it has been accepted by teachers and researchers as one of the most important factors that influence success in L2 learning (Dörnyei, 1998).

### 5.1 The Socio-Educational Model

Gardner and Lambert (1959) introduced the socio-educational model of second language acquisition. To successfully learn a new language one must, according to Gardner, approach the study of it with intensity, desire and attitude. All three aspects are necessary when learning a new language (Gardner, 2001). The socio-educational model consists of two constructs: *Integrative Motivation* and *Instrumental Motivation*.

*Integrative Motivation:* This particular method refers to learners' interests and desire in learning the target language to be able to interact with members from the target language community and to increase their understanding of their culture and habits. Individuals are therefore more motivated to learn the target language.

*Instrumental Motivation:* This method refers to a more practical use of the target language, such as greater job opportunities or better grades.

Gardner and his associates were the first to introduce integrative motivation which has been one of the most influential concepts of L2 motivation for several decades and has received most attention within the L2 motivational field (Dörnyei & Ushioda, 2009). They found that integrative motivation has an effect on student's behavior in the classroom. Those who possessed integrative motivation were more positively reinforced by their teacher and were therefore more likely to participate and answer questions and they were more likely to answer them right. During their research observers found that the more motivated students were more interested in the lesson. In one of their research on Canadian high-school students they discovered that integrative motivation is a "stronger predictor" of language achievement than instrumental motivation. Furthermore, Gardner's conclusion was that integrative motivation was important for "the development of communicative skills" (Dörnyei & Ushioda, 2009, p. 9). In another research on students in grades 7-11 in Montreal they concluded that integrative motivation correlated more with the student's

“speech” measures than with their grades. Additionally they found that integrative motivation was a better predictor for language proficiency than instrumental motivation. According to their research on language class “drop-outs” those students had lower scores on integrative motivation than those who decided to pursue the class. The students who remained in the language class were more motivated and Gardner and associates suggest that “integrative motivation provides the student with the necessary motivation to persist in the second language studies”. (Krashen, 1981, p. 26)

Several researches have been done by using Gardner's socio-educational model and most of them concluded that integrative motivation is an important part of L2 learning. Even though there is a strong correlation between language learning and integrative motivation there are some cases in which it seems to be weaker (Krashen, 1981). This includes situations where the target language input is weak in society or outside the classroom, for instance, foreign-language learning in the United States. In this case it is unlikely that the learner is exposed to the target language outside the classroom and may therefore be less motivated since exposure to the target language is important in one's language learning. This method also proved to be weak in a study conducted on Mexican women in California who were learning the English language. Those who were less integrative oriented were more successful in learning English than those who were more integrative oriented. This may be due to the fact that motivation is in fact the *result* of learning. Those who are successful in their learning may become more or less motivated to learn (Krashen, 1981).

L2 researchers were quite dissatisfied with Gardner's theory and began to look at other ways in which motivation had an impact on second language learning. The researchers wanted to emphasize the importance of cognitive nature on motivation which opened up researches in the relationship between motivation and language learning behaviors (Dörnyei, 2006).

## **5.2 The L2 Motivational Self System**

Dörnyei (2003) emphasized the importance of looking into the relationship between learners motivation and learning behavior, he indicated that this view would give a closer look into what effect motivation has on L2 acquisition. He further proposed that researchers of L2 acquisition take a closer look into motivational psychology that relates to general education for instance, goal theories or self- determination theory since most L2 learning

takes place in a classroom (Dörnyei, 2003). Second language learners are usually self-motivated and have a way of modifying their motivation to different learning situations. This aspect of motivation is called a trait motivation and is an important concept in the discussion of L2 motivation. Dörnyei expressed his view on the variation of motivational matter and claimed the following:

When motivation is examined in relation to specific learner behaviors and classroom processes, the lack of stability of the construct becomes obvious: Learners tend to demonstrate a fluctuating level of commitment even within a single lesson, and the variation in their motivation over a longer period (e.g., a whole academic term) can be dramatic, (2003, p. 17)

Dörnyei speculated that motivation is a factor that needs to be explained as an internal process of a person's self-concept. During a research on Hungarian students' attitude to foreign language learning he claimed that it would be more relevant to look into the person as an individual rather than comparing them with an external reference group. In order to develop his theory even further he looked into the psychological theory of possible selves. Possible selves are a “representation of individual's ideas of what they might become, what they would like to become, and what they are afraid of becoming” (Dörnyei, 2003). With the help of the psychological theory of possible selves, Dörnyei developed a new theory which he calls “*The L2 motivational self-system*” (Dörnyei, 2003), with emphasis on the ideal self, which refers to features that an individual would ideally like to possess, and the ought-to-self, which refers to features that the individual believes he should possess. According to Dörnyei an individual who is able to reach a proficiency level in the target language that is acceptable to his ideal or ought-to-self, will reach the motivation to learn the target language, since it is important to avoid any “inconsistencies between one's current and possible future selves to a minimum” (Dörnyei, 2003).

There has been an increase in the notion of self and identity when it comes to language learning motivation. Learning a language requires an individual to realize one's identities. Apart from being a learner, one has other identities, such as gender and social class identities (Paiva, 2011).

### **5.3 Motivation and Identity**

The interaction between motivation and identity is a field that Ushioda (2011) has been exploring for over a dozen years. She emphasized the importance of looking into the interaction between motivation and autonomy in the learners' behavior and classroom practices. Ushioda (2011) finds that it is vital to teach students how to be themselves and emphasize their social identity, and her definition of autonomous learning is "...practices that encourage students to develop and express their own identities through the language they are learning – that is, to be and to become themselves" (Ushioda, 2011, p. 13).

Richards explored whether it was possible for students to engage in real conversations and in particular with their teachers. He asserts that in order to understand how real conversations may now and then occur between students and teachers, one needs to look closer into the different aspects of identity. The most powerful and motivational aspect of identity is *transportable identity* which refers to the teacher invoking the student's interests in the conversation. This shows a high level of effort and personal involvement and has a better chance of encouraging students to take part in the conversation than traditional teacher student conversation. In a traditional classroom the student is merely learning a new language and has little chance of revealing their true identity and they do not speak as themselves through the language. (As cited in Ushioda, 2011). As students are learning a new language it is important for the teachers to connect with them and encourage them to "speak as themselves" and use the target language to express their own interests. This increases the student's motivation to participate and get more involved in the classroom (Ushioda, 2011).

Language learning emphasizes the importance of using the target language and if an individual is sure of one's identity, it is more likely that one will place themselves in the situation where they might be forced to use the target language in order to communicate with others with the same interests. Identity is thus a highly important factor in L2 learning. Being able to share your interests with others is motivating and it inspires students to use the target language.

## 6.0 Conclusion

Research has shown that age is an important factor in L2 acquisition, however, it seems as though motivation plays an even bigger role in SLA. Second language learners

vary in their ability to learn a new language and not everyone is as equipped even though they are raised in the same language environment. Exposure to the target language is extremely important and whether a language learner is massively exposed to the target language is important to the acquisition. Many researchers claim that age is an important factor when it comes to the acquisition of a second language. However, as research has shown, it is not always a relevant factor. Older learners traditionally learn the language at a faster rate than younger learners. In most cases, the younger learners surpass the older learners as time passes. Additionally, researchers have claimed that older learners are not as likely to achieve a native-like proficiency in the target language as the younger learners. This theory is related to the Critical period hypothesis, which states that children are better equipped to learn a new language than adults. However, as Snow and Hoefnagel (1978) showed us with their experiment on pronunciation, the younger learners did not do as well as the teenagers on the tests. This experiment questions the Critical Period Hypothesis, since the 12-15 year olds had the highest scores. The critical period hypothesis claims that children older than 12 years are not capable of achieving native-like proficiency level in the target language. According to most researches, and as Krashen (1979) points out, adults learn the target language at a faster rate, initially, however children tend to achieve higher ultimate attainment in the target language. According to most long term research, children surpass the adults. Therefore, age is a relevant factor when it comes to learning a second language, but it is not always in favor of the younger learners.

Even though motivation is a recent factor in the research of second language learning it has been acknowledged as one of the most important elements in successful second language acquisition. Motivation is important when one is learning a new language and it is important that teachers acknowledge that in their classroom. As Ushioda (2011) points out, it is important to relate to the students and include their interest in the learning. That way they are more likely to participate in the conversation in the target language. With motivation, students are able to learn a second language more effectively. It is their desire to learn the language and they do it on their own terms, it is not something that is expected from them. They show an effort in doing their homework and seek opportunities to use the target language.

In conclusion, even though age is a relevant factor in language learning it does not mean that younger is always better. If exposure is not available to young learners it is unlikely that they will succeed in learning the target language. Age is a relevant factor

when it comes to L2 acquisition, however in order for young learners to acquire the target language, motivation and sufficient exposure to the target language are necessary. In other words, motivation and exposure seem to be more relevant than age when it comes to L2 acquisition.



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