



COMPARATIVE STUDY OF SOME FACTORS AFFECTING FOREIGN LANGUAGE LEARNING OF YOUTH AND ADULTS

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Abstract

This learning method is to find out whether there is a relationship between the foreign languages of young people and adults and variables such as their age, previous experiences, and learning purpose. The data obtained as a result of semi-participation interviews with 10 randomly selected students who had English preparatory education at a private university, at least 2 of whom were at their level, and 10 adults selected by the snowball method, who participated in the foreign language certificate offered at the same university, were analyzed with the Maxqda program. The findings obtained as a result of the qualitative study were analyzed and the relationships between age, previous experience of learning a foreign language, language learning characteristics and current success levels were analyzed. In conclusion; It was stated that the language learners in the preparatory class, regardless of their gender and age, could take courses in English and that learning at least one language would be rich in terms of job and career in the future, and their success rates were observed in parallel with this. Certified adults are generally adults who have received any language training before and are in their 30s. It was stated that these research methods for women are generally aimed at helping the family, but on the other hand, adults generally participate in these programs with external motivations, at the request of the institution, that is, regardless of gender.

Keywords

Foreign Language Learning, Adult Education, Certificate Program

I. Introduction

As a result of today's new world system and globalization, there is an increase in theoretical and experimental studies on this subject, as foreign language learning, especially English, a common language used in communication, education, socio-economic, political, arts and science fields.

Over the years, different theories and opinions have been put forward regarding the factors affecting language learning (Stern, 1984). The most basic characteristics affecting learning include a number of variables such as age, learning goals, and previous educational experiences. Considering that students exhibit different approaches when learning a second language, depending on their different individual characteristics (Cotterall, 1999), differences in the language learning goals and processes of young university-aged learners and adult learners who are already professional are inevitable.

According to Stern (1976), each age group has its own advantages and disadvantages when it comes to language learning. While in earlier years the critical threshold in language learning was mentioned (Krashen, 1987) and explained this with the structure of the brain and even the elasticity of the brain, later studies have produced studies that argue and exemplify that it is actually possible to learn a language perfectly at later ages (Yule, 1985).

According to Duverger (1996) and Hagege (1954), ages 3-4 and 10-13 are defined as the peak in terms of language learning skills, and both researchers claim that the level of language learning after the age of 13 will remain the same, especially in the context of auditory (as cited in Anshin, 2006). In this context, language learning ability decreases with age. A similar study revealed that children learn faster than teenagers and adults. At this point, it has been stated that young people and adults forget the information they have learned later than children and that they turn this situation into an advantage in language learning (Asher & Price, 1967).

Besides the age of the learners, their learning goals are also an important predictor. In its most general form, the purposes of participation are; It is divided into three groups as goal-centered, activity-centered and learning-centered (Kirby et al., 2003). When an individual decides to receive education on any subject, he usually acts in accordance with one of these three categories.

According to Tokdemir (1997), no matter how old the learners are, it is possible for them to achieve success if their learning purpose and motivation are high. According to Tutaş (2000), adults have a wide range of language learning goals, from career development to communicating with foreigners, but regardless of an adult's goal, it is impossible for them not to be successful if the appropriate learning environment and materials are offered to them and they are motivated enough to learn.

Another variable mentioned in the frame of this study is past learning experiences, and this reveals itself as one of the most important differences between early youth and adult learning. Adults who acquire new skills and knowledge thanks to the experiences they have gained from the past, make plans and strategies for learning, and as a result gain problem-solving skills, are closer to achieving their goals and perform at the highest level to achieve this goal (Rotwell and Kazanas, 1998).

As a result, the field of language learning is very comprehensive and the dimension in which it is addressed is important in this sense. However, within the limited scope of this study, a comparative analysis could only be made of language learning in young people and adults by considering age, previous language learning experiences, learning goals and current success levels. In the light of the data obtained at the end of this study, it is aimed to reveal the physical, managerial and educational factors that can be improved for young people and adults to have a more efficient language learning process.

II. Method

In this section of the research, information is given about the research method:

The first group of the sample consists of 12 young people studying in a class consisting of students who have enrolled in different departments in the Foreign Languages Department preparatory program in the 2022-2023 Spring semester. The average age of the group is 18. The second group consists of 12 adult students, with an average age of approximately 32, who participated in the foreign language certificate program offered through YAGEM at the Turkish Aeronautical Association University in the 2022-23 Spring semester. It was ensured that the distribution of young people and adults selected for groups of 12 people participating in the preparatory language program and certificate program was equal in terms of age and gender. 6 of the preparatory students were selected from students who had previously received preparatory education, that is, randomly selected from the repeat class, and the other 6 were selected from newly registered students who had no English education background. For the adult group, 12 adults were randomly selected, 6 of whom had previously enrolled in any language program and 6 of whom had no language education experience.

Within the scope of this research, a 6-question semi-structured interview form presented in Appendix 1 was used. The last step of the research involves statistical analysis of the collected data. The main and sub-themes that emerged from the interviews with 12 preparatory students and 12 adult certificate participants were divided into categories with the help of Maxqda, and then these categories were analyzed.

III. Findings and Conclusions

In the light of the results of the research, the findings regarding the language learning status of preparatory class students and adult certificate participants are as follows:

The results of this study, which comparatively examines the relationship between age, purpose of participation and previous foreign language education experience, and the success levels of preparatory students learning English as a foreign language and adults participating in a foreign language certificate program, can be listed as follows: As stated in the literature, age is important in language learning, but it is not either a factor just for success or not an obstacle or a criterion. As a result of the interviews conducted with young people aged 17-19 studying in the preparatory program within the scope of this study, no significant relationship was found in the success and failure of this age group. The same situation was observed for adult learners who participated in the certificate program between the ages of 28-32. They talked about the difficulty of learning a new language, regardless of young people and/or adults, and discussed this regardless of age. While these difficulties manifested themselves in the younger group as longing for family and friends and lack of time management, in adults they manifested themselves as home responsibilities and lack of internal motivation. In this context, when young students and adult students are compared, it is concluded that individual characteristics/differences and external factors affect the success in language learning in both groups, regardless of age. In the context of learning, according to Knapper and Cropley (2000), being more experienced means having more established learning habits.

Adults learn differently than children when it comes to being, progressing towards their goals, and being more independent learners. As seen in the results of this study, when considering the connection between age and learning, there is a large difference between child and adult learning, while the difference between youth and adult learning is generally independent of age.

When examined in the context of participation purposes, preparatory students stated that they continued the program because the courses were compulsory, but 9 out of 12 students added that although it was not compulsory, the best environment for learning a language was either a one-year preparatory program or a 1-year study abroad. They stated that learning a language, in addition to being a requirement for admission to the department, would turn into career and overseas opportunities in the future. In this context, all of the young people interviewed cited their desire to take part in some overseas projects as the most important reason. The learning purpose frequently mentioned by adults who participate in a foreign language certificate program is to improve themselves in their current careers/jobs and to obtain language compensation, even if it will contribute to some extent. In the light of the data obtained from this study, married adults, on the one hand, state the difficulty of learning a language as time constraints due to home responsibilities, while on the other hand, they state that their primary purpose for learning a language is home and family responsibilities, especially supporting their children's lessons. The important factor for adults in learning goals and related to the previous item is self-actualization. At this point, adults' desire to learn a language and their participation in this direction can be based on the four building blocks of lifelong learning theory of ELLI (2010) and Saisana and Cartwright (2007), which are learning to know, learning to do, learning to live together and learning to exist. Talking about the positive effect of motivators on success in the learning process, Parkinson (1999) made suggestions such as including more projects or portfolios in the evaluation process to increase student motivation, giving importance to the training of educators who will be role models, and encouraging learning by having fun regardless of age.

When the current success status (scores they received during the semester) of the students in the 2022-23 spring semester, where this study was carried out, was examined, it was concluded that among the students who attended the preparatory class, those who received language education for the first time were more successful in learning a language than their friends who repeated the class. This situation is caused by the failure in a similar situation experienced in the past, resulting in the words "I can't learn, I don't have the skill to learn a language, etc." which can be explained by prejudices. In the context of this study, it was determined that young preparatory students and adults in the certificate program had similar attitudes. The negative effects of previous unsuccessful experiences are more common, especially in young people and adults, compared to children. In the literature, the importance of the experience gained by adults in self-evaluation and developing related goals has been emphasized (Günüç et al., 2012). As can be seen from these studies, if the experience is positive, this situation's contribution to the learning process of adults is also positively reflected.

Factors affecting the perception of learning have been evaluated in many aspects in the literature, and age, purpose of participation and/or motivation and experience, which constitute the boundaries of this study, are among the frequently mentioned items. As can be seen in this context, the success of learners cannot be based solely on reasons such as the individual's personal characteristics and internal motivation. Studies conducted in this sense emphasize not only the goals of participation but also the barriers to participation, and the development of policies appropriate to the results will definitely contribute to the learning process of individuals, regardless of age and experience.

According to OECD (2005), learners need high motivation to participate in any education or continue the education they attend. In this context, creating the most appropriate physical learning environment for the learners, taking into account their age, presenting materials prepared taking into account their age, interests, program expectations, and the contribution of educators who act as administrators and guides to guide the learners in line with their goals, are of great importance (Dowling et al., 2004). Within this frame, regarding the last question of the interview with young people, all of the young people stated that, no matter how much they complained, the obligation to attend classes positively affected their learning processes. Adults, on the other hand, argued the opposite of this situation, that is, attendance should not be compulsory. As a result of this comparison, it was concluded that young people are more successful with external factors, which is the obligation to attend in this context, but the intrinsic motivation and individual learning tendencies of adults are of greater importance.

There are some limitations in the research. First of all, this study included participants who are randomly selected in the Turkish Aeronautical Association University, Foreign Languages Department preparatory program and YAGEM foreign language certificate program. However, the research only considers student age, purpose of participation and past learning experiences as variables among the factors affecting language learning status and success. It is recommended that future similar research should not be limited to student age and experience, but should focus on the learning process, social content, learning effects and the effects of learning conditions on success.

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List of Appendices

Appendix1: Semi-structured interview form (used for both groups)

Participant age:

Participation Status: (Certificate program / Preparatory Program)

1. What is your purpose for participating in this program (supporting my children's language education, Erasmus opportunity, institution request, department requirement, etc.)?
2. Have you attended any foreign language program before this program?
3. If he/she has previously attended a foreign language program; what were your participation goals at that time and were you successful? If he/she has not participated in a foreign language program before; why didn't you participate before, what led you to participate during this period?
4. What are your expectations at the end of this foreign language program (being able to read foreign publications, study abroad, attend foreign conferences, learn enough to help my children, etc.)?
5. Does the program you are currently attending meet your expectations? How do you evaluate your success?
6. What kind of changes made or what kind of policies implemented, will possibly help you have a more successful learning process?