

The Influences of Age on Vietnamese Learners' Second Language Acquisition of English Auxiliary Structures

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Abstract

Investigating the influences of age on the acquisition of English auxiliary structures by Vietnamese in-service students of non-English majors at Ho Chi Minh City University of Natural Resources and Environment, this study partly looks at the question whether the success of second language acquisition, particularly the target language proficiency, is subject to the learner's age, and if so, to which extent. The findings show that the learner's length of exposure to the second language is a strong predictor for auxiliary performance and his/her second language proficiency will not decrease with increasing age.

Keywords: age, second language acquisition, English, auxiliary structures

Introduction

Among different extra-linguistic factors affecting the second language acquisition (SLA) process and the learner's proficiency in the target language (TL), the age of the learner and his/her length of exposure (LOE) to the second language (L2) have been investigated by many researchers (Bialystok, 1997; Clahsen & Muysken, 1986; Flege, Yeni-Komshian & Liu, 1999; Snow & Hoefnagel-Hoehle, 1978). Both age and LOE to L2 have been proved to be related to the learner's acquired pronunciation (Hyltenstam & Abrahamsson, 2000; White & Genessee, 1996), and learners seem to have more difficulties acquiring a second language up to a native-speaker likeness level when they get older (Bialystok, 1997; Lenneberg, 1967). Drawing on the primary data collected from Vietnamese in-service students of non-English majors at Ho Chi Minh City University of

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Natural Resources and Environment, this study analyzes the impacts of age on SLA of auxiliary constructions in English.

Age and Second Language Acquisition

Since the 1960s, a great number of researchers and linguists (Clahsen & Muysken, 1986; DuPlessis, Solin, Travis & White, 1987; Ehrman & Oxford, 1995; Johnson & Newport, 1989; Klein, 1992; Lenneberg, 1967; Schachter, 1996; White & Genesee, 1996) have investigated the relationship between age and SLA, and they made some controversial generalizations based on what they observed. Apparently, the most commonly discussed and debatable issue in this field is younger learners versus older learners. In general, younger learners seem to be better at language learning in the long term than older learners are. Bialystok (1997) points out that children are usually more successful in acquiring a second language than adults. In terms of native or near native-speaker likeness, Ehrman and Oxford (1995) state that younger learners are more likely to attain fluency and native-like pronunciation than older learners.

In addition, Johnson and Newport (1989) find that learners' proficiency is to some extent influenced by the age from which they are regularly exposed to the L2. According to Lenneberg (1967, p. 176), "automatic acquisition from mere exposure to a given language seems to disappear after puberty, and foreign languages have to be learned through a conscious and labored effort." Agreeing with Lenneberg (1967), Klein (1992) states that puberty is the period after which SLA is more difficult or respectively different with regard to its eventual outcome. In favor of the existence of critical period (CP), Bialystok (1997) argues that the later learners are regularly exposed to the L2, the lower their final L2 proficiency will be, and SLA is definitely affected by some sort of sensitive or critical period.

However, studies on the relationship between age and SLA yield disputable findings. In an investigation of the Dutch language acquisition of native English speakers, Snow and Hoefnagel-Hoehle (1978) found that the adults and adolescents did better than the children in pronunciation, auditory discrimination, morphology, sentence translation, sentence judgment, story comprehension and vocabulary tests. Ehrman and Oxford (1995)

state that older learners have an advantage in understanding the grammatical system and in bringing greater ‘world knowledge’ to the target language learning context (p. 69). Studying the acquisition of English by native speakers of Chinese, Flege, Yeni-Komshian and Liu (1999) also conclude that “many adults eventually succeed better than children in learning a second language” and “the target language proficiency increases over time” (p. 97).

It is interesting that the existence or non-existence of a CP could not be proven empirically without ambiguity (Bialystok, 1997). Johnson and Newport (1989), testing native speakers of Korean and Chinese with a grammaticality judgment test including several inflectional and syntactical structures of English, conclude that actual exposure to the L2 does not have a positive influence on the L2 proficiency after the first few years. Therefore, the LOE to L2 has no or hardly any effects on the target language improvement after an initial period. Besides, White and Genesee’s (1996) project shows no decline with age in access to universal grammar (UG), and “hence, no critical period in this domain” (p. 258). Hyltenstam and Abrahamsson (2000) further claim that there are no conclusive results about maturational constraints in the SLA field. Within the EFL context of Vietnam, this project investigates the participation of UG in SLA through the acquisition of English auxiliary structures.

Focus on the Availability and Accessibility of Universal Grammar for L2 Learners

After studying differences in the adult and child SLA of German word order, Clahsen and Muysken (1986) refuse to accept the availability of universal grammar for adult learners. They argue that “while children possess innate language learning capacities, adults use learning strategies that are derived from general problem solving strategies” (p. 28). Nevertheless, DuPlessis, Solin, Travis and White (1987) reject Clahsen and Muysken’s hypothesis of restricted influence of UG on SLA, and they argue that “the inter-languages of L2 learners fall within the range of grammars permitted by universal grammar” (p. 35). Within the discussion on the presumed effects of UG on SLA during the last two decades, three different approaches have been established as follows.

First, a hypothesis on full access to UG by L2 learners is supported by White and Genesee (1996) and Flynn (1996). As mentioned above, White and Genesee (1996) reject the hypothesis that the access to UG decays over the maturation. They confirm that although the grammar of their inter-languages may be different from that of the target language, they are “nevertheless constrained by universal grammar” (p. 245). Flynn (1996) further claims that all principles and parameters are fully accessible to both L1 children and L2 adults. “L2 acquisition, therefore, is constrained by UG the same way L1 acquisition is” (p. 121), and “differences in L1 and L2 acquisition must be accounted for by other factors” (p. 129).

In contrast to the above-mentioned full access hypothesis, the no access hypothesis rejects any influence of universal grammar on second language acquisition. According to Schachter (1996), universal grammar is “inaccessible to learners of a second language” (p. 187).

As the third approach about the UG influence on second language acquisition, the partial access theory tries to find a compromise between full access and no access hypothesis. Flynn (1996) later argues that “universal grammar is available to the L2 learner inasmuch as the principles and parameters instantiated in the L1 are also realized in the L2” (p. 130). If principles and parameters differ in L1 and L2, other learning strategies are applied and a parameter re-setting is not possible.

As stated earlier, this investigation focuses on analyzing the influences of learners’ age, as well as their LOE to L2, on their ability to acquire and produce auxiliary structures in English, in order to provide evidence for or against the theories above.

Methodology

Subjects

The speech data for this qualitative research was collected from open-ended or unstructured interviews (Nichols, 1991) with 10 Vietnamese in-service first-year-students of non-English majors at Ho Chi Minh City University of Natural Resources and Environment. These 5 male and 5 female learners were classified into 2 groups according to their current age and length of exposure to English in the contexts of Vietnam. The first group consists of

5 under-25-year-old students with under-7-year-exposure to English. The second group comprises 5 over-35-year-old students with over-14-year-exposure to English. Before these students took part in this project, they had learnt and used English as a foreign language in Vietnam. The following table (table 1) summarizes current age (in years), gender, and length of exposure to English (in years) of each informant.

| STUDENT | GENDER | AGE | LOE to ENGLISH |
|---------|--------|-----|----------------|
| Nh | Male | 18 | 4 |
| Nt | Male | 23 | 5 |
| Nl | Male | 24 | 6 |
| Nk | Female | 24 | 5 |
| Ls | Female | 18 | 4 |
| Pd | Female | 36 | 15 |
| Pu | Female | 37 | 16 |
| Lc | Female | 42 | 20 |
| Lt | Male | 43 | 19 |
| Hh | Male | 36 | 16 |

Table 1: Basic information about the subjects

Data Collection

The investigators employed open-ended interviews focusing on three specific topics (self-introduction, family, and schooling and future career) as the only research method. Inasmuch as the data collection took place in very familiar conversations to the subjects, the interviewer could elicit quite natural speech data from the informants who showed that they felt comfortable talking about these three suggested topics. Moreover, freedom in their response to the questions gave the participants a feeling of control in the interview situations; this is one of the most important advantages of unstructured interviews (Wimmer & Dominick, 1997).

A dominant interviewee can negatively affect the outcome of the group and that group pressures may influence the responses made by individuals (Wimmer & Dominick, 1997). Therefore, one-to-one interviews were used to avoid the potential impacts of one or two respondents on the remaining members of the group. Each of the 10 interviewees was asked to introduce himself/herself first, and then he/she could talk about his/her family or schooling and future career in any order. According to Nichols (1991, p. 131), an unstructured interview is "informal" and "not structured by a standard list of questions"; therefore, the students were free to answer the interviewer's questions and the interviewer was flexible about probing deeper into the respondent's initial response to get more auxiliary structures produced.

Data Analysis

The speech data provided by the ten participants was analyzed for use of auxiliary structures; therefore, pronunciation and intonation errors were not taken into account. Following Klein's criteria (1992, p. 117), the data analysis did not include the formation questions, negation, passive constructions, unfinished utterances, utterances which were stopped and then corrected, elliptic answers, and immediate repetitions.

The utterances were analyzed in accordance with the following criteria:

Errors per tense (The failure to appropriately use tenses including auxiliary constructions):

- *I have learned English for 7 years.* vs. *I learn English for 7 years.*

The omission of the auxiliary:

- *My mother is very beautiful.* vs. *My mother [Ø] very beautiful.*

- *I am working as a shop assistant.* vs. *I [Ø] working as a shop assistant.*

The deletion of “_ing” in progressive forms:

- *I am studying at HCMC University of Natural Resources and Environment.* vs.
I am study-[Ø] at HCMC University of Natural Resources and Environment.

The wrong formation of the participle part in auxiliary constructions:

- *I have read two novels in English.* vs. *I have readed two novels in English.*

The incorrect subject-verb agreement:

- *She has lived in this city for 5 years.* vs. *She have lived in this city for 5 years.*

The atypical combination of “be + infinitive”:

- *I like shopping and traveling.* vs. *I am like shopping and traveling.*

Results and Analysis

The following table (table 2) provides the number of deviations per category made by the ten subjects.

| Student | Sex | Age | LOE to English | Number of errors in terms of | | | | | |
|---------|-----|-----|----------------|------------------------------|-------------------------------|---|--|--------------------------------------|---|
| | | | | Tenses | The omission of the auxiliary | The deletion of “_ing” in progressive forms | The wrong formation of the participle part | The incorrect subject-verb agreement | The atypical combination of “be + infinitive” |
| Nh | M | 18 | 4 | 31 | 5 | 4 | 8 | 10 | 29 |
| Nt | M | 23 | 5 | 34 | 7 | 2 | 9 | 12 | 27 |
| Nl | M | 24 | 6 | 18 | 6 | 3 | 7 | 11 | 17 |
| Nk | F | 24 | 5 | 37 | 4 | 2 | 9 | 11 | 27 |
| Ls | F | 18 | 4 | 38 | 5 | 3 | 8 | 12 | 30 |
| Pd | F | 36 | 15 | 10 | 5 | 3 | 7 | 8 | 13 |
| Pu | F | 37 | 16 | 17 | 6 | 2 | 9 | 8 | 14 |
| Lc | F | 42 | 20 | 18 | 4 | 3 | 9 | 9 | 15 |
| Lt | M | 43 | 19 | 19 | 5 | 2 | 9 | 8 | 14 |
| Hh | M | 36 | 16 | 18 | 6 | 3 | 8 | 9 | 13 |

Table 2: Errors in the formation of auxiliary constructions

In general, the group of over-35-year-old subjects demonstrated a better auxiliary performance and second language proficiency than the under-25-year-old group did. Among the six analysis criteria, tenses including auxiliary constructions and the atypical combination of “be + infinitive” troubled the participants most. The wrong formation of the participle part and the incorrect subject-verb agreement were also sources of errors. Interestingly, the students were most proficient in the use of “_ing” progressive marker.

The results show that every older subject with the minimum 15-year-exposure to English committed less than 20 errors related to tenses including auxiliary constructions while 4 out of 5 younger students made more than 30 errors of this type. The group of older participants also committed less errors in the combination of “be + infinitive” than the younger ones did (about a half of the younger participants’ errors). This proves that the elder Vietnamese learners performed better than the younger ones in the use of tenses including auxiliary constructions. Although the former made less errors in the use of “be + infinitive” than the later, both groups of learners seemed to ignore the L2 rule constraints. The atypical combination of “be + infinitive” is most likely due to the mother-tongue interference. In Vietnamese language, the verb “to be” can be translated as “*thì*” and this word can precede a bare infinitive, for example “*Tôi thì thích mua sắm và du lịch.*” The following incorrect word-for-word translation will explain this first language interference.

| | | | | | | |
|---------------|------------|------------|--------------|-----------------|------------|-------------------|
| In Vietnamese | <i>Tôi</i> | <i>thì</i> | <i>thích</i> | <i>mua sắm</i> | <i>và</i> | <i>du lịch.</i> |
| In English | <i>I</i> | <i>am</i> | <i>like</i> | <i>shopping</i> | <i>and</i> | <i>traveling.</i> |

Amazingly, performance is not significantly different between the two groups of participants in terms of the omission of the auxiliary and “_ing” in progressive forms. Again, the mother-tongue interference is a likely cause of the omission of the auxiliary. The following table shows how these learners improperly translated their thinking from Vietnamese into English.

| | | | |
|---------------|------------------|-------------|-------------------|
| In Vietnamese | <i>Mẹ tôi</i> | <i>rất</i> | <i>đẹp.</i> |
| In English | <i>My mother</i> | <i>very</i> | <i>Beautiful.</i> |

As for the incorrect use of subject-verb concord, the older group performed a little bit better than the younger one did. All of the errors in this category were the learners' failure to use "has + past participle" after a third person singular subject in the present perfect tense. These Vietnamese participants tended to use "have + past participle" for every subject! For example, "*I have been to Singapore twice but my mother have never been there*" or "*The course at this university have putted pressure on me*". This error type is also related to the mother-tongue because Vietnamese language does not make any distinction between plural and singular verbs. In other words, verbs in Vietnamese language are always used in the base form (bare infinitive).

The statements "*The course at this university have putted pressure on me*" and "*I have readed two novels in English*" show the learners' wrong formation of the participle part in auxiliary constructions. In this error category, table 2 shows no significant difference between the two groups' performance. All learners revealed their intra-lingual confusion by sometimes applying "_ed" to irregular verbs.

Conclusion

The main purpose of this investigation is to examine the correlation between the Vietnamese learners' age and their English proficiency with respect to auxiliary structures. The findings suggest that the learners' length of exposure to the target language is a strong predictor for auxiliary performance outcome.

The mother-tongue interference is the most likely cause of deviations in English auxiliary constructions. However, the older Vietnamese learners of English performed better than the younger ones; therefore, the influence of the first language can be gradually overcome.

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