The Effect of the Age Factor on Teenage L2 Learners: A Japanese Perspective

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ABSTRACT

In terms of second language acquisition, teenagers, who are in between children and adults are often considered to be a difficult age group, not only because they have the possible disadvantages that adults face, but also because the characteristics of teenagers could have a negative impact on learning a second language. However, when teachers are aware of the potential effects of the age factor, and compatible approaches are employed, teenagers could become more excited and motivated learners. This paper explores beneficial teaching and learning styles for teenagers based on previous research, and examines how these could be applied to a typical learning context of teenagers in Japan, a senior high school.

KEYWORDS: age factor, teenagers, SLA, L1 use

1 Introduction

The age at which learners begin foreign language education has been lowered in a number of countries in Europe (Cook, 2016, p. 165; Jaekel et al., 2017, p. 632). Japan has followed this trend. The Ministry of Education, Culture, Sports, Science and Technology in Japan (hereafter MEXT) has announced that by 2020 all students will begin what are called ‘English language activities’ classes in the 3rd grade (MEXT, 2014). These decisions are based on the belief that younger children potentially have better abilities in acquiring a second language (L2). In fact, it is often seen that younger children who move to a foreign country are able to acquire native-like proficiency of the new language whereas their parents still struggle even after a long period of study (Lightbown and Spada, 2013, p. 92). The ‘younger is better’ belief is often discussed in terms of the difficulties of adults in acquiring a L2 (ibid., p. 93), although it is acknowledged that adults tend to be more motivated, and disciplined (Zhao and Morgan, 2006, p. 46). Teenagers, who are in between children and adults are often considered to be a difficult age group in terms of learning a L2, because, in addition to the possible disadvantages that adults face, teenagers have typical behaviours potentially seen as having a negative influence on learning L2, such as inhibition, sleepiness and lack of concentration (Krashen, 1975, quoted in Harley, 1986, p. 9; Pea rman, 2009, p. 34).

However, from my personal experience of teaching teenagers for almost ten years, I believe that teenagers have a variety of advantages in terms of learning a L2, which neither younger children nor adults possess. Being aware of the age factor, as Lightbown and Spada (2013, p. 88) suggest, could allow teachers to determine the most appropriate ways of keeping students motivated. It could also enhance teenagers’ L2 learning significantly by understanding the rationale behind their behaviours, which at first might appear to be troublesome. The purpose of this paper is to explore possible beneficial teaching and learning styles for teenagers, and the implications for the particular context of a senior high school in Japan. Although this paper does not aim at judging which is the best age group for second language acquisition, in order to grasp the characteristics of each age group, it will begin with examining the ‘younger is better’ belief based on Critical Period
Hypothesis (hereafter CPH), list some research focusing on possible difficulties that older learners could have, and consider some of the common learning styles or characteristics of late-teenagers in comparison with other age groups. Finally, it will suggest some implications for a typical teaching context for late-teenagers in Japan, a foreign language classroom at a senior high school.

2 Overview of Age Research

2.1 Younger is Better or Older is Better?

The ‘younger is better’ belief has been influenced by CPH (Lightbown and Spada, 2013, p. 93). The term ‘critical period’ is used in biology to indicate the limited period of time during which an organism can acquire a particular activity or competency (Singleton and Ryan, 2004, p. 32; Zhao and Morgan, 2006, p. 39). The original idea was introduced by Penfield and Roberts (1959, cited in Zhao and Morgan, 2006, p. 39), who see the plasticity of children’s brains compared to those of adults as an advantage in acquiring a language. Similar to Penfield and Roberts, Lenneberg (1967), who is generally known as the ‘father’ of CPH in terms of language acquisition (Singleton and Ryan, 2004, p. 33), claims that CPH starts at two and ends around puberty for biological reasons. However, later studies have not consistently supported the validity of CPH (Ibid., p. 115). Despite CPH being originally applied to the acquisition of the first language (hereafter L1) and also questioned in terms of its validity, much research claims that younger L2 learners are superior to older learners in some respects, such as phonology (Scovel, 1988, cited in Singleton and Ryan, 2004, pp. 84–85).

In addition, some studies imply that adult learners potentially use different cognitive processes, which could be less natural and less efficient. For example, Lenneberg (1967, p. 176) argues that automatic acquisition from more exposure seems to cease after puberty, so a L2 needs to be ‘taught and learned through a conscious and laboured effort’. In addition, Krashen discusses the changing role of the learner, into a ‘Monitor’, which develops in adolescence, and as a Monitor they would inspect their language according to learned rules (Krashen, 1978, cited in Harley, 1986, p. 10), which is ‘learning’ as opposed to ‘acquisition’ through more automatic process as described by Krashen (1982, cited in Lightbown and Spada, 2013, p. 106). Unlike Krashen, who argues that ‘learning’ and ‘acquisition’ are independent and separate (Mitchell, Myles and Marsden, 2013, p. 41), McLaughlin replaces this distinction ‘with the concepts of “controlled” and “automatic” processing’ and insists that even older learners can utilize automatic processing (McLaughlin, 1978, cited in Harley, 1986, p. 13).

It is true that later studies have questioned the validity of the idea which Krashen proposed (Lightbown and Spada, 2013, p. 107), and it has been argued that the different or less natural route that older learners might use to learn L2 could be more efficient, considering the fact that some students who start learning a L2 at an early age, would show no difference in L2 abilities from students who start at secondary schools (Burstall, 1975, cited in Lightbown and Spada, 2013, p. 97). Similarly, Yu (2006, p. 56) remarks that adolescents are better learners than younger children in a foreign language classroom where learners have limited time. In fact, Muñoz (2006) argues that the high proficiency achieved by young people in natural settings should not be generalized into different settings, such as formal language classes with a limited amount of exposure, where young people did not surpass older learners in his research.

2.2 Older Learners Require Different Approaches from Young Children

It has been argued that older learners could
learn a L2 more efficiently than younger learners, but not many studies have focused on the learning characteristics of teenagers, especially late-teenagers. This could be partly because some features of teenagers are considered to be the same as those of adults, such as cognitive awareness and L1 experience, as shown in the research of Ausubel (1964, p.420), who suggests in his article, ‘adolescents may be substituted for adults in most contexts’. He examines in his research if children show readiness for L2 learning in a class setting as widely believed, and if the audio-lingual method by which ‘children achieve such spectacular success’ can be efficient for adult learners (Ibid., p.420). He focuses on classroom settings, rather than ‘natural settings’ such as the home environment where children are immersed in L2, as natural settings provide a totally different environment for adults. By analysing features of the audio-lingual method taking into account adults’ learning styles, he argues that an approach efficient for children might not be appropriate for adults, because ‘children’s cognitive immaturity and lack of certain intellectual skills’ limits approaches that teachers can use with them (Ibid., p.420).

Although he acknowledges that children have some advantages such as acceptable pronunciation and ‘being venturesome and less rigid’(Ibid., p.421), he notes two significant advantages that adults have. Firstly, a larger L1 vocabulary would help them memorise new words because these concepts already exist in their L1 knowledge. Secondly, their metalinguistic awareness developed through their L1 possibly encourages them to generalise and apply grammatical rules. Considering those characteristics typically seen in adult learners, he concludes some features are not appropriate for them such as ‘inductive rather than deductive learning’, ‘avoidance of native language’ and ‘presentation of spoken form of the language before the written form’, and proves that adults require different learning styles (Ibid., p.420). However, in this widely quoted but now dated research, the contexts are not specified, and the research methodology is not clearly shown, and it was apparently based on the author’s abundant knowledge and experience as a teacher and a researcher.

An empirical study focusing on an EFL class in Germany was conducted by Jaekel et al. (2017). They argue that until recently the findings of the research from L2 acquisition ‘at home or through immersion programs’ were often applied to the context ‘of learning a language in preschool or elementary school’ despite the significant differences in the amount of exposure of L2 (Ibid., p.633). In their research, the data was collected from 5,130 students from 31 grammar schools, comparing the starting age and different styles of instruction at school. Their findings show older learners ‘to be at an advantage (in the long run) in learning a foreign language over students in early foreign language education with minimal input’, ‘potentially due to higher level of cognitive maturity and their ability to learn languages through explicit instruction’ (Ibid., p.649), which shows that older learners in school contexts would benefit from explicit learning with metalinguistic knowledge, as opposed to heavy focus on communicative learning which is often used in early foreign language education (Ibid., p.651).

3 Analysis of Appropriate Learning Styles

3.1 Teenagers’ Learning Styles from a Neuroscientific Perspective

An analysis of teenagers’ typical behaviour based on neuroscientific research was conducted by Leiguarda (2004). She offers practical tips based on the findings, comparing teenagers with adults, as opposed to Ausubel (1964), who sees adolescents and adults as one age group, in contrast to younger children. Leiguarda differentiates adults and teenagers,
pointing to development of the brain. Despite the human brain reaching 90% of its full size by the age of six, as discussed by Leiguarda, they are ‘not fully developed until the age of 20’ (2004, p. 5), and teenage brains undergo a massive loss of unused connection of neurons called ‘pruning’, which enhances the efficiency of the brain (Ibid., p. 7). They tend to be intuitive and emotional due to the prefrontal cortex not being fully developed, this area of the brain ‘acts like a brake and enables them to calm down’ (Yurgelun-Todd, 1998, cited in Leiguarda, 2004, p. 7). Instead, they rely on amygdalas, a part of the brain critical for making emotional decisions (Ibid., p. 7).

Leiguarda’s analysis also indicates that one of the major problems that teenagers have, sleepiness, is because their biological clock is different (Leiguarda, 2004, p. 7) and teenagers are always sleep-deprived considering their necessity for about nine and a quarter hours of sleep per night (Carskadon, 1999, cited in Leiguarda, 2004, p. 8). Taking these findings from neuroscientific research into account, she provides general but practical advice for teaching teenagers. For example, it is argued that teachers should make their class ‘emotionally relevant for them [the students] by presenting and practising topics in new ways’, to attract students’ attention to what teachers want to teach (Leiguarda, 2004, p. 9). As one of the new ways, teachers are advised to empower the students, by giving them a choice or letting them try peer-teaching. Also, it is suggested that teachers try to praise them whenever possible instead of offering rewards as this could easily become the ultimate goal for students (Ibid., pp. 10–11). This study is based on the factual findings of neuroscientific research, but whether the techniques suggested from the findings were tried in class is not clarified.

Gomes (2011) offers advice in terms of teaching teenagers, based on the findings discussed by Leiguarda (2004). He describes teenagers as “right-brained” individuals’, which makes them more emotional, less logical and rational, compared to adults, who use the left side of brain predominantly (Ibid., p. 29). In addition, he suggests that teenagers ‘perform better when kinaesthetic, sensory and visual stimuli are involved’ (Ibid., p. 29). His advice is drawn from his own teaching experience, in which he focuses more on practical steps, such as the introduction of useful activities for teenagers, compared to Leiguarda (2004), who focuses more on explaining how the teenage brain functions.

3.2 Appropriate Approaches for Teenage Learners

Woodward (2011) makes a list of similar ideas when teaching teenagers, which appears to be mainly based on her own teaching experience. Despite the research methodology not being clearly explained, the verbatim comments from two group leaders and their students in a monolingual class from a Swiss institution which came to the UK in 2010 are attached in the article. Woodward suggests that teenagers do not have as much life experience that they can share in activities as adults do, easily get bored or distracted when an activity continues for too long, possibly have a problem with authority, and do not like being treated as a child or in an unfair way (Ibid., p. 24). Therefore, she advises teachers to keep pace with a variety of short activities, show an interest in their L1 by allowing them to use it for a limited time, and provide clear and consistent instructions (Ibid., p. 24). It is worth noting that, as shown in the comments, the students expect teachers to provide some directions instead of giving the students too much responsibility for their learning as well as homework, because ‘they are exam-oriented’ (Ibid., p. 25). In addition, no matter how old they are, as discussed by Woodward (2011, p. 25), the students tend to be motivated when activities are closely related to their lives and they
feel that teachers know their likes and dislikes, which is also suggested by Gomes (2011, p. 29).

Greenaway (2013) conducted action research focusing on an elementary level class of 11 teenagers aged 13 to 17 from an international academy in Spain. She suggests that in her teaching context mid-teens who remain at an elementary level of English after taking classes for several years tend to be considered to have learning issues such as learning or behavioural disabilities, whereas adults in a similar situation are usually offered classes at the appropriate level for their ability (Ibid., p. 20). A reaction to ‘the frustration and embarrassment of many years of study and little progress’ could appear to be typical behaviour for teenagers, such as silence, refusal to speak English, or less willingness to join activities (Ibid., p. 21). To meet their needs, she tried to adopt the main aspects of Community Language Learning, which aims to offer a relaxed atmosphere so that students are encouraged to take risks. Also, she employed activities focusing on enhancing self-esteem, including limited L1 use. In addition, she incorporated ‘confirming behaviours’ such as smiling or congratulating students (Ibid., p. 22). The findings show that these attempts to remove anxiety and fear made the students communicative especially on topics ‘directly related to their life experiences’ (Ibid., p. 23). Also, it is found useful to use L1 occasionally and to encourage them to be responsible for their own learning by explaining the purposes of activities or asking for their opinions and evaluation. However, assessment of this type of study would require the students’ rather subjective evaluation to some extent, and therefore, the data from a group of 11 students might be too small to apply to other contexts.

A quasi-experimental study was conducted in a senior high school in Japan by Tomita and Spada (2013). This research is different from other studies by focusing on an EFL setting in Asia. The students in the study were 24 female first-year students aged 15 to 16, taught English by Japanese teachers, where two types of activities, form-focused activities and meaning-focused activities were employed to see in which activities the students are more engaged with L2 communication. Unlike the former activities, which require the students to focus on form and meaning, the latter requires exclusive focus on meaning in L2 communication. Accordingly, teachers provide the metalinguistic and explicit feedback in the former activities, whereas the latter activity only feedback about the content was given. The results show that teenagers are more willing to engage in communicative activities including focus on forms rather than exclusively meaning-focused activities. The students could establish their identities as an L2 learner instead of pretending to be a native English speaker, through explicitly focusing on forms and sharing the difficulty of the rules of the language (Ibid., p. 606). Although they have not clearly mentioned the age factor in their teenage students, it seems clear that Tomita and Spada consider teenagers’ typical characteristics such as inhibition or metalinguistic knowledge in this study.

### 4 The Age Factor in the Context of a Japanese High School

Finally, this section will deal with the implications for a typical teaching context involving teenagers in Japan. The teaching context is a monolingual class in a private senior high school in a rural area of Japan. The students’ age ranges from 15 to 18. English is taught by Japanese English teachers as a compulsory foreign language subject. They study English mainly from instrumental motivation as described by Gardner and Lambert (1959, p. 267), which is to pass the university entrance examination, and most of the examinations still place considerable emphasis on reading and translation,
and little on listening ability (Brown and Yamashita, 1995, p. 24). The average class is about 40 mixed gender students with a similar level of language proficiency, and their level corresponds to A2–B1 of the Common European Framework of Reference (CEFR) (Council of Europe, 2017). Generally, classes are conducted in a lecture style, with desks arranged in a row. Despite MEXT’s attempt to introduce communicative activities into the classroom (Wada, 2002, p. 32), many English classes are still strongly influenced by the Grammar Translation Method (Ibid., p. 36), or ‘yakudoku, a form of teacher-led grammar translation’ as described by Humphries and Burns (2015, p. 239), in which teachers generally deliver the class in a lecture-style and students are occasionally allowed to speak (Larsen-Freeman and Anderson, 2011, p. 19).

Considering teenagers’ learning characteristics, it could be said that different approaches should be employed when teaching students of this age, and teachers might need to think about the reasons behind the students’ troubled behaviour because it can be a form of reaction against mismatched approaches in class as discussed by Greenaway (2013, pp. 20–21). For example, when teenagers appear to be silent in class, this could be due to their unwillingness to engage in activities which look irrelevant to their life. It could explain why some of the students in this context are reluctant to engage in activities which exclusively focus on communication as shown in study of Tomita and Spada (2013). That is, considering the limited opportunities for them to use English in their daily lives they ‘may not want to spend their limited time in class doing activities which will not be performed out of class’ (Liu, 2009, p. 64) or which look irrelevant to the university entrance exams.

Therefore, teachers should keep the students’ learning relevant to their lives. Firstly, teachers can help them to establish an identity as an L2 learner by using a ‘real-life activity’ such as translation activities (Atkinson, 1993, p. 54, italics in original). Considering the fact that almost all English language-related occupations for non-native English speakers demand occasional translation, teachers can let students do a role play which requires translation as an L2 user as well as let them translate a sentence or a word, summarize that part in L1 to check their understanding. In addition, due to few opportunities to use L2 outside of class, the appropriate balance of focus on forms could also keep students motivated. Focus on forms is necessary to not only meet their instrumental motivation, as discussed by Gardner and Lambert (1959, p. 267), to pass the university entrance examination, but also meet their characteristics of being less patient toward ambiguity (Woodward, 2011, p. 24). Explicit explanation and clear understanding of language rules encourage them to remain motivated, as shown in the study of Tomita and Spada (2013).

However, it is not enough that teachers believe that activities used in class are useful and potentially relevant to the students’ future. Teachers need to share their beliefs with students as students may find it difficult to work on activities whose purposes are unclear to them (Leiguarda, 2004, p. 9). In the classes that I have taught, I try to explain my detailed curriculum and the reason for activities or homework. It is true that late-teenagers are more impatient with activities which might appear boring compared to adults, but they are more mature than children. When late-teenagers understand the rationale of activities, even though it appears rather boring, they can work hard.

Also, the students in this context show stronger inhibition because teenage characteristics are intertwined with cultural values (Greer, 2000, p. 183; Thompson, 2001, p. 309), and therefore teachers need to remove those anxieties and there are some techniques which can be easily employed, as shown in
Greenaway’s study (2013): the desk arrangement, confirming behaviours, the amount and the style of correction and L1 use. Firstly, as for the desk arrangement, the students usually take every class in the same classroom, and almost every class is delivered in a lecture style. So rearranging their desks for group work could make a significant change to the atmosphere of the class (Harmer, 2015, p. 179). Secondly, confirming behaviours such as smiling, eye contact, and positive feedback, especially using the students’ names, tend to help them build confidence. In my teaching, I often check their answers while they are working individually and tell them whether it is correct, so that in group checking they can raise their hand and give their answer with confidence. Those students tend to feel a sense of achievement, and to volunteer their answers next time. In the meantime, they become less afraid of making mistakes, and more likely to take risks. Lastly, it is very beneficial to let them have limited time to use L1 in a monolingual class, not only because some activities including translation make the English more realistic but also the students can share and discuss their opinion at a deeper level. Teenagers with limited L2 skills tend to feel frustrated when they cannot express what they want to, so allowing them to use L1 occasionally gives them a sense of achievement and an opportunity to show their intelligence (Atkinson, 1993, p. 14).

5 Analysis on Research in the Field of the Age Factor of Late-Teenagers

In researching and writing this paper, it must be noted that the research in this field is limited. Firstly, there is not much research which focuses on the age factor of late-teenagers. Secondly, most research was conducted in an ESL setting of immigrants or students in immersion classrooms (Jaekel et al., 2017, p. 633), which might be difficult to apply broadly. Lastly, it should be mentioned that most of the writing in this field is based on experience and opinions as a learner, a teacher or a researcher, instead of findings based on action research or experimental research carried out in a classroom. This could be due to many researchers acknowledging that the age factor and the typical learning styles are difficult to separate from other individual differences, especially when the subjects are teenagers, whose characteristics could vary largely not only because of nationality and culture but also because of individual experiences and personality.

6 Conclusion

The research shows the possibility that older learners could have some advantages in learning a L2. In fact, as shown in Ausubel’s study (1964), unlike children, older learners have metalinguistic knowledge from their L1 and cognitive maturity, which could be suited to a deductive approach to the language rules and the use of L1 when learning a L2. Also, some data shows that in an EFL school setting, where a couple of English classes per week are provided, adolescents could learn more efficiently with these advantages than younger learners, who, it is argued, need more L2 exposure to develop advanced proficiency from an early start (Lightbown and Spada, 2013, p. 98: Jaekel et al., 2017, p. 650).

Late teenagers in the context of a senior high school in Japan could learn a L2 most efficiently (Yu, 2006, p. 53), when applying these advantages to their learning, and employing activities which match their typical age factor, although late-teenagers are generally considered to be a challenging age group in class. Late-teenagers tend to be self-conscious compared with young children, but teachers can offer a relaxing environment to them by getting to know them and developing a positive mood in class. They are likely to have less focus than adults, but
from my personal experience, when they believe that those activities are worth doing it, they can be surprisingly motivated. If teachers are unaware of the potential effect of the age factor, there might be conflict between the most beneficial learning styles for teenage students and the approaches that teachers use in class. Teenagers could be more excited and motivated students if compatible approaches are employed. Yet, teachers should keep it in mind that these generalisations may provide helpful tips but might not explain every aspect of teenage learning characteristics, and that their learning styles also depend to a great extent on other individual differences (Lightbown and Spada, 2013, p. 99; Harmer, 2015, p. 81).

Bibliography


1) In this article when referring to this teaching context, the students aged 15 to 18 shall be referred to as ‘teenagers’ or ‘late-teenagers’, although some might consider them to be ‘young adults’ in other contexts. This is because the school context in this article has strict school rules, which prevent the students from acting like ‘young adults’ as described by Lewis, for example, by being able to get married or have jobs ‘in the real world’ (Lewis, 2007, p. 6).