

# Age and Second Language Acquisition: A Case Study from Maldives

Aaidha Hammad

**Abstract**—The age a child to be exposed to a second language is a controversial issue in communities such as the Maldives where English is taught as a second language. It has been observed that different stakeholders have different viewpoints towards the issue. Some believe that the earlier children are exposed to a second language, the better they learn, while others disagree with the notion. Hence, this case study investigates whether children learn a second language better when they are exposed at an earlier age or not. The spoken and written data collected confirm that earlier exposure helps in mastering the sound pattern and speaking fluency with more native-like accent, while a later age is better for learning more abstract and concrete aspects such as grammar and syntactic rules.

**Keywords**—Age, development of language skills, fluency, second language acquisition.

## I. BACKGROUND AND SIGNIFICANCE OF THE STUDY

It has been noticed that many people believe that earlier the children are exposed to the second language the better they learn the language. It is believed that this is quite a commonly accepted belief in many communities. In countries such as the Maldives, where English is taught as a second language and used as a medium of instruction in the schools, it seems that many of the parents want their children to be exposed to the English language and to start learning it as early as possible.

A study carried out in the Maldives regarding the language of instruction shows that most of the parents who took part in the study presented arguments in support of introducing and using English as the language of instruction from an early stage (primary education) of formal education, while many other stakeholders, such as teachers and educators, contradict them with the idea that earlier is not always better [1].

Since the age issue is controversial, it is believed that it is important to address the issue not only at the surface level just by looking at the perception of the stakeholders, but it is also important to further investigate what really is happening with second language learners and what is being practiced. Hence, this case study was conducted to investigate whether children learn a second language better when they are exposed to the target language at an earlier age.

## II. LITERATURE REVIEW

### A. The Earlier the Better

It seems that many people in the Maldives, especially parents, believe that the earlier the children are exposed to the second language the better they learn the language. It is a

Aaidha Hammad is with The Maldives National University, Maldives (e-mail: aaidha.hammad@mnu.edu.mv).

conventional notion in such societies, especially in the Maldives that to be educated or intelligent, one has to be fluent in English, since it is regarded as the lingua franca of the globalised world [1].

As Maldivian students eventually prepare to undertake the Cambridge GCE examinations in secondary and higher secondary education, many parents believe that English should be taught at the very beginning of primary education [1]. In addition, it was argued that if the English language is taught and used from an early age, it would result in better fluency and would help to build students' confidence in using the language [1].

A parallel notion, the earlier the better for fluency, particularly with regard to accent and pronunciation, is supported by many other researchers [2]-[5]. They believe that the earlier the children start learning a second language, the better the pronunciation they achieve, with a more authentic native-like accent. They claim that younger second language learners do better and that after puberty, learners would inevitably face difficulties in achieving native-like competency of the spoken language including accent, word choice and pronunciation [2], [3]. It could be argued that this idea is also supported by the Critical Age Hypothesis (CPH) and Universal Grammar (UG).

Language learning is easier in a particular period of time, children have the innate capacity to acquire a language during a sensitive period in their development and it works successfully when it is stimulated at the right time before puberty, as brain lateralisation completes by puberty [4]. Besides, older learners find it difficult to master a native-like accent as the plasticity of the speech organs reduce and phonological parameters are already set by then [5]. As a result, they tend to have a foreign accent but with fluent control in most cases.

Apart from the mastery of accent, after conducting their studies, some researchers hypothesised that the earlier the second language learning is begun, the better the learners achieve some other linguistic features, such as morphology and syntax and have full native-like language abilities [5].

### B. The Later the Better

Even though it is believed that earlier is better for learning a second language, especially for learning pronunciation, it seems there are many others who contradict the notion that the earlier is always better. Some researchers argue that certain aspects of the language are learned better by older learners [5], [6]. They claim that adult learners are better at learning different aspects such as writing, vocabulary, syntax, discourse and pragmatics. They explain that adult learners are

benefitted by their first language, as they have full mastery of the first language. They believe that the learners' first language has some positive influences on the learning of a second language, as the knowledge of the first language helps to learn similar aspects of the second language [6]. In addition, it is believed that adult learners are also advantaged in learning the second language by their cognitive maturity. It could be believed that Jean Piaget's intellectual developmental stages support this notion. According to Piaget's stages of cognitive development, at the age of 11, a person becomes capable of abstraction of formal thinking which transcends concrete experience and direct perception [7]. Therefore, it could be believed that adults may benefit from this cognitive maturity in learning certain grammatical explanations and deductive thinking while they learn a second language, whereas children lack the benefits of this cognitive maturity, particularly in learning concrete aspects of the second language. Moreover, maturity of the left hemisphere would help adults in the application of more conscious and efficient learning strategies while they learn a second language, whereas children are generally not aware of these strategies [6]. Besides, they believe that sometimes first language influence is facilitative, as the habits formed in the first language would have positive influences on the students' second language learning in terms of language transfer. However, it also could be an interfering barrier and could lead to the fossilization of second language errors [6]. Therefore, based on the two ideas, what could be understood is that the earlier is better for attaining some aspects of language, such as speaking skills, particularly a native-like accent and pronunciation, whereas later is better in many of the cases for learning various other aspects and more concrete knowledge of the language, such as spelling, writing, vocabulary, syntax, discourse and pragmatics. Thus, this idea can be supported, as it is evident from the different aforementioned research. Furthermore, the empirical data collected for the current study and some incidences that the researcher has personally experienced, also support and show some evidence for the above mentioned notion that earlier is better for oral fluency and later is better for the learning of abstract aspects of the second language.

### III. METHODOLOGY

The research is conducted using a qualitative method. In this regard, a case study is carried out. Some spoken and written data of an eight-year-old Maldivian girl (Anan) was collected for analysis. Both spoken and written data were analysed and compared to see the development of her language skills, such as speaking and writing.

### IV. ANALYSES OF THE DATA

The collected data includes a video of an eight-year-old, Grade Two Maldivian girl, studying at an English-medium primary school where she learns English as a second language. Her first language is Dhivehi, which is the native language of Maldives. However, she has been exposed to the English

language from a very young age, at around two years of age. In the video, she explains and demonstrates the procedure of how to make bubbles using different tools. She explains it in her second language, English. Here is the transcription of the video. The lines are numbered in order to make it easy to follow while reading the findings and discussion.

- (1) *"Good morning... err... my name is Anan ...and this is a tool... my father made me..."*
- (2) *he cut this end and I blow through this end... so I take my bucket here and I err...aa..."*
- (3) *add this... in my pail.. then I take it out again then I blew the bubble out.. then I dip it*
- (4) *back again... a little bit of this... then I take it a little bit out... then it shown two*
- (5) *bubbles came out..(she pauses)... then I take my next one... called a fan wheel...*
- (6) *actually it has that... but here a bit... so I take it and mix it little bit again... then it*
- (7) *taking then let go and then the bubbles come out... and take again...then the bubbles*
- (8) *come out.. (she pauses).. and then I take another bottle like this one... it has a cut at the*
- (9) *end.. my father made it for me... then I dip it in soap that my mom made... then I take*
- (10) *it back... you see that end the bubble...then I blow it.. (she blows and makes a big bubble)...*
- (11) *then it's done... thank you for watching Anaan's video..."*

### V. FINDINGS AND DISCUSSION

When her pronunciation is considered, it could be said that she has a native-like pronunciation and her accent to a great extent, sounds like a native speaker, especially a native speaker of American English, as she has a rhotic accent. For example, she pronounces the words, *morning*, *father*, and *another* as /'mɔ:(r)niŋ/, /'fɑ:ðə(r)/ and /ə'nʌðə(r)/ with a rhotic accent with /r/. Besides she pronounces the words *little* and *bottle*, with a /d/ instead of a /t/ as /'lɪdəl/ and /'bɒdəl/, which sounds like a native speaker of American English. In addition to that, she pronounces the words *then* and *through* as /ðen/ and /θru:/, with the consonants /ð/ and /θ/, which is similar to native speakers' pronunciation.

It has been noticed that when most Maldivians, especially adults, speak in English, they find it difficult to articulate, or cannot articulate, those two sounds (/ð/ and /θ/) as a native English speaker. Instead of the voiceless fricative /θ/, they tend to use a voiceless dental stop [t̪], and instead of the voiced fricative /ð/, they tend to use the voiced dental stop [d̪], both of which exist in the Dhivehi language. It could be believed that the reason for this could be the negative influence of the first language because the Dhivehi language does not have /ð/ and /θ/ and most people, especially those who started learning English at a later age or after mastering the full sound system of their native language, find it difficult to master a native-like accent. It could be believed that this happens as a result of the reduction of the plasticity of the speech organs, already established phonological parameters

and fossilization, as Lightbown & Spada explain [5]. Thus, they replace these sounds with the closest sounds from their vernacular.

Deterding and Salbrina argue that the native language has a strong influence on the pronunciation of the second language, rather than some external influences [8]. This could be believed rather true, as the researcher herself experienced the same thing as a second language student of the English language. Unlike Anan, the researcher started learning English at a later age, after mastering the full sound system of her first language, Dhivehi. As a result, her pronunciation of English and the accent is highly influenced by her native language. She cannot articulate some of the sounds in English, as a native speaker would pronounce, particularly those sounds that do not exist in Dhivehi. It could be believed that the situation would be quite similar with many other Maldivians who started learning English at a later age. However, it has been noticed that, nowadays the younger generation and many of Maldivian children who have been learning English from a very young age tend to have a closer pronunciation and native-like accent when they speak English. On the basis of this, it could be assumed that Anan's pronunciation is more native-like because she has started learning English at a very young age, and as a result her pronunciation is not as influenced by her first language, as it is for many adult learners. Therefore, based on the data, the researcher's personal experience and the research findings mentioned previously, it could be concluded that for the learning of oral fluency, native-like pronunciation and accent, it is better to introduce the second language as early as possible.

When Anan's learning of other aspects of the second language such as grammar, and writing skills are considered, it cannot be said that she performs as well as she performs in speaking and pronunciation. For example, when the data is analysed, it is evident that there are some problems with various aspects of English grammar since she has not mastered those features as effectively as she has the pronunciation. For example, in line 1, "...and this is a tool... my father made me...", in lines 6 and 7, "... then it taking then let go and then the bubbles come out...", and in line 9, "...then I dip it in soap that my mom made...". Anan could not use the passive form "this is a tool made for me by my father", "...then it is taken and then let go.", "...then I dip it in soap which is made by my mom.." in order to say it in a grammatically correct way.

Some more examples are in lines 4 and 5, "... then it shown two bubbles came out". Here she could not use the correct form of the present perfect and the gerund clause as a direct object ("...then it has shown two bubbles coming out"). This shows that even though she is capable of learning the correct, native-like pronunciation and oral fluency, she has not been able to learn certain grammatical aspects, especially the more difficult and abstract features of passive form, perfect tense and the use of the gerund as a noun. Hence, this provides evidence and supports the idea that earlier is not always better

for learning a second language, especially the abstract aspects of the language. It shows that cognitive maturity is important in order to learn certain aspects of a language.

Apart from the spoken data, some written data were also collected in order to compare the development of her speaking and writing skills. Fig. 1 shows pictures of her written work. Fig. 1 is the written version of the same procedure of how to make bubbles using different tools, which she explains in the video.

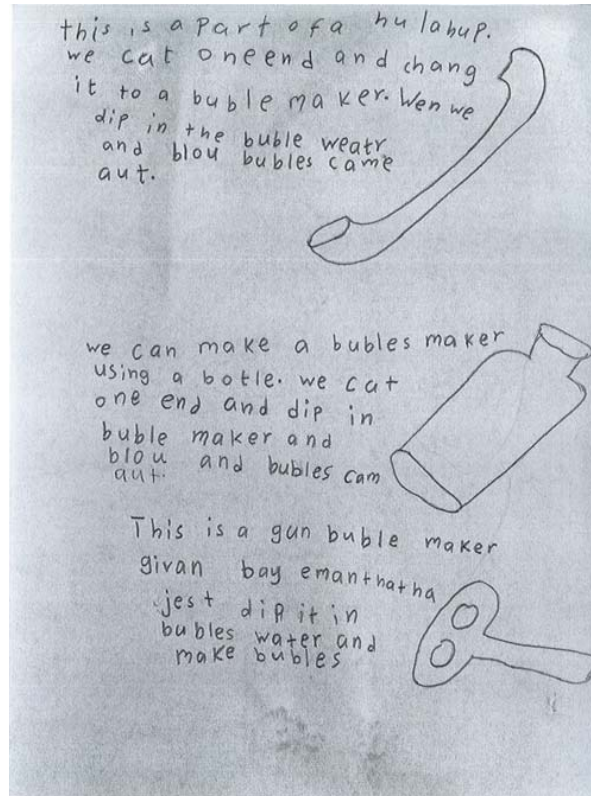


Fig. 1 Sample 1 of Anan's writing

Fig. 2 shows two drawings, made on a computer by Anan and her brother. However, the text was written by Anan. When her writing is analysed, it can be seen that spelling is one of her major problems. Many of the words are misspelt and inventive spellings have been used based on her knowledge of phonology, which is very interesting. In addition, both examples of writing have various difficulties with punctuation, such as using full stops and capital letters. When her speaking and writing skills are compared, it could be said that her speaking skills, such as fluency and pronunciation, are far better than her writing skills and grammar. This shows that earlier is better, especially for acquiring spoken language, but not always better for learning various aspects of writing and a sound grammar foundation.

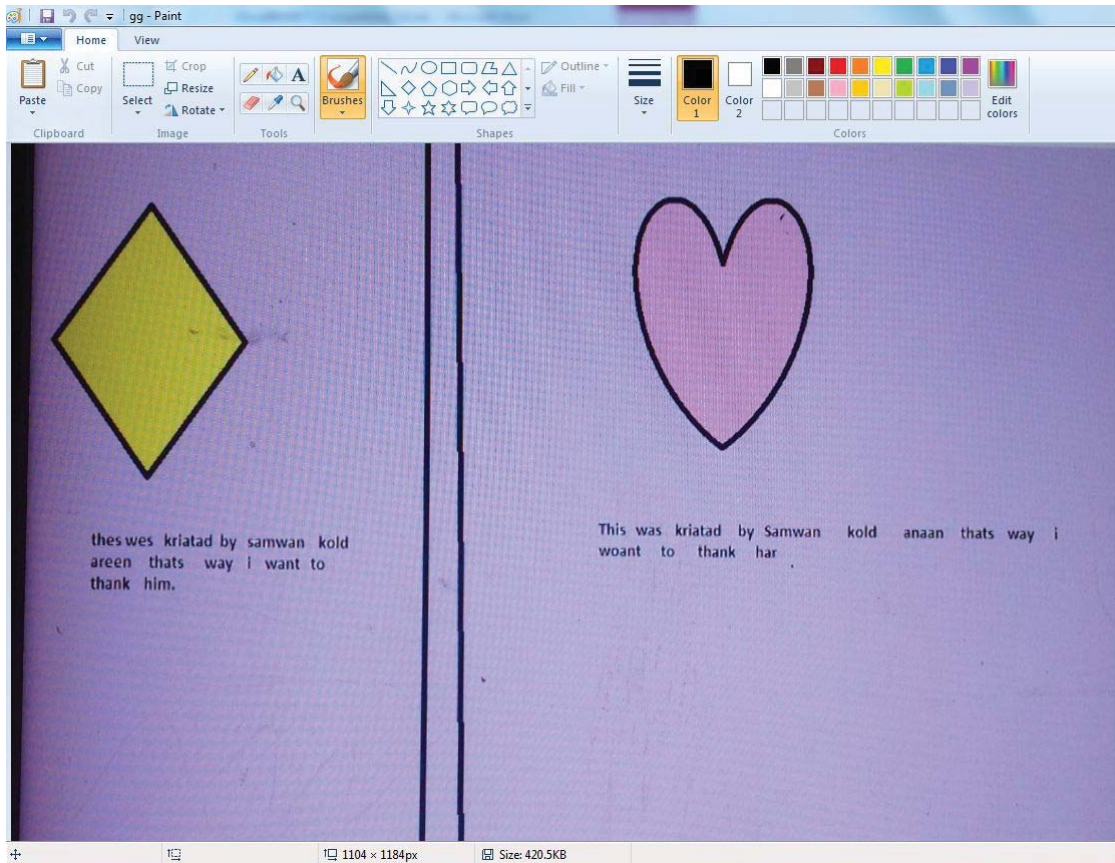


Fig. 2 Sample two of Anan's writing

## VI. CONCLUSION

To conclude, it could be said that neither earlier nor later is better in itself in learning a second language; however, other factors, such as attitude, aptitude, motivation and age matter in learning different aspects of a second language. Based on the research, the data presented and the researcher's own personal experience, it can be believed that earlier exposure helps in mastering the sound patterns with greater ease and achieving a more native-like accent. However, learning abstract aspects, such as grammar, vocabulary items, syntactic rules, stylistic variations, discourse and pragmatics, is easier and more effective if learned later as cognitive maturity and mastering of the full competency of a first language facilitates the learning of a second language.

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