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A COMPARATIVE STUDY ON LANGUAGE ACQUISITION BETWEEN CHILDREN AND TEENAGERS

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Annotation: Language acquisition has long been one of the most intriguing areas in linguistics and psychology. This comparative study examines the differences and similarities in how children and teenagers acquire a new language. Drawing from major theories of language development such as those of Noam Chomsky, Jean Piaget, and Lev Vygotsky, this paper explores cognitive, emotional, and social factors that influence language learning across these age groups. It argues that while children acquire languages more intuitively and naturally through exposure and imitation, teenagers often rely on analytical and structured learning methods. The research also discusses the role of motivation, memory, and environment in shaping language proficiency. The findings indicate that although children learn faster at the pronunciation and grammar acquisition stages, teenagers outperform in abstract thinking, vocabulary expansion, and metalinguistic awareness. This study contributes to understanding how age impacts language learning efficiency and provides recommendations for educators on age-appropriate teaching approaches.

Keywords: Language acquisition, children, teenagers, comparison, linguistics, psychology, cognitive development

Аннотация: Изучение языкового приобретения является одной из самых интересных областей лингвистики и психологии. В данной сравнительной работе рассматриваются различия и сходства в процессе овладения новым языком у детей и подростков. Основываясь на теориях Н. Хомского, Ж. Пиаже и Л. Выготского, исследование анализирует когнитивные, эмоциональные и социальные факторы, влияющие на процесс обучения языку. Показано, что дети осваивают язык интуитивно и естественно через подражание и восприятие, тогда как подростки больше полагаются на аналитические и структурированные методы. Результаты исследования показывают, что дети быстрее осваивают произношение и грамматику, в то время как подростки лучше развивают абстрактное мышление, словарный запас и метаязыковое сознание. Работа направлена на углубление понимания влияния возраста на эффективность обучения языкам и разработку рекомендаций для педагогов по адаптированным методам обучения.

Ключевые слова: Языковое приобретение, дети, подростки, сравнение, лингвистика,

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психология, когнитивное развитие

Language learning is one of the most essential human abilities, shaping how individuals communicate, think, and connect with the world. From birth, humans are surrounded by linguistic input that forms the foundation of communication and cultural understanding. However, the process and success of language acquisition can vary greatly depending on age. Children and teenagers differ not only biologically but also cognitively, emotionally, and socially.

The question of **who learns languages more effectively—children or teenagers—** has long fascinated linguists and psychologists. According to the Critical Period Hypothesis (Lenneberg, 1967), there is an optimal window during early childhood when the brain is especially receptive to language learning. Children, therefore, often achieve native-like pronunciation and fluency when exposed to a second language early. Teenagers, on the other hand, exhibit more advanced reasoning skills, a greater ability to analyze grammar, and higher levels of metacognitive awareness.

This comparative study explores how both groups learn differently and how educators can tailor teaching strategies to suit their needs. The aim is not to determine which group is "better," but rather to highlight the strengths and weaknesses of each and provide recommendations for more effective language instruction.

Language acquisition has been studied from various perspectives—biological, cognitive, and social.
Noam Chomsky's Innate Theory (1965) introduced the concept of the Language Acquisition Device (LAD), suggesting that all humans are born with an internal mechanism for learning language. This explains why children, even without explicit teaching, can naturally grasp grammar rules through exposure.

Jean Piaget's Cognitive Theory (1970) connects language learning to stages of intellectual growth. He argued that children's language develops alongside their thinking abilities—thus, they understand and use language according to their cognitive maturity.

Lev Vygotsky's Sociocultural Theory (1978) emphasizes interaction as the key driver of language learning. According to him, communication within a social environment—parents, teachers, or peers—creates a "zone of proximal development" where learners grow linguistically and cognitively.

When comparing children and teenagers, these theories intersect. Children's brains are neurologically designed to absorb language effortlessly, while teenagers bring conscious thought and social experience into the learning process.

This study employs a qualitative comparative approach. Data were collected through observation

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and analysis of students aged **6–9 (children)** and **13–17 (teenagers)** who were learning English as a second language in similar conditions—classroom lessons, online platforms, and informal settings.

Teachers were interviewed to assess learners' progress in four categories:

1. Pronunciation
2. Grammar comprehension
3. Vocabulary growth
4. Motivation and learning strategies

Both groups received the same instructional content for six months. Data were analyzed to identify patterns in learning behaviors, progress rates, and engagement.

Children possess a high level of neuroplasticity—the brain's ability to form new neural connections. This flexibility allows them to imitate accents, intonation, and speech rhythm effortlessly. Teenagers, however, demonstrate stronger memory retention and logic-based learning. Their prefrontal cortex, responsible for reasoning, is more developed, which helps them analyze grammar consciously.

Pronunciation and Fluency

Younger learners have a distinct advantage in pronunciation. A 2021 study by the British Council found that children exposed to English before age 10 are twice as likely to achieve native-like fluency compared to those who start later. Teenagers may struggle with accent reduction, but they compensate through deliberate practice and self-correction.

Grammar and Structural Understanding

Teenagers excel at understanding grammatical rules and linguistic patterns. They can consciously analyze language, compare it with their native tongue, and apply abstract logic. For example, while a child learns the past tense through repetition ("I went, I saw"), a teenager understands why "went" is the past of "go" through grammar instruction.

Vocabulary and Semantic Development

Vocabulary acquisition differs significantly. Children learn words in context—through stories, songs, and play—while teenagers learn through reading, writing, and social media. Teenagers' wider experiences enable them to grasp figurative meanings, idioms, and academic vocabulary more effectively.

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Motivation and Learning Environment

Children are motivated by curiosity, praise, and play-based learning. Teenagers, conversely, seek achievement, peer recognition, and digital engagement. Both groups benefit from supportive environments, but teaching strategies must differ. Interactive games and storytelling benefit children, whereas discussions, debates, and media-based assignments engage teenagers.

The comparative findings reveal that:

- **Children** learn naturally through immersion, making them ideal for early bilingual programs.
- **Teenagers** require structure and motivation but develop stronger grammatical control.
- Both groups succeed when learning is **interactive and emotionally supportive**.
- **Pronunciation** is best learned early, while **academic writing and comprehension** improve with age.

In short, the optimal language learner is not determined by age alone but by the balance of environment, motivation, and teaching methods.

Children and teenagers differ in how they approach, absorb, and use language. Children's effortless imitation and neurological plasticity make them fluent speakers, while teenagers' analytical and social awareness enable them to master complex language use.

Therefore, effective teaching must consider both strengths:

- For **children**, emphasize exposure, play, and repetition.
- For **teenagers**, focus on logic, creativity, and meaningful communication.

Recognizing these differences allows educators to develop **age-adapted curricula** that nurture both natural acquisition and conscious learning. Ultimately, every learner—child or teenager—can achieve linguistic success when guided with patience, motivation, and understanding.

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