

Perspectives on ESL Acquisition for Adult Learners in Romania

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Abstract

The present paper aims at catching a glimpse of the process of second language learning and acquisition among adult learners in Romania. When talking about adult learners, the focused age group comprises individuals over 24 years old who are no longer enrolled in any type of educational system. On the contrary, they already have jobs, families and lead a busy life. The paper comprises four parts – the introduction presents some factors, like age, psychological and environmental components, which interact in the process of successful language acquisition. The second part discusses motivation which has a pivotal role in the process of language acquisition while in the next part some difficulties Romanian adult learners face when learning English are presented. The paper ends with conclusions, emphasizing that the process of second language acquisition is not at all a simple one, it is a bouquet of factors which influences the final result.

Keywords: *adult learners; motivation; second language learning; second language acquisition*

Rezumat

Lucrarea de față își propune să prezinte succint procesul de învățare și achiziționare a limbii a doua în cazul adulților din România. Când discutăm de adulți, grupa de vârstă la care se face referire cuprinde persoane peste 24 de ani care nu mai aparțin sistemului educațional. Contrar, aceste persoane deja lucrează, au familii și o viață ocupată. Lucrarea cuprinde patru părți – introducerea prezintă anumiți factori precum vârsta, componentele psihologice și de mediu care interacționează în procesul de achiziționare a limbii. A doua parte discută motivația cu rol pivotal în procesul de achiziționare a limbii în timp ce, în următoarea parte sunt prezentate câteva dintre dificultățile întâlnite de adulții români atunci când învață limba engleză. Lucrarea se termină cu concluzii, punând accent pe faptul că procesul achiziționării unei a doua limbi nu este deloc simplu ci reprezintă un buchet de factori care influențează rezultatul final.

Cuvinte-cheie: *adulți; motivație; învățarea unei a doua limbi; achiziționarea unei a doua limbi*

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1. Introduction – factors affecting second language acquisition

There is a difference between „language learning” and „language acquisition”, the two terms not being perfect synonyms. Language learning represents the conscious process of studying a language in certain environments such as state or private schools, within a regular schedule, with the help of a trainer or a teacher. It is a conscious, well-planned process with specific goals to be reached. The acquisition of a language, on the other hand, is more like a subconscious process, a way of retaining vocabulary or expressions simply by communicating in that foreign language or by being exposed to language in a natural way. Yet, learning can include acquisition if the learner faces tasks, such as listening to natives or watching short movies that help him/her acquire specific structures without having to analyze or be aware of them in the formal way.

The acquisition of a second or foreign language is not a solitary process, it is more like a bouquet of different factors which influences not only the way learners succeed in the proceeding but also the means to do that. Age, psychological and environmental factors are a prerequisite of this task.

When it comes to second language acquisition, the difference between children and adults arises most often. It’s been debated, though without a clear conclusion or result, that adults are unable to acquire a second language at the pace and level children usually do. It is indeed known that children’s minds are ‘like a sponge’, absorbing, many times without any awareness, different information, words or expressions with an easiness that cannot be applied to adults. Yet, is age a factor which contributes to the level of proficiency learners obtain? Several studies have been conducted throughout time related to this difference between children’s and adults’ capabilities in learning and mastering a second foreign language.

One theory regards a specific period in humans’ lives when we are more capable of acquiring a second language due to neurological factors in our brains, changes that generally appear around the puberty age. This is called the critical period hypothesis, tested by few studies with no unequivocal evidence to support it. In 1989, Johnson and Newport conducted a study on 3 to 39-year-old native speakers of Chinese and Korean, immigrants to the USA, who were tested on their grammatical level of English. The results showed that the younger the arrivals, the better the scores of the test, many times not different from the ones of native speakers. Thus, those who arrived between the ages of 3 and 7 had almost identical scores with the native speakers while the grades gradually decreased with age. There was a big difference between the level of the group aged 0 to 16 years old and the one comprising people aged 16



to 40 years old. Based on these results, they came to the conclusion that the hypothesis is correct and indeed, the maximum age for the proper acquisition of a second language is near puberty. Yet, other investigators (Bialystok, Hakuta, 1994) reexamined the data and came to the conclusion that the decline is not so abrupt and the differences may occur due to some other cognitive factors or the amount of input learners face. According to them, „The adult learning a second language behaves just like a child learning a second language: he walks like a duck and talks like a duck, the only major difference being that, on average, he does not waddle as far” (Bialystok, Hakuta, 1994: 86). In their opinion, older learners are able to reach a certain level, being in the end not only caught up but also exceeded by youngsters. Other researchers (Birdsong, 2014, Cook, Singleton, 2014, Muñoz, Singleton, 2011) do not favor the age-theory of language, since they bring into discussion a range of other factors involved in the process such as language aptitude or motivation. As Cohen (2010) explains, „the younger the better principle is only valid in environments where there is a constant and natural exposure to the L2 [...]; in typical classroom environments where the amount of exposure is relatively small, older learners seem to have the advantage over their younger peers, that is, here, older is better” (Cohen, 2010: 162).

A research conducted by Steinberg (1982) mentions three factors of importance in the acquisition of a second language, with an eye on the differences between children and adults, as well. Psychological and social factors are taken into consideration with three categories being under debate: children up to 7 years old, the group of 7 to 12 and adults over 12. Steinberg showed how the age factor has an impact upon memory ability and the proficiency of language. While memory is better for the younger groups, showing high levels, the proficiency learners acquire decreases with age. In this paper, when adult learners are referred to, it is taken into consideration the period after the graduation of studies, that is, depending on cases, after the age of 24. It is important to make this distinction between the individuals who learn the second language during their educational programmes and those who no longer have any connection with the standard system of schooling, those who are now integrated into the labour market, have different jobs and lead busy lives.

In terms of psychological factors, adults are definitely more aware of their cognitive abilities, they function in accordance with what they believe it is expected from them, they care more about what others think about them and, are more afraid of making mistakes when communicating freely. It is the tendency of adult learners of speaking with restraints for fear others could laugh at their pronunciation or the sentence structure they use. They need more time to absorb new information, especially



when this one is different from their mother tongue or what they had previously learnt. Their high expectations of themselves and their projection of learning a language fast and proficiently become barriers in the success of any second language acquisition.

Regarding the environmental factors, the difference between adults and children is also obvious. Adults generally work, have families, lead busy lives and are unable to spend more time to learn a language as opposed to children who are enrolled in an educational system which pushes them into the acquisition and learning of a second language as part of their daily school tasks. Yet, there is the difference between adults who wish to learn the language in private, for their own different reasons and those who acquire the language due to their international work environment. The latter category generally succeeds in a shorter period to improve the knowledge of the second language. Working at least eight hours a day with foreigners, communicating in English all the time on different topics help them acquire the language faster and better. So, environment is an important factor in the process of L2 acquisition.

2. Motivational Factors

Ever since the Romanian revolution, in 1989, when people were freed from the burden of communism, the importance of knowing a foreign language, especially English, has gradually evolved. The peak time of this need of functioning in English became predominant in 2007 when the country became a member state of the European Union. More and more people started travelling for leisure and, at the same time, international companies emerged on the labour market. Thus, the stringent need of adults to communicate, both orally and in writing, in the second language. Since they no longer pertained to any educational system, being graduates, adults had to find the best alternatives for them to learn or acquire the foreign language.

It is known that, as time passes, humans become more responsible and clear-sighted in regard to what they are interested in, they set goals and choose the suitable path to achieve such goals. That is why, adults in Romania have chosen different ways of helping themselves with their set goal of learning a language, ways which they considered as being suitable. Some have chosen the enrollment in private foreign language schools, others opted for private, one-to-one sessions with a teacher or tutor while there is also a category that went for the aid of specialized language teaching platforms. These tendencies are still valid today. No matter the path they take, adults are eager to achieve the goal of becoming better, if not proficient in the second language. Motivation is the key factor which leads to success in all life aspects. It is motivation that makes people strive



for what they wish to accomplish in life. It is also the case of language learning desire which is based on specific motivational factors. As Gardner (2010) explains it, „Motivation to learn a second language is not a simple construct. It cannot be measured by one scale; perhaps the whole range of motivation cannot be assessed by even three or four scales. It definitely cannot be assessed by asking individuals to give reasons for why they think learning a language is important to them” (Gardner, 2010: 9).

Due to social or work demands, adults become highly motivated to attain success based on both intrinsic and extrinsic factors. Keeping up with the demands of the workplace or society represents a strong motivational factor. It is an intrinsic one as, here, we discuss about their inner will or wish to become better, to expand their level of knowledge which helps them increase self-esteem. Even if no exterior factors influence their decision to learn the second language, reasons such as „I want to be able to travel around the world and communicate freely everywhere in English” or „I already use English at work, I am capable of doing it right but I want to become better and better” determine them to keep the process of language acquisition vivid. Then, there is the prospect of finding a better job or that of promoting, part of extrinsic reasons for learning a second language. The case of adults working for international companies who are interested in managerial positions and are held back by their low level of English is common to many nowadays. This reason makes them be extremely committed to the process of language acquisition, the only impediment being their impatience to reach a higher level in a relatively short time. Some companies in Romania offer their employees training sessions for learning or improving the second language, which is a great benefit for them.

3. Encountered Difficulties

Just like with all non-native speakers of English, Romanian adults face the challenge of thinking in their own language while attempting to express themselves in the second language. This thinking in the L1 represents a major obstacle in the fluency of their speech. The reason for doing so is precisely the environment they live and function in. If they do not encounter English in their common, every day activities, then, it is somehow normal to think first in Romanian and try to translate the desired message on the spot. Inadequacies appear precisely from the differences existing between the two languages and, most of the time, when they think in Romanian, their final message in English sounds unnatural, forced, even odd at times. They need both span and a lot of practice to start thinking directly in English. It is simpler for those who work in the international environments discussed above. But what can the



others do to improve fluency and ‘forget’ their native language? Reading extensively in English, watching documentaries or movies without subtitling and speaking only in English with their trainers or private teachers are some of the ways which may help them become better at expressing themselves as natural as possible in English.

Once a second or a third language is learnt, cross-linguistic influences have an impact on the process. Generally, L1 has an influence over the L2, a phenomenon known as „linguistic interference” (Ringbom, 1987) or „language transfer” (Odlin, 1989). Discussing interference, Bălănescu (2021) says that it „[...] underlined the rather negative impact of L1 on L2 acquisition, and consequently the term was replaced by ‘transfer’ in order to emphasize the findings of subsequent research which proved that the native language influence on L2 was a creative process, despite learners’ production errors” (Bălănescu, 2021: 175).

A negative interference in the process of second language acquisition with adult learners in Romania is pronunciation. Again, there is the difference between children and adults when it comes to pronouncing certain words or producing specific English sounds which are not to be found in the Romanian language. Children are more open to the process of native-like pronunciation due to their ability to imitate the heard sounds. With adults, it becomes more difficult since their L1 sound system is well established in their minds and their capability of imitation of what they hear is decreased. A clear example is the strong pronunciation of the letter „r” when speaking in English. That’s because the „r” sound is rolled in the L1 phonetical system. Take, for example, the word *report* which is pronounced as /ri’pɔ:t/ but many Romanian adults say it as /ri’port/, or *car* /ka:/ which is pronounced as /kar/ and so on.

Also with origins in the L1, adult learners face some difficulties, especially at lower levels, with the proper sentence structure in English. Although they are aware of the SVO structure and they are able to produce simple sentences such as *I eat pizza*; *John went home* or even more elaborated ones as *We met at the corner of the street yesterday*, they still struggle with instances like *It rains* or *There are some chairs in the living-room* because in Romanian the subject is null and sentences appear as *Rains (Plouă)* or *Are chairs in the living-room (Sunt niste scaune în living)*. So, there is the tendency of many starter or elementary level adults of not using the subject or pausing in their speech because they do not know what subject they should use. Luckily, this is an aspect which can be hurdled once they pass the basic levels of language learning.

Apart from these above-mentioned difficulties, picked for the sake of exemplifying the most common issues Romanian learners face, there are, again, factors common to all adult learners trying to acquire a new, second



language known as individual learner differences. Anxiety, beliefs and the degree of willingness to communicate are just few issues adults need to deal with. As stated by Pawlak (2015), „...adult learners, especially older ones, may display reluctance to speak as a result of affective concerns, related to the belief that they cannot be successful, that their utterances may be unintelligible, or that they cannot express their true personality or expertise in a foreign language (Pawlak, 2015: 58).

4. Conclusions

Adults who embark on the study of a second language represent a special category which needs thorough attention since, as it's been shown, there are differences between them and children in terms of age, psychological and environmental factors. These factors are to be considered by the professionals in the field so that they may choose suitable teaching procedures and tasks which can help adults acquire the language successfully. Motivation plays a pivotal role, it is the engine which powers adults to achieve their set goals, including the aim of learning and functioning in a second language. Both intrinsic and extrinsic motivational factors are of high importance in the process. Romanian adult learners, over 24 years old, face challenges observed in adults around the world such as the fear of making mistakes, the preconceptions they might have about what the best way to acquire a second language is or the tendency of thinking in their native language and trying to translate into English. Besides general factors, the differences between the two languages must also be taken into consideration since the L1, well-established in adults' minds, may hinder the process of language acquisition. Yet, *when there is a will, there's a way!*

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