Are Young Learner’s Better Learners Of Foreign Language Learning Or Adults?

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Abstract

The present paper investigated a number of grammatical errors committed by young learners around the age of six to thirteen and adults between the ages of eighteen and twenty-five. They were at the same proficiency level (elementary level). Adults were studying the “Intro” book from the Interchange series and young learners, “family and friends 2”. The grammatical points were taught deductively so that they could become more familiar with them and their errors could be removed. The classes were held three sessions per week, lasting six weeks. At first, Pre-test was administered and 40 students out of 60, whose scores were somewhat identical, were chosen. Their errors were categorized into morpho-syntactic and lexico-semantic ones. Towards the end of the course, a Post-test was administered. The errors were classified into the same two groups. Afterwards, the errors were analysed. The grammatical errors made by these two age groups could not be remedied during the whole term in the classroom.

Errors of 20 young learners and 20 adults in four classes (each class consisting of 10 students) in the academic year of 2012 were examined. Findings showed that most of adults’ errors were inter language errors, indicating the influence of the mother language, while most of young learners’ errors were due to overgeneralization.

Keywords: Interlanguage, error analysis, grammatical errors, learners’ errors;

Introduction

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Generally, it is said that children are better learners than adults. When considering second language acquisition, a child introduced to a second language at the same time as an adult will, in almost every case, acquire a much better pronunciation. Young learners will also do better when it comes to grammar skills and fluency (Lightbrown, Spada, 60). Research that was made during one year’s time showed that the groups of adults and adolescents had the best results in almost all the tasks that were tested. A number of observations have shown that young learners seem to pick up another language quickly, without having been taught formal rules, but adults need to be taught rules and principles deductively. According to Steinberg (2006), children under seven years display a phenomenal ability at rote memorization. Adults, however, do not. Adults apply their cognitive abilities to the analysis of the syntactic rules of the second language, while young learners rely more heavily on their use of rote memory for language learning. Adults are eager to learn syntactic analysis sooner because they realize that they have difficulty in remembering all the sentences that they have heard.

The SLA researchers and structural traditions prior to the 1960s strictly emphasized that second language learners' errors be prevented and, in case of occurrence, corrected at all costs. They were believed to destroy the whole process of language learning. Over the past few decades, however, attitudes towards learners' errors have undergone significant changes following the changes in the methodological approaches to foreign language teaching, new insights from SLA research about the nature and significance of errors, and revolutionary research into the nature of interlanguage errors are considered as signs of developmental processes involved in the learning of language (Corder 1967, 1976, 1981, Selinker 1972, 1984, Eckman 1981, 1984).

Cultural background is a variable that may become potent with the age of the learners. It is an important consideration in the classroom situation that children have less background than adults, so this issue does not seem to have any effects on young learners learning a second language (Gardner and Lambert, 1972).

A number of factors affecting second language learning operate only in certain types of situations. In Gardner’s model, one of the most influential one in the second language acquisition is the four individual differences: intelligence, language aptitude, motivation, and situational anxiety. According to the influence of the strong version of the Contrastive Analysis Hypothesis, the source of language learners’ errors was recognized as transfer from the learners’ native language. Errors resulting from mother tongue interference are called inter-lingual errors. However, in error analysis, it is acknowledged as one source of errors, not the only source of errors.

According to Keshavarz’s taxonomy (2012) of the sources of errors, inter-lingual errors result from the transfer of phonological, morphological, grammatical, lexico-semantic, and stylistic elements of the learner's mother tongue to the learning of the target language. This research focused on the study of transfer of grammatical structures as one source of inter-language errors.

The underlying assumption was that the students’ errors in grammar were systematic and classifiable. So, this study carried out a systematic research into the field of error analysis to investigate a number of grammatical errors committed by the elementary level of young and adult learners. The researcher wanted to find out what types of grammatical errors were mostly made. The frequency of error occurrences was taken into consideration.

Two questions were composed in order to analyse the grammatical errors:
1) Do adult learners commit more errors than younger learners?
2) To what extent, are adult learners’ errors similar to young learners’?

Literature Review

According to James (1998) “the target language speaker knows everything and foreign language learner is more or less ignorant. Inter language is, therefore, a product of ignorance. An inter language is an emerging linguistic system that has been developed by a learner of a second language (or L2) who has not become fully proficient yet but is approximating the target language: preserving some features of their first language (or L1), or overgeneralizing target language rules in speaking or writing the target language and creating innovations. It can fossilize, or cease developing, in any of its developmental stages. The inter-language rules are claimed to be shaped by several factors, including: L1 transfer, transfer of training, strategies of L2 learning (e.g. simplification), strategies of L2 communication (or communication strategies like circumlocution), and overgeneralization of the target language patterns”.

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Keshavarz (2012) Considers two categorizations for errors; the first categorization is syntactical - morphological errors which include: errors in the use of prepositions, errors in the use of articles, wrong use of plural morphemes, wrong use of quantifiers and intensifiers, and the use of typical Persian constructions in English. The second one is Lexico-semantic errors, including errors in choosing the proper vocabulary, which can be semantically meaningful, in particular constructs.

Method

a) Participants: Since the aim of the study was to compare the errors of young with adult learners, 40 students from four classes in a language school in Tehran took part in the present study: 20 students formed the younger group and 20 students the adult one.

b) Data Analysis Procedures: In order to figure out the possible linguistic errors of participants, the researchers decided to record the learners’ utterances in the class and then transcribe them. The collected data was analyzed according to Keshavarz (2012) model of error analysis. Transcription of recorded utterances was done and grammatical errors were identified. The categorizing the errors into syntactic and morphological types followed these. Having been classified, the errors were counted to realize how frequent the errors had been made by the learners. Once the errors were counted, the results were tabulated.

Data Analysis and Results

a) Analysis of errors: This study explained the grammatical errors made by the adult and young learners of foreign language. Based on Keshvarz model, eight types of the grammatical errors were figured out. In this article, only morpho-syntactic errors were accounted for and the second category of lexico-semantic was ignored. Table 1 displays morpho-syntactic errors committed by elementary level adult and young learners. According to the corpus, 162 and 152 errors were made by young and adult learners respectively:

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>The relative frequency of morpho-syntactic error types</th>
<th>No. adults</th>
<th>%</th>
<th>No. young</th>
<th>%</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Errors in the use of tenses</td>
<td>25</td>
<td>12.5</td>
<td>31</td>
<td>15.5</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Errors in the use of inversion to make question</td>
<td>18</td>
<td>9</td>
<td>26</td>
<td>13.5</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Errors in the use of infinitive</td>
<td>12</td>
<td>6</td>
<td>15</td>
<td>7.5</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Errors in the use of prepositions</td>
<td>21</td>
<td>10.5</td>
<td>23</td>
<td>11.5</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Errors in the use of articles</td>
<td>19</td>
<td>9.5</td>
<td>27</td>
<td>13.5</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Errors in the use of “it is” instead of “there is”</td>
<td>21</td>
<td>10.5</td>
<td>18</td>
<td>9</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Errors in the use of possessive construction</td>
<td>15</td>
<td>7.5</td>
<td>10</td>
<td>5</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Errors in the use of typical Persian structure</td>
<td>15</td>
<td>7.5</td>
<td>0</td>
<td>0</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Wrong use of parts of speech</td>
<td>28</td>
<td>14</td>
<td>17</td>
<td>8.5</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Total number of errors</td>
<td>174</td>
<td>--</td>
<td>167</td>
<td>--</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
According to Table 1, in most cases, young learners made more mistakes than adults did. In cases of typical Persian structure, possessive, using ‘there is’ and parts of speech, the children made fewer errors. As discussed earlier, the reason is that younger learners’ background knowledge of their L1 was almost limited; hence, they received less interference compared to that of adults. However, in other domains, adults did much better and made fewer errors, therefore, they are considered better learners of grammatical rules. Also, as clearly shown in Table 1, errors made by both groups were almost the same. Based on our findings, in learning English as a foreign language, adults’ errors are almost similar to the ones made by children. As mentioned above, children are not usually under negative transfers or interference from their L1, whereas adults (in the elementary level) usually are faced with interference. When it comes to EFL, we cannot say with certainty which group are better learners, because their errors are almost identical and the number of errors made by the two groups is almost the same. We believe that in order to help adult learners improve their knowledge of English; teachers are advised to teach grammar deductively and with details. The instructors can benefit from a contrastive method as well; that is, they can compare the structures of both languages and try to illustrate that the structures are whether identical or different. This helps the adult learners to have a better understanding of the target language. For children, the teachers should not confuse the young learners with the grammatical details. Instructors can benefit from drills; that is, having written a definite structure on the board, they can ask the students to repeat it several times. Students can be asked to compose different sentences based on the patterns given. Involving the young learners with grammatical intricacies can...
make them confused; thus, a comparative study of both L1 and L2 structures is not suggested at all.

References


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