

The Impact Of Students' Age And Psychological Characteristics On The Formation Of Linguistic Competence

 Ergashev Doniyor Dovronovich

Independent Researcher, Chirchiq State Pedagogical University, Uzbekistan

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Abstract: This paper examines the significance of students' age and psychological characteristics in the formation of linguistic competence. The study analyzes grammatical accuracy, lexical richness, speech activity, phonological accuracy, and discursive abilities across different age groups (16–20, 21–25, 26+). Psychological factors—such as motivation, speech inhibition, self-confidence, and anxiety levels—are empirically and theoretically evaluated in terms of their influence on specific components of linguistic competence.

Keywords: Age, psychological characteristics, linguistic competence, speech inhibition, motivation, language acquisition, CEFR.

Introduction: Modern theories and practices of language teaching increasingly require approaches that take into account learners' individual differences. Among these differences, age and psychological characteristics play a decisive role in the formation of linguistic competence. Linguistic competence is understood as the integration of grammatical, lexical, phonological, discursive, and pragmatic knowledge [2, p. 47], and its development depends not only on curricula but also on learners' internal world, cognitive developmental stage, and psychological stability.

In the scholarly literature, the Critical Period Hypothesis explains the importance of age in language acquisition: children up to the age of 12 acquire language intuitively, similar to first language acquisition, whereas with increasing age the process becomes more complex and relies on analytical thinking [6, p. 76]. However, this hypothesis remains a subject of academic debate. Some researchers argue that adults are also capable of achieving high levels of language proficiency, provided that favorable psychological factors—such as motivation, anxiety management, and self-confidence—are present.

LITERATURE REVIEW

Age is considered one of the most influential individual differences in second language acquisition. According to the Critical Period Hypothesis proposed by Lenneberg [6, p. 81], children under the age of 12 acquire a new language intuitively due to brain plasticity, learning through exposure rather than explicit rule understanding. This intuitive learning supports natural pronunciation, intonation, and idiomatic usage.

In contrast, learners over the age of 16 tend to rely on analytical approaches due to more developed cognitive systems. They prefer understanding rules, testing them through examples, and analyzing errors, which often results in higher grammatical accuracy and stronger written skills. Nevertheless, their oral participation is frequently limited by psychological barriers such as fear of making mistakes.

Deci and Ryan's Self-Determination Theory emphasizes that motivation is based on three basic needs—autonomy, competence, and relatedness [3, p. 98]. When learners feel control over their learning process, intrinsic motivation increases, leading to deeper and more sustainable acquisition.

Conversely, speech inhibition—the fear of openly

expressing one's thoughts—is particularly prevalent among older learners. Horwitz introduced the concept of foreign language anxiety, demonstrating that it can reduce oral participation by up to 70% [4, p. 127], especially in classroom settings requiring public speaking.

Self-efficacy also plays a crucial role. According to Bandura, learners who believe in their language abilities are more willing to engage in challenging tasks and perceive errors as learning opportunities rather than failures [1, p. 110].

METHODOLOGY

The study employed a mixed-methods approach, combining theoretical analysis, questionnaires, speech tests, and classroom observation. The sample consisted of English-major students at Alfraganus University ($n = 150$), divided into the following age groups:

Group A: 16–20 years ($n = 50$)

Group B: 21–25 years ($n = 60$)

Group C: 26+ years ($n = 40$)

All participants were confirmed at CEFR B1–B2 levels. The research instruments included: Gardner's Attitude/Motivation Test Battery (AMTB), Horwitz's Foreign Language Classroom Anxiety Scale (FLCAS), a five-minute free-topic speaking task (automatically analyzed via a speaking application and evaluated by instructors), a written argumentative essay (analyzed for grammatical errors, lexical diversity, and use of connectors), and classroom observation of oral participation. Quantitative data were analyzed using SPSS v26 (ANOVA and correlation analysis), while qualitative data were processed through thematic analysis.

RESULTS AND DISCUSSION

The findings reveal that younger students demonstrate higher oral activity but make more grammatical errors, whereas older students show strong grammatical competence but limited oral participation due to psychological inhibition. Questionnaire results indicate that Group C exhibited significantly higher anxiety levels (FLCAS mean score = 98) compared to Group A (72). Motivation levels were generally high across all groups; however, intrinsic motivation was more prevalent in Group A (78%), while extrinsic motivation (career advancement, examinations) dominated in

Group C (85%). This suggests that older learners are more goal-oriented but experience greater performance anxiety. Classroom observations showed that Group C students often avoided speaking due to fear of making mistakes. One participant stated: "I have to speak correctly; otherwise, my peers will laugh at me," illustrating fear of social evaluation. In contrast, Group A students perceived errors as natural and actively attempted self-correction, reflecting higher self-confidence.

CONCLUSION

The study confirms that age and psychological characteristics have a direct impact on the formation of linguistic competence. Younger learners develop communicative competence through intuitive learning, while older learners strengthen grammatical competence through analytical approaches; however, psychological barriers limit their oral performance.

Recommendations:

- Develop age-appropriate lesson plans: interactive speaking activities for younger learners and psychologically safe speaking environments for older learners (e.g., pair work, pre-speaking writing tasks).
- Provide psychological support by fostering a classroom culture where mistakes are viewed as part of learning.
- Reduce speech inhibition through gamification, such as anonymous speaking tasks and virtual classrooms.
- Future research should examine additional individual differences, including temperament, gender, and cultural context.

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