



## **The Role of Informal English Language Teaching in Childhood on English Knowledge and Attitude towards the English Language in Adulthood**

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### **Abstract**

The purpose of this study was to investigate the role of informal English language teaching in childhood on English knowledge and attitude towards English language in adulthood. The research design was of a causal-comparative nature. The statistical population included all the first-year undergraduate students of Islamic Azad Universities who had been studying humanities in the academic year of 2015-2016. A sample size of 200 students was selected by multistage cluster sampling method. The research tools were English knowledge test and attitude questionnaire which were developed by the researcher. Statistical analyses using MANOVA was implemented. Findings revealed that the informal English language teaching in childhood, as compared to its absence, leads to more English knowledge and improves attitude towards the English language in adulthood. Based on the obtained results, it is recommended that English language learning should not only start at an earlier age but it should also and be taught informally.

**Keywords:** Attitude towards the English language, English education, English language, English Informal teaching

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### **Introduction**

In the learning process as well as the success of learners in the second language learning (and foreign language), emotional variables such as attitude, orientation, motivation, and anxiety (Noels, Pelletier & Vallerand, 2000), are as important as other variables such as talent, intelligence, age, and personality. In most researches in the field of foreign and second language learning, among the various factors mentioned, the age starting of language learning (Khalifa Gawi, 2012) and the attitude of learners towards language learning (Zainal Abidin, Pour-Mohammadi & Alzawari, 2012) are considered to be the most important factors involved.

Attitude plays an important role in language learning. Success or failure of learners in learning a language is not just related to the learning capacity and cognitive abilities of people, attitude also plays a very

important role (Zainol Abidin, Pour-Mohammadi & Alzawari, 2012).

Due to the importance of an individual's attitude towards language learning process and the success and failure rates in this field, many related studies have been carried out over the past years. Researches have been done by scholars such as Gardner (1985), Yang (2012), and Ahmed (2015) to highlight the key role of this variable in the process of learning and teaching foreign and second languages. Various studies such as Dominguez and Pessoa (2005) as well as Orhan Kocaman and Nurgul Kocaman (2012) have shown that age and its related factors are considered as the most important variables in the field of language learning. The early years of life are the most influential years in human life for the acquisition of languages. In the early years of life, emotional, physical, cognitive, psychological, and also linguistic changes take place very rapidly. Foreign language education is expanding to children all over the world, and as a result, the age of language learning has also declined in many countries for a variety of reasons, such as political, economic, and educational ones. Although the results

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of language teaching have not been completely discovered in the early years of life, education is still widespread in the early years of life (Gursoy, 2011).

There is no consensus on the teaching of English as a foreign or second language in childhood between specialists and researchers. A group of them defended education in this era and another group against them. Researches have been done by Fathman (1975), Dominguez and Pessoa (2005), Orhan Kocaman and Nurgul Kocaman (2012) and Li (2014) supporting foreign and second language learning in childhood. In addition, some researchers such as Johnson and Newport (1989), Asher and Garcia (1969; quoted by Marinova-Todd, Bradford Marshall and Snow, 2000), and Khalifa Gawi (2012) advocated a critical period hypothesis (CPH), and confirmed the learning of English in childhood. Another group of professionals, such as Snow and Hoefnagel-Hohle (1978), Rivera (1988; quoted by Marinova-Todd, & Bradford Marshall) and Snow (2000) who opposed the critical period hypothesis, considered adults in comparison with children as having great advantages in learning foreign and second languages.

In relation to the points discussed above, this study tried to investigate the role of informal English language teaching in childhood on English knowledge and attitude towards the English language in adulthood.

## Method

### Participants

The research design was a causal-comparative. The statistical population of this study (11321) was the first-year undergraduate students of Islamic Azad Universities in Tehran, who had been studying humanities in the academic year of 2015-2016. The sample size was calculated based on Krejcie and Morgan table to be 200 people. The first group consisted of 100 students who had done English studies before formal education and another group included 100 students who entered the English language class of school without any prior English language learning.

The sampling method was a multi-stage cluster type. The sample was randomly selected from some of the branches of Islamic Azad University located in Tehran (Islamic Azad University; South and Central Tehran Branches).

### Instruments

**English Language Knowledge Test:** In order to prepare the English language test and determine its

content validity, first of all the table of specifications for a summative test in English was prepared; English books of second and third grades of senior high school of the old system of Iran's education were used. To prepare English language test, the following books were used according to the specifications table: English books of second grade of senior high school; second and third grades of senior high school and college English books of old system of Iran's education, complementary books, preparation books for university entrance examination, and final exam questions. Later on, a test of four optional multiple choices according to the rules for preparing multiple-choice questions (Saif, 1395) was also designed. This test took into account the psychometric criteria which included 100 questions for implementation and preliminary study (Pilot Study). Then, the test was carried out after the confirmation of professors on a small group of a statistical sample of educational science students from the Faculty of Psychology and Educational Sciences of Islamic Azad University-Central Tehran Branch involving 36 students. Afterward, in order to analyze the test questions, the difficulty coefficients and the discriminant coefficients of the questions were calculated. Therefore, very difficult or very easy and defective questions were removed. The final test consisted of 50 questions. This test was given to both groups of the main sample. The content validity of this test was also examined through using the specifications table as well as the opinion of the experts in this field (supervisor professor). This test had a decent validity. The reliability of this test was also reported through the internal consistency method, using the Kuder-Richardson method (KR21) of 0.91.

**Attitude Questionnaire:** In order to prepare the questionnaire, the Attitude/Motivation Test Battery (Gardner, 2004), an English version of 104 items, was selected among the available tools. Gardner's questionnaire (2004) has been developed and expanded to address the need to measure emotional variables and has evolved following long-term researches, many of which are based on English-language students who have learned French as a second language. According to the literature review of the present study, this questionnaire was used more than other ones by various researchers. Then, from different items of this questionnaire, those who were appropriate with regard to the title, goals, and questions of the present research were selected, and other appropriate items were added to them. This questionnaire is a self-reporting tool and is a closed-ended response test. Therefore, the questionnaire consisting of 20 items was developed to assess the

attitude towards foreign language, with a focus on English. Each item is a simple sentence that is set in the form of a Likert scale with four-choice responses. The entire spectrum is totally in agreement to completely disagree; I completely disagree with the number 1 and I totally agree with number 4 points. This process of counting according to the meaning of the item is a reversal in questions numbers 3, 7, 14, 15, and 16; therefore, the minimum score is 20 and the maximum one is 80. The content validity of this questionnaire determined through using the opinion of experts in this field was confirmed. Its reliability was also reported through the internal consistency method using the Cronbach's alpha to be 0.92.

## Procedure

In order to collect information, two groups of the first-year undergraduate students of Islamic Azad University were selected randomly from Tehran branches, who had been studying humanities in the academic year 2015-2016. The first group consisted of students who had done English studies before formal education so that when they entered the English language classroom at school, they had a background in learning English and the other group included students who entered the English language class of school without any prior English language learning. A questionnaire with demographic information was distributed among the students. Then, the participants filled out the attitude questionnaires and completed the knowledge test. The data were coded and later analyzed by SPSS software.

In order to analyze the data, a multivariate analysis of variance (MANOVA) was used. Bartlett, Box's M, and Levene tests were also used to examine the assumptions.

## Findings

In order to answer the research questions, the Multivariate Analysis of Variable (MANOVA) was used. Before using MANOVA, the assumptions were

checked. The results of Bartlett's test ( $F= 17.99$ ,  $P< 0.001$ ) shows that there is a significant correlation between the dependent variables. The results of Box's M test was significant for the variance-covariance matrix homogeneity assessment independent variables ( $F= 0.33$ ,  $P< 0.05$ ); accordingly, homogeneity condition of the variance-covariance matrix was not observed, but due to the equality of the group size versus failure to adhere to this assumption is not sensitive.

**Table 1**  
*Leven's Test Results*

Variables	F	df1	Df2	Sig
English Language Knowledge	24.31	1	198	0.001
Attitude Towards English Language	0.14	1	198	0.70

As can be seen in Table 1, the results of Leven's test for defining the assumption of equality of dependent variables variance indicates that the variances in attitude scores are equal and there is no significant difference between the two groups ( $P> 0.05$ ), but the variances are not the same in knowledge scores ( $P <0.05$ ). Multivariate analysis of variance is not sensitive to the lack of compliance with this assumption due to the equality of group size. Currently, all the assumptions are examined and the next table shows the main result of the multivariate analysis of variance.

The results of the Wilk's Lambda the test shows that the difference between the groups mean in the composite dependent variable is significant [ $F= (2 \& 197) 23.43$ ,  $P<0.001$ ,  $\text{Partial} = 0.19$ ]. This means that there is a significant difference between the linear compositions of the mean of dependent variables in the two groups. After applying Wilk's Lambda, which is meaningful, the results of the analysis related to the effects between the subjects were examined, which can be seen in Table 2.

**Table 2.**  
*Results of Multivariate Analysis of Variance of Group Effects (teaching) on Dependent Variables*

Resources	Dependent Variable	SS	df	MS	F	Sig	Eta Squared
Group	English Knowledge	5110.605	1	5110.605	44.208	0.001	0.183
	Attitude Towards English	1250	1	1250	12.52	0.001	0.060
Error	English Knowledge	22889.75	198	115.605			
	Attitude Towards English	19757.68	198	99.786			

As it is seen in Table 2, there is a significant difference between the two groups of trained and not

trained subjects in English knowledge [ $F = (1 \& 198) 44.208$ ,  $P <0.001$ ,  $\text{Partial} 0.183$ ]. In this way, the

English knowledge scores of people trained in childhood are significantly higher than those who have not been trained in childhood. The group variable explains 18.3% of the variance of English knowledge.

The results showed that there is a significant difference between the two groups of trained and untrained participants in attitude towards English [ $F=(1 \text{ \& } 198) 12.52, P< 0.001, \text{Partial } 0.060$ ]. In this way, attitude towards English score of those who are trained in childhood is significantly higher than those who have not been trained in childhood. The group variable represents 6% of the variance in attitude towards English.

## Discussion and Conclusion

According to the results of this study, those who studied English in their childhood (6 to 12 years old) had more English knowledge than those who began to learn from school. The results of this study are similar to those of Orhan Kocamen and Nurgul Kocamen (2012), Dominguez and Pessoa (2005), Li (2014), and Khalifa Gawi (2012), but they were not consistent with the research results of Gorjian, Mahmoudi and Mir (2010). In the study of Gorjian, Mahmoudi, and Mir (2010), there was no significant relationship between attitude, age, gender, and English language learning; in this study, although age does not affect language learning, but in Iran, the age variable can be associated with social and psychological limitations which are examined that it may affect the process of language learning, so it may not be coherent because of various factors, such as differences in statistical populations and samples, time and environment of testing and ignoring some other influential factors. Therefore, the results of these studies indicate the success of children in learning English. Considering childhood as a golden age to learn a variety of concepts and subjects, including foreign or second language, it is vital to take advantage of children's abilities at this time. Also, according to the critical period hypothesis that children's success is due to neurological and biological factors, during this period, children have very good rote memory and this ability is very effective to help success. In addition, the children's rote memory capacity is also high and does not let them rely on rote learning. Also, the child's brain in the early stages of adolescence absorbs new sounds and patterns easily; thus, learning English as a foreign language plays a key role in children's educational programs.

In addition, children can learn other languages similar to their mother tongue without the need to use the grammatical rules consciously; similar to the

mother tongue, hearing is the first source of children's learning, which first only stored what they heard and then they speak of what they have only heard for a long time, precisely the process that they adopt in native language (there are differences of opinion with respect to different theories). With using the natural approach, English language environment and not teaching in the classroom, children learning process is more successful than the adult, although children are not ready for classroom learning and will not succeed. It should also be considered that age is only one of the important factors in learning a language and neglecting other effective factors lead to deceptive conclusions. Factors such as teaching method and, the learning strategies adopted, and the learning the environment are also very important; therefore, given the role that the age factor plays in learning English, starting to teach English to children of ages under 12 years old, in order to enhance their English knowledge in adulthood, it is essential that the results of this study have been in the same direction.

One of the other studied variables is the attitude towards English. According to the results of the present study, those who studied English in their childhood (6 to 12 years old) had a better attitude towards the English language than those who had started their learning from school. The results of this study are consistent with Karahan's research (2007). As a matter of fact, age was the only factor which has been used by Karahan, but in this study, in addition to considering the age, the place where the training began; school or institute, it was considered as the main factor. Attitude is considered as an essential component of language learning. Teachers and educators of English as a foreign language need to be aware and respect students' feelings, beliefs, orientations, personality traits, and behaviors before thinking about their cognitive abilities. Also, educational programs and classroom activities should be created and implemented according to the students' individual needs and differences in order to create a positive attitude towards English. Therefore, due to the important role that the attitude plays in the academic achievement of learners, various studies and researches in this field is of great importance; consequently, parents and educational leaders are encouraged to start teaching English from childhood. It is also suggested to English teachers and educators not to ignore learners' attitudes towards English language, but to respond to them and be aware of students' prior perceptions and attitudes towards the English language.

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