

THE MYTH OF “THE EARLIER THE BETTER” IN FOREIGN LANGUAGE LEARNING OR THE OPTIMAL AGE TO LEARN A FOREIGN LANGUAGE

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Abstract: A widespread belief of ‘the earlier the better’ in foreign language learning has led to generous investment from both families and societies on young children’s foreign language learning. Nonetheless, the outcome of such investment is often under expectation. This article aims to discuss if there is an optimal age to learn a foreign language. By putting together both related theoretical and empirical research in the international literature, this article forwards the message that the general belief of ‘the earlier the better’ in foreign language learning is often misleading, and too early investment in children’s foreign language learning may become a big waste. Ultimately, the key factor in effective foreign language teaching and learning is how to adapt the teaching style to match the learning style of students rather than when to let children start learning a foreign language.

Keywords: optimal age, foreign language learning, children, critical period hypothesis, Vietnam

1. Introduction and background context

English, under the impact of globalisation, has become the international language in science and technology (Kaplan, Baldauf Jr, & Kamwangamalu, 2011), and has been perceived by many individuals and governments as the world’s *lingua franca* (Alisjahbana, 1974; Choi & Spolsky, 2007; Crystal, 2012; Graddol, 1997; Qi, 2009). For governments, English is required to increase the country’s competitiveness in the world economy; for families, parents see English as the key to educational success for their children (Baldauf Jr, Kaplan, Kamwangamalu, & Bryant, 2011). Given this important role, English has been taught as an important subject in many countries where traditionally

English is not officially used in everyday communication.

Is there an optimal age to start learning a foreign language (FL)? This has remained one of the most controversial issues in FL learning and teaching. While the theoretical debate and the empirical research data have revealed different complex issues and there is no easy answer as when is best to introduce an FL, there exists a widespread belief of ‘the earlier the better’ in FL learning. The assumption that the one who starts learning an FL very early in life would generally acquire a higher level of proficiency than those who begin at later stages (Gawi, 2012) has led to very generous investment in FL learning. Evidence indicates that a growing number of governments have lowered the age at which children are first introduced English at schools (Miralpeix, 2011). Huge investment for children FL

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learning has been made with the expectation that an early exposure to FL instruction and interaction will result in better performance (Gawi, 2012).

Vietnam has also joined the move to begin teaching English at the primary level (Moon, 2009). English is now a popular subject from Grade 3, but in most schools in developed cities and areas, English is taught since the very first grade at school and also in different kindergartens and childcare centres. FL teaching below Grade 3 is optional and is paid for by parents. Apart from paying for these optional programs, parents are increasingly spending their pocket money for their kids' English private tuition since their child is as young as two to four years old. The number of children attending English teaching centres is increasing, regardless if they are forced or want to learn this FL.

The Vietnamese government does also not hide its ambitious aim of boosting the English proficiency level for young Vietnamese to increase the competitiveness of the country in the world economy. Since 2008 the government has generously agreed to invest 9,400 billion Vietnamese dong (about 570 million USD in 2008) to implement Decision No. 1400/QĐ-TTg "Teaching and Learning Foreign Languages in the National Education System, Period 2008 to 2020" (MOET, 2008) with the key goal as: By the year 2020 most

Vietnamese youth whoever graduate from vocational schools, colleges and universities gain the capacity to use a foreign language independently. This will enable them to be more confident in communication, further their chance to study and work in an integrated and multi-cultural environment with a variety of languages. This goal also makes language an advantage for Vietnamese people, serving the cause of industrialization and modernization for the country (MOET, 2008).

Despite huge investment and effort, and ambitious expectation from the government, schools and families, the English proficiency level among young Vietnamese has remained disappointing. The mean score of the English tests in High School Final Exams has remained below average mark and around 70% to nearly 90% of students often gain below 5 points (the average mark in this test) (See details in the table below) (H.Le, 2019; V.Le, 2016, 2017). In July 2019, half year before the 'deadline' set for the Foreign Language Project 2020, English together with History have remained the two subjects with recorded lowest marks in the High School Final Exams every year (Nguyen & Quy-Hien, 2019).

Table 1. High School Final Exams - English results

Year	Number of students taking English exam	The mean score	Number/proportion of students gained below average mark (5 points)	Note
2016	634,200	3.48	559,784 (88.27%)	The maximum score students could get is 10.
2017	749,078	4.46	516,596 (69%)	
2018	814,779	3.91	637,335 (78.22%)	
2019	789,435	4.36	542,666 (68.74%)	

The Minister of the Education and Training Ministry (MOET), Mr. Phung Xuan Nha also acknowledged that Decision 1400/QĐ-TTg is unachievable (Thuy-Linh, 2016). Many students, after 10 or even 12 years of learning English at school and

private language centres, are still hardly able to use English in a simple communication interaction. Many research projects have investigated the reasons for the failure to deliver several goals and objectives of the National Foreign Language Project 2020;

nonetheless, there seems to be hardly any research focusing on the area of an optimal age to begin an FL, especially English, in the Vietnamese context, and why huge investment for English learning since young ages failed to bring an expected outcome. Parents keep paying for optional language programs and sending their kids to extra English classes in children's out-of-class time since early ages, but are unsure if the investment is worthwhile.

This paper, by pulling together both theoretical and empirical research related to the issue of the age factor in FL learning, hopefully will bring about a better understanding about this matter. It will first discuss the Critical Period Hypothesis (CPH) and other related terminologies which support the arguments of 'the earlier the better' in second language (L2) learning. It then moves to the discussion of the FL learning context and the empirical research which largely indicates the older the better in learning a new language in a foreign context. Other related factors will then be discussed before an implication for Vietnam to be formed.

2. CPH and the assumption 'early is better' in language learning

There are certainly reasons supporting the intention to introduce English language learning from the pre-school years, and this is closely related to the ideas of CPH, maturation constraints, ultimate attainment in first and second language learning (Agullo, 2006; Farzaneh & Movahed, 2015; Nap-Kolhoff, 2010; Slev, 2015). The idea of critical period was first introduced in 1959 by Penfield and Roberts (1959). According to Penfield and Roberts (1959), before the age of nine, a child can learn two to three languages as easily as one, this is because their brain is much more plastic than an adult's. CPH was then theoretically formulated by Lenneberg in 1967 who, based on the neurophysiology studies, claimed that the acquisition of language is

an innate process determined by biological factors. And this limits the ages for humans being to be able to learn the *first language* (L1) (i.e. between the age of 2 and 12 - the age of puberty) (Lenneberg, 1967). Lenneberg (1967) also believed that the plasticity of a child's brain will lose after lateralization (a process by which the two sides of the brain develop specialized functions). Puberty is normally the time the lateralization of the language function is completed, and thus, post-adolescent language acquisition becomes difficult. What is worth noticed is that the brain's lateralization can be finished at the age of five (Krashen, 1973). Nonetheless, Lamendella (1977) later argued that using lateralization as a cut-off point for language learning is too much exaggerated and he used the term 'sensitive period' instead of 'lateralization'. That means after puberty it is still possible to learn a language.

Lamendella (1977) and other subsequent authors also adapted the term 'sensitive period' to *second language* (L2) context. He also suggested that language acquisition is often more efficient during early childhood, but that does not mean that learning an L2 at later ages is impossible.

The argument of CPH and sensitive period in L1 and L2 learning proposes *maturation constraints* for language acquisition (Celaya, 2012). Evidence is found where a child living in isolation and had not developed language capability, experts suggested that that child would not be able to acquire a language after a certain age (Celaya, 2012). In the case of L2, it is suggested that adults have already stored linguistic representations, and the more established these representations are, the harder for them to change (Nap-Kolhoff, 2010). Thus, there exists a worry that learning an L2 after the critical/sensitive period would mean not achieving the *ultimate attainment* level (the final/optimal level of language proficiency achieved in the L2) compared to learners who had started before this period (Miralpeix, 2011).

Quite a few research findings support CPH. Research in L2 acquisition often relates CPH to such questions whether L2 learners are able to attain 'native-like' proficiency in a L2 (Hyltenstam & Abrahamsson, 2003; D. Singleton, 2005) or how the way of learning a L2 should be changed when the age of onset is later (Schwartz, 2004; Unsworth, 2007). Research on L2 acquisition in a naturalistic context often found that older learners were often faster and achieved higher level of proficiency in the short term, but in the long term, the ones who had arrived in the L2 context earlier often outperformed the late starters (Birdsong, 2005; Krashen, Long, & Scarcella, 1979; D. M. Singleton & Ryan, 2004). It is argued that young children who have opportunities to acquire both L1 and L2 from birth are extremely sensitive and finely tuned to different patterns in the input and pick up on them implicitly (Granena, 2013).

Implicit learning seems to be strength of young learners, which does not mean that implicit learning mechanisms are not available in late L2 acquisition, but they decline with age (Granena, 2013; MH Long, 2010; Rebuschat & Williams, 2009; Williams, 2009). Studies on immigrants in the US suggest that early exposure to L2 (e.g. before the age of 15) would lead to higher syntactic command than the later arrival (Patkowski, 1980). Similarly, Johnson and Newport (1989), Chiswick, Lee and Miller (2004) and Hakuta, Bialystok and Wiley (2003) also found linear relationships between age of arrival and language proficiency. In short, most studies in favor of the existence of the CPH (DeKeyser & Larson-Hall, 2005; DeKeysey, 2008; Hakuta et al., 2003; Hu, 2016; Hyltenstam & Abrahamsson, 2001; Ioup, 2005) support Krashen, Long and Scarcella's (1979) findings: older learners acquire faster than young learner at early stages, but younger learners outperform older learners in the long run.

3. CPH in foreign contexts and the argument of 'older is better'

CPH and the assumption of 'earlier is better' which indicates that the earlier exposure to language the more beneficial, were later assumed to be applicable in foreign language (FL) learning context (Agullo, 2006; Celaya, 2012). Nonetheless, Agullo (2006) argued that not everybody agrees that what applies to L1 and L2 can also apply to FL in an identical way. There are, in fact, many important differences between L2 and FL learning contexts. The key difference is that L2 context is a natural context and learners acquire the language where it is spoken, whereas FL learners acquire a language which is not their mother tongue in the context where that language is not spoken. This indicates a significant difference in terms of the *amount and the type of exposure* to the target language in the two situations; L2 learners learn the language in both natural settings and instructional settings (e.g. class instruction), while most FL learners can learn language only under instructional/class settings.

Secondly, learning a new language is often challenging and time-consuming; being able to expose to a new language is not enough in acquiring it, and the motivation behind the learning process (such as: wanting to communicate with people speaking that language) is equally important. Children in a L2 setting (e.g. migrant children in the US, the UK or Australian schools) seem to be more motivated to learn a new language (Clark, 2000; Tabors, 1997). The massive exposure to the target language and the natural setting also enhance children's implicit learning. Based on this explanation, some researchers are against the myth of 'earlier is better' in FL learning and argue that more intensive FL learning in the late primary school years may even more effective than the 'drip-feed' method of teaching for children when they are younger and their cognitive skills are less developed (Agullo, 2006; Gawi, 2012; Lightbown,

2000). Nonetheless, Jaekel, Schurig, Florian and Ritter (2017) argue that the age of onset of FL learning cannot be investigated separately from the factor of the amount of exposure to English. In other words, age of onset and amount of exposure are two crucial and inextricable factors in FL learning (Jaekel et al., 2017).

CPH is based on the assumption of implicit learning and it clearly indicates the advantage of younger learners in a meaningful exposure and communicative activities. Implicit learning also implies that children need massive exposure to target language structures to “internalize the underlying rule/pattern without their attention being explicitly focused on it” and to “infer rules without awareness” (Ellis, 2009, p. 16). Nonetheless, in most FL learning contexts, the limited amount of exposure to FL and the instruction in a classroom-based setting place a question to implicit learning process among younger learners.

The age of onset (AO), maturation and the ultimate attainment level in language acquisition proposed by CPH are also questioned in FL contexts. Since most studies confirming and supporting CPH are conducted in L2 settings, such variables as AO or the length of residence are arguably to be indirect measures of L2 experience (Moyer, 2004). Thus experience should be considered as crucial as maturation in language acquisition (Moyer, 2004). Moyer also called for a contextualization of the critical period and challenged the assumption that ultimate attainment is primarily a function of age. She pointed out that ultimate attainment is not only a function of maturation but also of experience, psychological and social influences and that each person’s experience is unique and is relevant to ultimate attainment.

Nonetheless, there are widely accepted findings in research into the CPH in L2 learning in a naturalistic context: (i) adults progress faster than children at early stages of morphology and syntax; (ii) older children acquire new language faster than younger

children; and (iii) child starters outperform adult starters in the long run (Nikolov, 2009). The tendency of lowering the AO and investing in early English learning in FL contexts seems to reflect parents and policy makers’ awareness of the third point, but Nikolov (2009) also claimed that there was evidence showing that there is a misconception that younger learners develop faster and that the enthusiasm towards an early start is not supported by empirical research, even the one conducted in L2 settings. Indeed, research has proved that younger is slower.

There is also another possibility leading to the increase enthusiasm towards an early start FL: the expectation to help children adopt native-like accent. Accent is at the heart of CPH, and it is suggested that the earlier the child exposes to the L2, the more likely he/she will adopt native-like accent and pronunciation (Flege, Mackay, & Imai, 2010; Nikolov, 2009; Nikolov & Djigunović, 2006). Nonetheless, the range for children to be able to pick up native accent is also wide, as Long (2005) claimed that native-like accent is hard to attain unless the first exposure to the target language occurs before age six or twelve.

Recent scholars also raised different perspectives regarding the relationship between AO and native-like accent. Some scholars provided evidence of successful adult language learners who could achieve native-like accent and proficiency (Moyer, 2004; Nikolov & Djigunović, 2006; D. M. Singleton & Ryan, 2004). Others’ research findings indicate that AO is not a decisive factor for perceiving and producing English sounds in a native-like manner (Fullana, 2006; Mora, 2006). In other words, early starters do not guarantee native-like accent and pronunciation. On the other hand, researchers also support deBot’s (2014) argument that the native norm becomes basically irrelevant since English has become a world *lingua franca* and is increasingly used in communication between speakers of nonstandard varieties of UK or US English.

The empirical research in FL learning indicates mixed results, but in general, most studies in FL contexts point out that older learners outperform younger learners in instructed learning contexts (Celaya, 2012; deBot, 2014; Farzaneh & Movahed, 2015; Garcia-Lecumberri & F., 2003; Garcia-Mayo, 2003; Krashen et al., 1979; Langabaster & Doiz, 2003; Larson-Hall, 2008; Munoz, 2003; Muñoz, 2006; Nikolov, 2009; Pfenninger, 2014; Pfenninger & Singleton, 2016). For example, Jaekel, Schurig, Michael, Florian, and Ritter (2017) conducted a study to compare receptive skills of two cohorts of English language learners in year 5 and year 7. The early starters (ES) (N=2,498) started learning English as FL in Year 1 (age 6-7) and the later starters (LS) (N= 2,635) in Year 3 (age 8-9). Two distinguished factors between these two cohorts (i.e. AO and the amount of language exposure) were taken into consideration in this study (the ES had received 3.5 years (245 hours) and the LS had received 2 years (140 hours) before starting Year 5). The findings showed that the early starters outperformed the later ones with less and later exposure to English in Year 5, but in Year 7, the later starters surpassed the early starter cohort. They then concluded that the one who has advantage in the long run in learning an FL is not the younger learners as widely suggested in a naturalistic language setting. It is the older starter who will outperform the younger learners in the long run in early language education with minimum input/exposure to the target language.

Jaekel, Schurig, Michael, Florian, and Ritter's (2017) findings are not in line with the research findings supporting CPH in naturalistic contexts which suggested that older learners were faster than younger learners in the short run but younger learners would outperform older learners in the long run. However, their findings are not new. Since 1975, Burstall's (1975) study in a primary FL learning context showed that older learners outperformed younger learners

in both the mid and long term. Then Krashen et al. (1979), Larson-Hall (2008), Munoz (2006), Pfenninger (2014) and Pfenninger and Singleton (2016) also confirmed that older learners are at an advantage both in the short term and long term. Older learners are claimed to outperform younger learners on structure and vocabulary development (Miralpeix, 2006; Mora, 2006; Walsh & Diller, 1978), writing skills (Rosa-Torras, Navés, Loz-Celaya, & Pérez-Vidal, 2006), oral fluency (Mora, 2006), grammar and cognitive demanding tasks (Burstall, 1975) and rate of acquisition (Jaekel et al., 2017; Pfenninger & Singleton, 2016). Sun, de Bot and Steinkrauss's (2015) research, on the other hand, posed a question over the claim of long-term benefit for children to start learning FL early. They conducted a project on teaching English as an FL in commercial institutions in China, and the findings indicated that 3 to 4-year-old children appreciated the lessons but gained very little from them.

There are several explanations for the different findings of research conducted in L2 and FL contexts. It is claimed that when analyzing the age factor, the rate of learning, the type and amount of exposure to the target language, the ultimate attainment and the communicative needs in the two contexts also need to be taken into consideration (Muñoz, 2008; Villanueva, 1991). Obviously, both the type of exposure and the amount of exposure to the target language are so different in naturalistic and FL learning contexts. Similarly, it is impossible to compare the ultimate attainment achieved in naturalistic settings and in school contexts in FL settings where students only follow the FL program during their school years and may stop learning the language after some certain years. In terms of communicative needs, there is a tendency for the learners in naturalistic contexts to try to express themselves and make use of all possible strategies because the target language is used for real life interaction.

That is often not the case for FL learners who often use the FL in a fake situation in a learning context.

There also appear several reasons explaining why older learners are more efficient than the younger learners in FL learning. This is due to older learners' higher level of cognitive maturity, greater world knowledge, better learning capability (knowing how to learn) and their ability to learn languages through explicit instruction (Farzaneh & Movahed, 2015; Jaekel et al., 2017; Krashen et al., 1979; Muñoz, 2006). Older learners are also able to integrate new language input with their established learning experience whereas young learners often face some difficulties in learning tasks that are beyond their cognitive maturity (Farzaneh & Movahed, 2015; Walsh & Diller, 1978). Older learners also benefit from the rule-based and grammar-oriented language teaching in secondary school FL classroom environments (Jaekel et al., 2017; Pfenninger & Singleton, 2016). Studies also suggest that strong academic skills in L1 will help learners acquire an L2 faster (Farzaneh & Movahed, 2015; Jaekel et al., 2017), or in other words, "effective acquisition of the L1 plays an important role in learning an L2" (Farzaneh & Movahed, 2015, p. 859).

Strengthening and preserving L1 is, therefore, will support L2 proficiency and development (Farzaneh & Movahed, 2015; Jaekel et al., 2017). However, there is a real concern about children who start to learn another language (English in most cases now) too early before they fully acquire their L1 (Clark, 2000; Cummins, 1979; Fillmore, 1991; McLaughlin, 1984). In naturalistic settings, learning an L2 may mean losing the L1. That is often the case observed in English speaking countries where migrants' children are exposed to English when they have not fully dominated their L1. Fillmore (1991) suggests that only few American-born children of immigrant parents are fully proficient in their own language because once they learn English, they tend not to maintain,

or in other words, they often drop the mother tongue even if it is the only language their parents know. This is especially the case when their L1 is considered having lower value and 'social status' than the L2. In an FL learning context, being immersed in FL learning from preschool years will possibly negatively affect both L1 and L2 acquisition (Farzaneh & Movahed, 2015). Farzaneh and Movahed (2015) also suggested that in two years of learning English, preschoolers could only understand and say simple English like naming colors, shapes, alphabet letters and speak only very simple English sentences like "I am thirsty" - they are still not at the stage of being able to communicate with native speakers or understand a native speaker when they are talking. Nonetheless, when these preschoolers move to primary school, they often bring with them all the knowledge about language learning they acquired to learn their L1. The mutual interference of L1 and FL may result in language mixing. Moreover, exposing to FL also helps young kids get a taste of foreign culture, this may result in cultural confusion in some cases (Farzaneh & Movahed, 2015).

4. Other related factors

From the discussion above, it became clear that AO is not the only decisive factor in L2 and FL acquisition. Different or sometimes contrasted research findings regarding CPH and language learning indicate that research is conducted in different context settings and the results depend on other contextual factors, some of which are:

The level of input or the type and amount of exposure to the target language: This factor has been repeatedly mentioned in the above sections and it is also the key difference between L1 and FL learning contexts. In the L2 learning context, learners are exposed to L2 both in instructional language setting (e.g. classroom) and in naturalistic settings outside the class. This environment is an ideal

environment for young children to enhance their implicit learning process, and it is more likely for young children to adopt native-like accent if they arrive to the naturalistic language setting early in life. Nonetheless, that does not seem to be the case for children to learn FL, most in instructional language setting, where there is no need for them to communicate in that language outside the class. As suggested in the previous sections, with limited amount of exposure to the target language, adults and adolescents are often more efficient learners than children in FL learning, both in the short term and long term.

In the FL contexts, the amount of time children exposing to FL is also correlated to the scores they can achieve in that language. deBot (2014) conducted a 2-year longitudinal study measuring the achievement levels of 168 children learning English as an FL with several variables taken into account in measurement such as early or late start (age 4 or 8-9) and the number of minutes/weeks of English lessons. The results indicate that the later (8-9 year old starters) make more progress than the early starters, and there is a significant effect for the number of minutes of English lessons per week. deBot (2014, p. 412) claimed that sixty minutes or less per week leads to significantly lower scores for English, compared to children with more than 60 minutes but less than 120 minutes and the children with 120 minutes or more.

Children also seem to forget FL more quickly than adults (Clark, 2000), thus an interruptive period in FL learning may bring the child back to the beginning. In some other circumstances, not an interruptive period but the lack of continuity also creates a major challenge for FL young learners (Nikolov & Curtain, 2000). Nikolov (2009) named the reasons for the lack of continuity in children FL learning: (1) students are not offered to study at their appropriate level. This may lead to decline in motivation; (2) they are denied an opportunity to continue learning an FL due to limited access, and (3) teaching methodology

in the class is not up to their expectation, and this often results in a demotivating experience for the FL learners.

Motivation: The above analysis indicates that motivation is also considered a key factor in FL learning. This is supported widely in the literature (deBot, 2014; Farzaneh & Movahed, 2015; Met & Phillips, 1999; Moyer, 2004; Muñoz, 2006; Nikolov, 2009). Met and Phillips (1999) stressed the importance of motivation and language exposure that given motivation and opportunity (including sufficient time and appropriate circumstance) almost everyone can attain a degree of proficiency in another language at any age. In terms of the age-related motivation, some scholars argue that the significant advantage of the early starters over the late starters is in the development of positive attitudes and motivation (Blondin et al., 1998; Edelenbos, Johnstone, & Kubanek, 2006). It is suggested that children's attitude toward learning a new language is often positive, they are also more motivated and less anxious than older students (Nikolov, 2009). However, there are many arguments against this claim. Muñoz (2006), for example, assured that motivation toward learning a new language is stronger among older students. The findings of deBot (2014, p. 415) also indicate that the attitudes of students decline over time: "While English is something new and exciting in the first few years, it becomes an ordinary school subject in later years". It is not surprising when the ultimate success of the process of early FL learning (primary school English teaching) in Germany is defined as "high levels of motivation and continuous development of language proficiency" (Jaekel et al., 2017, p. 462).

The role of the teacher and classroom practices: The motivation of students depends much on the language teachers and the classroom practices, especially in the FL contexts where teachers seem to be the only source of input for students. Norton (2014) pointed out that although children are

generally highly motivated and eager to learn English, they may become disruptive and resist participation in classroom activities if the teachers or classroom practices make them unhappy or dissatisfied. It is also suggested that if the teaching practices make the students feel they lack competence, their internal motivation will decrease and they only learn because of the environmental influences, pressures and controls (such as to pass exams and to satisfy parents' expectation) (Noels, Clément, & Pelletier, 1999; Taylor, 2013; Ushioda, 2011, 2015). So the teacher language proficiency, teaching pedagogy and their background and training are very important as these all impact on the student's motivation and attitudes toward the FL. Lamp (2013, p. 26) also posed a warning that if the teacher lacks personal experience, understanding of Anglophone culture or both, the English learning and teaching process may become a 'values-free body of knowledge conveyed via official textbooks'. Nonetheless, many English teachers in Korea, Japan, Taiwan and Vietnam are not confident about their cultural understanding and their English capability. Specifically, they felt their productive skills lagged behind their receptive skills and called for an opportunity to develop their English in order to implement successfully the English language teaching programs (Moon, 2009; Nikolov, 2009; Tran, 2017). It is also suggested that children will learn better if the teachers are keen to focus on their implicit acquisition process and provide massive amount of input (Agullo, 2006). That is not often the case in many FL learning contexts, given the limit hours students can learn English in class and the limitation of their teachers' English capability. For all these reasons, the learning of English is not an enjoyable activity for many students (Pfenninger & Singleton, 2016).

Apart from the motivation and attitude, teachers, and the amount of exposure, many other factors are also considered and discussed widely in the literature as determinative

factors in FL learning. *Language aptitude* is a factor that could be used to explain the different learning outcomes of people who study in the same context and circumstance. Language aptitude can also be able to compensate for the effects of a late start in L2 or FL learning (Granena, 2013). *Socio-economic status/background* is also claimed to have a strong link to achievement and motivation in FL learning (Kormos & Kiddle, 2013; Lamb, 2012). Children from different social backgrounds get access to different types of schools (state, private or international schools), have different amounts of exposure or different inputs of the target language outside class time such as learning resources, private tuition and study abroad (Muñoz, 2008; Nap-Kolhoff, 2010; Pfenninger & Singleton, 2016). *The close proximity between the L1 and L2/FL* is also claimed to have an impact on FL learning outcome (Nap-Kolhoff, 2010), people from countries where their languages have the same 'roots' (Western Romanian languages: Spanish, French, Italian and Portuguese; Anglo-Frisian language: German, English, Scots; Chinese, Cantonese and Vietnamese) can learn other languages which share the 'roots' with their mother tongue easier. Apart from these, individual characteristics such as *gender* (girls are often better than boys in FL learning (Jaekel et al., 2017)), *personal learning styles and strategies*, *personality*, *experience factors*, *opportunities of use*, *social and educational variables* and *the privilege of the target language* all affect language learning (Agullo, 2006; Clark, 2000; Farzaneh & Movahed, 2015; Jaekel et al., 2017; McLaughlin, 1984; Nap-Kolhoff, 2010; Slev, 2015). Why are some people successful in FL learning and some are not? There is no simple way to explain and age is obviously not the only decisive factor.

The discussion of age and language learning reveals that there are differences in the learning styles between children and adults (Agullo, 2006; Hu, 2016; Nap-Kolhoff, 2010). Implicit learning versus explicit

learning is the most obvious difference in learning approaches between small children and adolescent/adults. Teenager and adult learners often consciously reflect on language forms when learning while children often use their memory and process new information in a holistic way (Agullo, 2006). Similarly, Wray (2005) and Nap-Kolhoff (2010) also suggested that the difference between child language learners and adult language learners is the difference between holistic and analytic learning styles. They also claimed that children often acquire mostly phrases, but teenagers and adults tend to focus on learning words and ways to combine words into phrases. Children, thus, often gain more advantage in a naturalistic context with abundant language input, while adults seem to process faster in formal instructional settings.

5. Discussion and implications for Vietnam

This article has put together different perspectives related to the issue of age and language acquisition. It has become clear from the discussion that in FL learning contexts, where the input is minimum and where there is little or no need for the student to communicate in that FL outside classroom, older learners are often more efficient and learn faster than young children. The ultimate attainment of the older starters in FL contexts is also arguably higher than that of the young starters. The myth of ‘earlier is better’ may have arisen from the misunderstanding/mistranslating the CPH that children learn FL faster than adults, or from the expectation that young children will more likely to adopt native-like accent. There is also evidence from the literature suggesting that child starters outperform adult starters in the long run and that the earlier the child exposes to the L2, the more likely native-like accent and pronunciation will be adopted. However, all of these in-favor-of-CPH studies were conducted in a naturalistic learning environment (e.g. migrant children learning the host country

language). The type of input, the amount of exposure and the child’s motivation to use the language in that context is very different from that in an FL learning context. It is suggested that the same conclusion is not applicable in FL learning contexts.

Nevertheless, even when empirical research has clearly confirmed that older is better in FL learning, it does not mean that early FL is worthless and should be delayed (Agullo, 2006; Met & Phillips, 1999). Since it often takes a long time to gain proficiency in an FL, where the language input is limited and the amount of exposure is low, the early start will possibly lead to higher level students are likely to achieve (Haas, 1998). Met and Phillips (1999, p. 25) argued that “omitting certain academic experiences simply because older learners are more efficient may be insufficient justification for curriculum design”, just like while older learners can grasp mathematics concepts faster than children, it does not mean that we should delay to start teaching Math at Grade 9. That could be a justification for the tendency of lowering the age of FL introduction in the school curriculum in many countries.

When is considered an early start, when is late? These terms used in the international debate are not always clear. In 1990s, an early start in industrialized countries may mean the age of 10 or earlier (Lambert & Bergentoft, 1994). Recently, an early start in European policy documents is at the beginning of primary education, and that could mean ages 4, 5 or 6 in different countries. In Asian countries an early start means Grade 1 or 3 but many parents send their children to start learning since children are 3 or 4 years old (Baldauf Jr et al., 2011). Although an early start means different ages in different contexts, there is a general recommended period: after children fully acquire their L1 and before their puberty (around the age of 12).

The question remains: Is there an optimal age (not a recommended period) for children to learn FL? There seem to be no clear answer

as age is not the only factor determining the effectiveness of FL learning. It is suggested that the age factor needs to be viewed in its context, taken into account all other related factors such as the intensity, duration and quality of the language instruction, students' first language competence, the status of the FL course within the school curriculum (Duff, 2008) and all factors discussed in section 4 above. Since younger learners and older learners often adopt different learning styles, the teaching style also needs to be adapted to the particular age of the learners. This is one of the most decisive factors which help in raising or at least keeping the motivation of the learners in FL learning. Thus, a large body of literature now turns to discuss the question "how" rather than the when question "when" to start learning an FL (Agullo, 2006; Met & Phillips, 1999; Nikolov, 2009). Since the decision over the age to introduce FL instruction often involves political, economic and educational aspects, most teachers cannot participate in that decision making (Agullo, 2006). Then, even if the critical or sensitive period does exist, children in most educational systems have, in fact, started learning FL within or even earlier than the recommended "period" suggested by CPH. The question now does not seem to lie in when to start FL instruction, but how teachers should adapt their teaching to the age of their students, because successful learning is possible at any age (Miralpeix, 2006).

The aim of this article is not to focus on the reasons for the recently disappointing FL learning outcome in Vietnam. Although huge investment, both from the government and from each individual family, has been put on children English learning, the outcome is much below expectation. Hence, this article wants to formulate some recommendations for the FL learning in Vietnam:

- Parents should be realistic about their expectations: Many parents now spend huge money for their children to learn English early. They should

understand that early exposure is good to get familiar with the language; however, it is not sufficient to predict successful FL acquisition. Formal FL instruction should not be commenced before children master Vietnamese (3 - 5 years old, depending on each child).

- No learning interruption and maintaining motivation in FL learning is important. Children tend to forget FL more easily than adults if they do not expose to that language for a period of time. By contrast, if they can have a lot of opportunities to use the language (both in and out of class, at home or elsewhere), they are often more motivated: watching interesting programs in English on TV, adults talking with children in English at home... these are all considered beneficial for children's FL development.
- Primary school English teaching in Vietnam appears to be a challenging task for English teachers. The class size is often too big (50 – 60 students), with different incoming levels (some students have exposed to the target language for 2-3 years before schooling, some others start Grade 1 with no English experience before), with minimum support from multimedia device, and teaching facility is poor. That is not to count the fact that many primary school English teachers are underqualified and have little or no prior-training about teaching pedagogy appropriate for young children (Tran, 2017). To make the FL teaching at primary school in Vietnam more efficient, students should be divided into smaller groups with similar level of understanding; supporting facility needs to be provided and teachers need to be trained to know how to adapt their teaching to the age of their students.

If the condition is not allowed, the AO can move from Grade 3 to Grade 5. It is better late than early but ruining the students' motivation in FL learning.

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LIỆU CHO TRẺ HỌC NGOẠI NGỮ CÀNG SỚM CÒ CÀNG TỐT? CÓ HAY KHÔNG ĐỘ TUỔI TỐI ƯU CHO TRẺ HỌC NGOẠI NGỮ?

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Tóm tắt: Quan niệm ‘cho trẻ học ngoại ngữ càng sớm càng tốt’ đã dẫn tới những đầu tư khá lớn từ cả gia đình và xã hội cho việc học ngoại ngữ của trẻ nhỏ. Tuy nhiên, việc đầu tư này không phải lúc nào cũng mang lại những kết quả khả quan. Bài viết này, thông qua các nghiên cứu lý thuyết và thực tế, bàn tới vấn đề có hay không một độ tuổi lý tưởng cho trẻ học ngoại ngữ. Các lý luận chuyên ngành đã chỉ ra rằng quan niệm ‘càng sớm càng tốt’ trong việc học tiếng thường bị hiểu sai lệch, và việc đầu tư quá sớm cho con trẻ học ngoại ngữ đôi khi là một sự lãng phí rất lớn và không ít trường hợp kết quả mang về lại là lợi bất cập hại. Trẻ nhỏ học ngoại ngữ khác với người lớn. Học ngầm (implicit learning), học theo hứng và ít chịu ảnh hưởng bởi áp lực bên ngoài là đặc điểm của việc học ngôn ngữ ở trẻ. Vì vậy, vấn đề mấu chốt trong dạy học ngoại ngữ cho trẻ không phải là khi nào bắt đầu cho trẻ theo học ngoại ngữ, mà là việc tiếp cận được cách dạy phù hợp với tâm lý và cách học của trẻ ở từng độ tuổi khác nhau.

Từ khóa: độ tuổi tối ưu, học ngoại ngữ, trẻ em, giả thuyết giai đoạn tiên quyết, Việt Nam