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## Developmental Differences in Foreign Language Instruction: A Comparative Study of Child and Adult Learners

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**Annotation** *This article examines the developmental, psychological, and pedagogical differences between teaching foreign languages to children, adolescents, and adults. The study explores age-related factors influencing language acquisition, including cognitive development, motivation, emotional characteristics, communicative behavior, and social interaction. Special attention is given to young learners' ability to acquire language implicitly through play-based, interactive, and communicative activities that promote natural language use and learner engagement. The article also highlights the influence of peer relationships and friendship on motivation and communicative competence in language learning environments. In contrast, adolescent and adult learners are described as relying more heavily on explicit instruction, analytical thinking, metacognitive awareness, and goal-oriented learning strategies. Drawing on contemporary theories and research in foreign language pedagogy, the study emphasizes the necessity of applying learner-centered teaching approaches that correspond to learners' developmental and psychological characteristics. The findings suggest that age-sensitive instructional methods significantly contribute to improving the effectiveness, motivation, and overall outcomes of foreign language education.*

**Keywords** *Foreign language teaching, young learners, adult learners, language acquisition, implicit learning, explicit learning, learning-centered approach, motivation in language learning, friendship and language learning, child psychology*

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## Chet tilini o'qitishdagi bolalar va o'smirlar rivojlanish bosqichlaridagi qiyosiy tahlili

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**Annotatsiya** *Ushbu maqola bolalar, o'smirlar va kattalarga chet tillarini o'qitish jarayonidagi rivojlanish, psixologik hamda pedagogik farqlarni ilmiy jihatdan tahlil qiladi. Tadqiqotda chet tilini o'zlashtirishga ta'sir etuvchi yoshga oid omillar, jumladan, kognitiv rivojlanish, motivatsiya, emotsional xususiyatlar, kommunikativ xulq-atvor va ijtimoiy o'zaro munosabatlar ko'rib chiqiladi. Ayniqsa, kichik yoshdagi o'quvchilarning tilni tabiiy va implitsit tarzda egallash qobiliyati hamda o'yin asosidagi, interaktiv va kommunikativ metodlarning samaradorligiga alohida e'tibor qaratiladi. Shuningdek, tengdoshlar bilan munosabatlar va do'stlikning kommunikativ kompetensiya hamda o'quv motivatsiyasiga ta'siri tahlil qilinadi. O'smir va katta yoshdagi o'quvchilar esa ko'proq analitik fikrlash, metakognitiv nazorat, aniq maqsadga yo'naltirilgan strategiyalar va eksplitsit o'qitish usullariga tayanishi bilan tavsiflanadi. Zamonaviy chet til pedagogikasi nazariyalari va ilmiy*

*tadqiqotlarga asoslanib, maqolada o'quvchilarning rivojlanish va psixologik ehtiyojlarini hisobga oluvchi learner-centered yondashuvning ahamiyati yoritiladi. Tadqiqot natijalari yoshga mos metodlarni qo'llash chet til ta'limining samaradorligi, motivatsiyasi va umumiy natijalarini sezilarli darajada oshirishini ko'rsatadi.*

**Kalit so'zlar** *Chet til ta'limi, yoshga oid xususiyatlar, kognitiv rivojlanish, kommunikativ kompetensiya, motivatsiya, interaktiv o'qitish metodlari, o'yin asosidagi ta'lim, psixologik omillar, til o'zlashtirish jarayoni*

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**Возрастные особенности  
обучения иностранному языку:  
сравнительное исследование  
детей и взрослых обучающихся**

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**Аннотация** *Данная статья посвящена исследованию психологических, возрастных и педагогических различий в обучении иностранным языкам детей, подростков и взрослых. В работе рассматриваются возрастные факторы, влияющие на процесс овладения иностранным языком, включая когнитивное развитие, мотивацию, эмоциональные особенности, коммуникативное поведение и социальное взаимодействие обучающихся. Особое внимание уделяется способности детей к имплицитному усвоению языка, а также эффективности игровых, интерактивных и коммуникативных методов обучения, способствующих естественному развитию речевых навыков. Кроме того, анализируется влияние межличностных отношений, дружбы и взаимодействия со сверстниками на формирование коммуникативной компетенции и учебной мотивации. Подростки и взрослые обучающиеся характеризуются большей ориентацией на аналитическое мышление, метакогнитивный контроль, целенаправленные стратегии обучения и эксплицитное усвоение языкового материала. На основе современных исследований и теоретических подходов в области методики преподавания иностранных языков в статье подчеркивается значимость learner-centered подхода, учитывающего психологические и возрастные особенности обучающихся. Результаты исследования подтверждают, что использование возрастно-ориентированных методов способствует повышению эффективности, мотивации и качества иноязычного образования.*

**Ключевые слова** *Обучение иностранным языкам, возрастные особенности, когнитивное развитие, коммуникативная компетенция, мотивация обучения, интерактивные методы обучения, игровое обучение, психологические факторы, процесс усвоения языка*

## Introduction

What is different about teaching a foreign language to children, in contrast to teaching adults or adolescents? Some differences are immediately obvious: children are often more enthusiastic and lively as learners. They want to please the teacher rather than their peer group. They will have a go at an activity even when they do not quite understand why or how. However, they also lose interest more quickly and are less able to keep themselves motivated on tasks they find difficult. According to a contemporary painter and writer Lynne Cameron, children do not find it as easy to use language to talk about language; in other words, they do not have the same access as older learners to meta-language that teachers can use to explain about grammar or discourse (Cameron, 2001). Children often seem less embarrassed than adults at talking in a new language, and their lack of inhibition seems to help them get a more native-like accent. But these are generalisations which hide the detail of different children, and of the skills involved in teaching them. We need to unpack the generalisations to find out what lies underneath as characteristic of children as language learners. We will find that important differences do arise from the linguistic, psychological and social development of the learners, and that, as a result, we need to adjust the way we think about the language we teach and the classroom activities we use. Although conventional language teaching terms like "grammar" and "listening" are used in connection with the young learner classroom, understanding of what these mean *to the children who are learning them* may need to differ from how they are understood in mainstream language teaching.

In the learning-centred perspective taken from the book which was called "Teaching languages to young learners" by L. Cameron, knowledge about children's learning is seen as

central to effective teaching. Successful lessons and activities are those that are tuned to the learning needs of pupils, rather than to the demands of the next text-book unit, or to the interests of the teacher. She distinguishes a *learning-centred* perspective from "*learner-centred*" teaching. Learner-centred teaching places the child at the centre of teacher thinking and curriculum planning. While this is a great improvement on placing the subject or the curriculum at the centre, she has found that it is not enough. In centring on the child, we risk losing sight of what it is we are trying to do in schools, and of the enormous potential that lies beyond the child.

Imagine a child standing at the edge of a new country that represents new ideas and all that can be learnt; ahead of the child are paths through valleys and forests, mountains to be climbed and cities to be explored. The child, however, may not be aware of the vast possibilities on offer, and, being a child, may either be content with the first stream or field s/he comes across, or may rush from one new place to the next without stopping to really explore any. If a teacher's concern is centred on the child, there is a temptation to stay in that first place or to follow the child. I have seen too many classrooms where learners are enjoying themselves on intellectually undemanding tasks but failing to learn as much as they might. The time available in busy school timetables for language teaching is too short to waste on activities that are fun but do not maximise learning. The teacher has to do what the child may not be able to do: to keep in sight the longer view, and move the child towards increasingly demanding challenges, so that no learning potential is wasted. A learning-centred perspective on teaching will, I believe, help us to do that more effectively.

Another study links even early friendships with high-quality sibling relationships.

Children who experience a rewarding friendship before the birth of a sibling are likely

to have a better relationship with that brother or sister that endures throughout their childhood, said Laurie Kramer in a University of Illinois study published in December's Journal of Family Psychology (Kramer, 2008). It may influence on their adulthood study in terms of their learning foreign languages as it is associated with child's background psychology and mind from their early age. "When early friendships are successful, young children get the chance to master sophisticated social and emotional skills, even more than they do with a parent. When parents relate to a child, they do a lot of the work, figuring what the child needs and then accommodating those needs," says Kramer.

Friendship plays a critical, supportive role in foreign language acquisition, acting as a natural motivator that drives verbal interaction, builds confidence, and fosters emotional, authentic communication. For children, friends provide safe opportunities for play-based language practice, while for adults, they offer low-stress environments that reduce anxiety and increase communicative competence (Cullen, 2008).

The child is considered as an active learner. As Piaget's concern was with how young children function in the world that surrounds them, and how this influences their mental development. The child is seen as continually interacting with world around her/him, solving problems that are presented by the environment (Piaget, 2002). It is through taking action to give a solution to the problems that learning process occurs. For instance, a very young child may come across the issue of how to get food from the plate into her mouth. In this process solving the problem, with a spoon or with fingers, the young child acquires the skill that the muscle control and direction-finding needed to feed herself. The knowledge that results from such action is not imitated or in-born, however, is actively constructed by the child.

What happens early on with concrete objects, continues to happen in the mind, as

problems are confronted internally, and action taken to solve them or think them through. In this way, *thought is seen as deriving from action*; action is internalised, or carried out mentally in the imagination, and in this way thinking develops. Piaget gives a much less important role to language in cognitive development than does Vygotsky. It is action, rather than the development of the first language which, for Piaget, is fundamental to cognitive development.

Piagetian psychology differentiates two ways in which development can take place as a result of activity: *assimilation* and *accommodation*. Assimilation happens when action takes place without any change to the child; accommodation involves the child adjusting to features of the environment in some way. Returning to the example of feeding, let's imagine what might happen when a child, who has learnt to use a spoon, is presented with a fork to eat with. She may first use the fork in just the same way as the spoon was used; this is assimilation of the new tool to existing skills and knowledge. When the child realises that the prongs of the fork offer new eating opportunities – spiking food rather than just "spooning" it – accommodation occurs; the child's actions and knowledge adapt to the new possibility and something new is created. These two adaptive processes, although essentially different, happen together. Assimilation and accommodation are initially adaptive processes of behaviour, but they become processes of thinking. Accommodation is an important idea that has been taken into second language learning under the label "restructuring", used to refer to the re-organisation of mental representations of a language (McLaughlin, 1992). We will encounter it again when we consider the development of grammar.

From a Piagetian viewpoint, a child's thinking develops as gradual growth of knowledge and intellectual skills towards a final stage of formal, logical thinking. However, gradual growth is punctuated with certain fundamental changes, which cause the child to

pass through a series of stages. At each stage, the child is capable of some types of thinking but still incapable of others. In particular, the Piagetian end-point of development – thinking that can manipulate formal abstract categories using rules of logic – is held to be unavailable to children before they reach 11 years of age or more.

An important dimension of children's lives that Piaget neglects is the *social*; it is the child on his or her own in the world that concerns him, rather than the child in communication with adults and other children.

### **Key Aspects of Friendship in Language Learning**

- *Social Scaffolding and Practice:* Friendships allow learners to practice in real-time, helping them “scaffold” their learning by using social interaction to build language skills.
- *Reduced Stress and Anxiety:* Friendship creates a supportive, low-anxiety environment where mistakes are permitted, encouraging learners to speak more freely without fear of judgment.
- *Improved Motivation:* Friendships provide a “natural” setting that fosters a desire to communicate, acting as a powerful, non-academic motivator to improve proficiency.
- *Deepened Cultural Understanding:* Learning a language through friends fosters empathy and deeper cultural understanding, as friendships encourage communicating through emotions and shared experiences.

### **Friendship in Children's Language Learning**

- *Peer Interaction:* Mutual friends and “best friends” in classroom settings improve language proficiency through collaborative, social interaction.
- *Play-Based Learning:* Children use peer interactions to negotiate, play, and express emotions, providing a natural context for acquiring new vocabulary.

- *Inclusivity:* Peer relationships, regardless of initial proficiency, encourage children with language disorders or differences to participate and feel a sense of belonging.

### **Friendship in Adult Language Learning**

- *Real-Time Communication:* Adult friendships provide opportunities for practicing conversation in a natural, real-world context, helping to reduce the inhibitions often felt in formal classroom settings.
- *Building Confidence:* Overcoming language challenges with friends helps adults gain confidence in their ability to cope with new, challenging situations.
- *Creating Deeper Bonds:* Learning a language for a friend or with a friend strengthens relationships, as it demonstrates care and curiosity.

Teaching a foreign language to children focuses on natural acquisition through play, songs, and routine, capitalizing on high energy and low inhibition. Unlike adults/adolescents, children learn implicitly, requiring short, varied activities to maintain engagement, whereas adults benefit from explicit grammar, analytical learning, and goal-oriented, structured instruction.

#### **Key differences include:**

- *Learning Mechanism:* Children acquire language through immersion and context (“implicit learning”), often achieving native-like pronunciation. Adults rely on cognitive analysis (“explicit learning”) and logical understanding of grammatical rules.
- *Motivation and Engagement:* Children are driven by curiosity, enthusiasm, and a desire to please, but have shorter attention spans. Adults are motivated by specific goals, life experience, and practical application.
- *Social/Emotional Factors:* Children lack self-consciousness, allowing them to try new language without fear of mistakes.

Adults often struggle with inhibitions and a fear of sounding silly.

- *Teaching Methods:* Lessons for children should be interactive, involving total physical response (TPR), games, and storytelling. Adult lessons allow for longer, intensive, and topic-focused sessions.

- *Meta-language:* Children do not grasp grammatical terminology (metalinguage), whereas adults can use it to understand how the language functions.

**In summary:** Teaching children is about **acquisition and engagement**, while teaching adults is about **instruction and application**.

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