

Review Article

The Dark Side of Motivation by Sakui and Cowie, N. (2011); the Role of Age in Second Language Acquisition by Dong and Ren, H. (2013): A Critical Review

Khedir Almoayidi* 

English Department, Umm Al-Qura University, Makkah, Saudi Arabia

Abstract

Motivation and age play crucial roles in second language acquisition. These two factors were the mainspring of many studies pertaining second language acquisition and learning. The aim of this paper was to find out how motivation and the role of age are perceived by the teachers. Two pivotal papers of eminent scholars were selected for this critical investigation. The review of the first paper revealed that even though there are situations where motivation is missing it can be developed and improved by confident teachers in the fields of both second language acquisition and second language learning. Concerning the role of age, on the other hand, the researchers of the other study, in accordance with many recent studies, emphasized that age has a significant impact on language learning and as the learner advances in age his/her ability declines. But, in contrast to this claim, there are many students in my country who start to learn English at 18 to 20 years of age and, as a language lecturer, I have found that they reach a very advanced level even though English in my country is considered to be a foreign language and within the expanding circle.

Keywords

Acquisition, Age, Foreign Language, Language, Learning, Motivation, Second Language

1. Introduction

Motivation and age play essential role in second and foreign language acquisition. Numerous studies have been conducted to shed light on these two factors and their contributive role in acquisition and learning. Motivation stands for “the internal process that can’t be directly observed but that activates, guides and maintains overt behavior” (Tranquillo et al., [27]). According to Dörnyei [7], motivation can enhance learning if teachers pay attention to their classroom atmosphere, the goal they want to achieve, the constructive feedback they provide and autonomous learning. Therefore,

teachers can implement motivation in their classroom using numerous strategies which create a cooperative learning environment Sharifovna [25]. Recent studies in the fields of language acquisition and learning have shown that motivation is a key element for both learners and teachers. In the study of Ai et al., [1], the researchers revealed that learners who have positive motivation are found to be more successful in second language acquisition than those who have negative motivation.

Age, on the other hand, impacts acquisition as well as

*Corresponding author: kamoayidi@uqu.edu.sa (Khedir Almoayidi)

Received: 13 December 2025; **Accepted:** 29 December 2025; **Published:** 23 January 2026



Copyright: © The Author(s), 2026. Published by Science Publishing Group. This is an **Open Access** article, distributed under the terms of the Creative Commons Attribution 4.0 License (<http://creativecommons.org/licenses/by/4.0/>), which permits unrestricted use, distribution and reproduction in any medium, provided the original work is properly cited.

learning of any second language. Yet, the question of how age can impact the second language acquisition, needs more consideration Yaş [30]. The controversial issue that many acquisitionists raise is concerned with the perfect age for language acquisition and learning. Even though, some studies claim that younger learners have always shown to be faster and more successful than older one (Ozfidan and Burlbaw [22]; Chen et al., [5], other studies (e.g. Troike and Barto, [24] suggest that both younger and older learners can benefit from their age factor. This means that every age phase has its positive role in acquisition and learning.

As such, this paper focuses on two eminent papers that have been published and well-cited in a number of researches conducted in these areas. The critical review is the driving motive of this paper in parallel with other studies which have been conducted pertaining the motivation and age in second and foreign language acquisition.

2. Discussion and Critical Review

The present study, which was conducted by Sakui and Cowie in [23], reveals one of the current issues which affects language learning and that is the concept of motivation, but they also try to uncover the opposite aspect which only a few studies have investigated and they refer to it as 'unmotivation'. They call it 'the dark side' because studies have focused a lot on motivation but few have been done to see if there is a relationship between the absence of motivation, or lack of motivation, and negative language learning.

Using surveys and interviewing participants, the researchers conducted their study on thirty-two English as a foreign language (EFL) teachers in Japanese universities who shared expectations and understanding of student motivation. Such shared concepts, according to the researchers, helped their findings to be reliable enough to be applied in contexts outside Japan as well as in the Japanese context. Moreover, internal factors as well as external factors were taken into account in this study to see if lack of motivation can be an obstacle in learning English as a foreign language and what difficulties these teachers faced in motivating their students to learn. The researchers confirm that even though external factors are not within the control of teachers, internal ones can be dealt with by teachers because they are within their domain.

The researchers provide important details about the research such as the research methods that were applied and the way the data was collected and analysed. The researchers used a qualitative approach which suits this kind of research as it consolidates the literature on the role of motivation in learning, and, as Gorham states [11], when there is no existence of demotivators, this means motivators are present. Moreover, this paper asserts what Dornyei [7] confirms - that motivation plays an essential role in helping learners do better in second language learning. Furthermore, the data of this study was obtained from teachers in the field and this is very

important for the reliability of the data on motivation provided by the same teachers.

One of the strongest issues making this study reliable is that the researchers integrated the teachers into their study in order to investigate how they deal with situations where motivation is absent. External factors, such as the institutional system and the attitude of the students as well as the relationship between the teachers and the students, were reviewed and classified according to the teachers' responses to find out why it is difficult to motivate students. However, these factors do not always cause difficulties for motivation to take place. One example that the researchers mention is the 'institutional system', but this is not always an obstacle. It is the role of teachers to adapt any situation to his/her advantage. In addition, the use of technology and a change of activity can also contribute to making a rigid situation become flexible. Anderson et al. [2] suggest that if goals are set to be achieved then there is a need for incentive activities.

In this study by Saku and Cowie, it can be clearly seen that their investigation highlights the relationship between the concept of context and 'unmotivation' because each determines the other. According to Dornyei [8], learning a second language is flexible and can be beneficial if there is a link between various factors, such as context and motivation, and in this case the classroom is the appropriate context for motivation. So, it is worth mentioning that, according to the researchers, the context plays a crucial role in triggering motivation or demotivation. This can also be supported from personal experience as I have seen that colleagues at the same institution can use the same facilities and the same curricula but their students show different motivation, or sometimes lack of motivation, to learning.

From a pedagogical and research implications point of view, many positive things were learnt from this study which can make a significant contribution in future language learning research. One of these, according to the researchers, is that teachers should concentrate on internal factors to enhance learning motivation because these factors can easily be tackled. This is because the literature shows that both teachers and students are inclined to relate success to internal rather than external factors (Williams, Burden, & Al-Baharna [29]. Furthermore, the final point that Sakui and Cowie [23] clarify in their study is the importance of how teachers perceive motivation and how they distinguish between types of motivation such as what Gardner and Lambert (cited in Mahadi & Jafari [19]) classify as 'integrative motivation' and 'instrumental motivation'. In addition, this study provides some solutions to deal with situations where students lack motivation and the beneficial aspect of these solutions is that they have been suggested by teachers themselves and these solutions can be implemented, and can be beneficial, in many contexts of learning.

The second study of Dong and Ren [6] focuses on a debatable issue which is the role of age in L2 acquisition, and they aim to investigate this issue from a psychological point of

view. The researchers try to confirm Lenneberg's [18] Critical Period Hypothesis (CPH) claim which indicates that learning takes place at an early age and if the learner's age exceeds that period, his/her ability to acquire the language becomes weak. Moreover, this study supports this hypothesis by providing some other hypotheses and studies to clarify that age evidently plays a significant role in language learning.

By providing the hypotheses of Exercise and Maturation State by Johnson and Newport [14], the researchers postulate that the human brain will lose its capacity and ability if it has not been used properly in the early years. Moreover, the human brain becomes incapable of mastering a language when people reach maturity and this makes it difficult to learn a language at this age. However, such assumptions do not reflect the reality of learners because recent studies have proved that being an adult does not hinder a person from becoming a proficient language learner. Ioup et al. [13] conducted a study on two language learners who started learning Arabic as adults and they succeeded in reaching high proficiency in the language. This counter study shows that age might affect learning, but there are many other factors that can hinder learning other than age. Moreover, Urponen [28] studied many Finnish women who started learning English at a late age and the researcher tested these participants and interviewed them and found that 38 percent of them were not distinguishable from native speakers.

In this study, Dong and Ren also mention that the rate of learning as well as ultimate attainment are affected by age. Their claim is in line with what Krashen, Long and Scarcella [16, 17] clarify - that adult learners show more progress in language learning than older children, and, on the other hand, older children learn faster than younger ones. Their study also confirms that when adult learners are exposed to morphology as well as pronunciation they perform better than young children. This finding has been confirmed by many researchers such as Snow and Hoefnagel-Hohle [26] who conducted a study on Dutch students and found that adults were more capable of mastering the morphology of the language than children. This also confirms what Ellis [9] clarifies - that adult learners do better than children when they are exposed to language learning in formal situations.

Regarding the critical and the sensitive periods, this study suggests that there are significant differences between the two. The critical period, according to Oyama [20], is a short period in which behaviour cannot be affected by outside stimulants. On the other hand, during the sensitive period, behaviour is interacting with other environmental stimuli. As a result, this study aligns with what Oyama [21] believes - that children are able to master the phonology of a language better than adults because age decreases the brain's ability to master the sound of a second language. Furthermore, studies by Harley, Hart & Lapkin [12] and Johnson and Newport [14] confirm that age does not affect people at the phonological level but it does affect them at the morphological as well

as the syntactic levels. So, this study consolidates that age plays a significant role in the rate as well as in the ultimate attainment of second language acquisition.

To further illustrate their claim about the effect of age on the acquisition of language, Dong and Ren [6] also present Felix's [10] Competition Model Hypothesis (CMH) which relates adult learning to problem solving and this is considered to be an obstacle in language learning. Moreover, Bley-Vroman's [3] Fundamental Difference Hypothesis (FDH) is provided to clarify that adult learners are inclined to apply new methods to learn the second language and these methods differ from the ones applied in learning their first language. However, Ioup et al., [13] and Bongaerts [4] confirm that there are some exceptional adults who advance in language learning to a level where they perform like native speakers.

3. Conclusion

The research extends our knowledge that even though there are situations where motivation is missing it can be developed and improved by confident teachers. So, as Komaraju [15] states, being an optimistic teacher and choosing different styles of teaching as well as adapting to new situations will enhance learning, even for less motivated learners. Consequently, this study provides optimistic and insightful clues which can be further investigated by other researchers from different contexts. Moreover, from my own experience as a lecturer at university in my country, I can assert that lack of motivation, or the factors which cause students to be not motivated, are not taken into account, and for this reason, this study is very important to inspire educators to rethink this 'dark side of motivation'.

Regarding the role of age, the researchers of this study have tried to emphasize that age has a significant impact on language learning and as the learner advances in age his/her ability declines. But there are many students in my country who start to learn English at 18 to 20 years of age and I, as a language lecturer, have found that they reach a very advanced level even though English in my country is considered to be a foreign language. This, according to Ellis [9], confirms that there is no decisive conclusion that learning language can only take place at a certain age, and the debate will continue amongst researchers.

Abbreviations

CPH	Critical Period Hypothesis
CMH	Completion Model Hypothesis
EFL	English as a Foreign Language
FDH	Fundamental Difference Hypothesis

Author Contributions

Khedir Almoayidi is the sole author. The author read and

approved the final manuscript.

Conflicts of Interest

There is no conflicts of interest.

References

- [1] Ai, J., Pan, Y., & Zhong, W. (2021, November). The role of motivation in second language acquisition: A review. In 2021 3rd International Conference on Literature, Art and Human Development (ICLAHD 2021) (pp. 623-627). Atlantis Press.
- [2] Anderson, T., Rourke, L., Garrison, R., & Archer, W. (2001). Assessing teaching presence in a computer conferencing context. *Journal of Asynchronous Learning Networks*, 5(2), 1-17.
- [3] Bley-Vroman, R. (1990). The logical problem of foreign language learning. *Linguistic analysis*, 20(1-2), 3-49.
- [4] Bongaerts, T. (1999). Ultimate attainment in L2 pronunciation: The case of very advanced late L2 learners. *Second language acquisition and the critical period hypothesis*, 133, 159.
- [5] Chen, S., Zhao, J., De Ruiter, L., Zhou, J., & Huang, J. (2022). A burden or a boost: The impact of early childhood English learning experience on lower elementary English and Chinese achievement. *International Journal of Bilingual Education and Bilingualism*, 25(4), 1212-1229.
- [6] Dong, G., & Ren, H. (2013). The role of age in second language acquisition – a psychological perspective. *British Journal of English Linguistics*, 1(1), 1-6.
- [7] Dörnyei, Z. (2001). *Motivational Strategies in the Language Classroom*. Cambridge University Press.
- [8] Dörnyei, Z. (2005). *The psychology of the language learner: Individual differences in second language acquisition*. New Jersey: Lawrence Erlbaum Associates.
- [9] Ellis, R. (2008). *The study of second language acquisition*. Oxford University Press.
- [10] Felix, S. W. (1988). UG-generated knowledge in adult second language acquisition. In *Linguistic theory in second language acquisition* (pp. 277-294). Dordrecht: Springer Netherlands.
- [11] Gorham, J., & Millette, D. M. (1997). A comparative analysis of teacher and student perceptions of sources of motivation and demotivation in college classes. *Communication Education*, 46(4), 245-261.
- [12] Harley, B., Hart, D., & Lapkin, S. (1986). The effects of early bilingual schooling on first language skills. *Applied Psycholinguistics*, 7(4), 295-321.
- [13] Ioup, G., Boustagui, E., El Tigi, M., & Moselle, M. (1994). Reexamining the critical period hypothesis. *Studies in Second Language Acquisition*, 16(01), 73-98.
- [14] Johnson, J. S., & Newport, E. L. (1989). Critical period effects in second language learning: The influence of maturational state on the acquisition of English as a second language. *Cognitive psychology*, 21(1), 60-99.
- [15] Komarraju, M. (2013). Ideal teacher behaviors: Student motivation and self-efficacy predict preferences. *Teaching of Psychology*, 40(2), 104-110.
- [16] Krashen, S. D., Long, M. A., & Scarcella, R. C. (1979). Age, rate and eventual attainment in second language acquisition. *TESOL quarterly*, 573-582.
- [17] Krashen, S., Long, M., & Scarcella, R. (1982). Age, rate and eventual attainment in second language acquisition. Reprinted in Krashen et al.
- [18] Lenneberg, E. H. (1967). The biological foundations of language. *Hospital Practice*, 2(12), 59-67.
- [19] Mahadi, T. S. T., & Jafari, S. M. (2012). Motivation, its types, and its impacts in language learning. *International Journal of Business and Social Science*, 3(24).
- [20] Oyama, S. (1976). A sensitive period for the acquisition of a nonnative phonological system. *Journal of psycholinguistic research*, 5(3), 261-283.
- [21] Oyama, S. (1979). The concept of the sensitive period in developmental studies. *Merrill-Palmer Quarterly of Behavior and Development*, 25(2), 83-103.
- [22] Ozfidan, B., & Burlbaw, L. M. (2019). A Literature-Based Approach on Age Factors in Second Language Acquisition: Children, Adolescents, and Adults. *International Education Studies*, 12(10), 27-36.
- [23] Sakui, K., & Cowie, N. (2012). The dark side of motivation: teachers' perspectives on 'unmotivation'. *ELT journal*, 66(2), 205-213.
- [24] Saville-Troike, M., & Barto, K. (2006). *Introducing Second Language Acquisition*. Cambridge University Press. New York: USA.
- [25] Sharifovna, G. (2025). The Role of Motivation in Second Language Acquisition (SLA) For EFL Learners. *International Journal of Artificial Intelligence*, 1(3), 854-857.
- [26] Snow, C. E., & Hoefnagel-Höhle, M. (1978). The critical period for language acquisition: Evidence from second language learning. *Child development*, 1114-1128.
- [27] Tranquillo, J., & Stecker, M. (2016). Using intrinsic and extrinsic motivation in continuing professional education. *Surgical neurology international*, 7(Suppl 7), S197.
- [28] Urponen, M. I. (2004). *Ultimate attainment in postpuberty second language acquisition*. Unpublished doctoral dissertation, Boston University.
- [29] Williams, M. R., Burden, S., & Al-Baharna, H. (2001). *Making sense of success and failure: The role of the individual in language learning. Motivation and Second Language Acquisition*. Honolulu: University of Hawai'i at Manoa, Second Language Teaching and Curriculum Center, 169-82.

- [30] Yaş, E. (2024). The Role of Age in Second Language Acquisition. Cankaya University Journal of Humanities and Social Sciences, 18(2), 265-276.