

## Age Factor And Gender Influence When Learning Languages. A Study Of Learner's Learning Limitations.

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**ABSTRACT:** This research has focused on how influential are gender and age when learning a second or foreign language and more specifically in English language. Participants were Spanish learners with different level and age who had to complete two different exams, B and C. There were two separated groups depending on the level (level 0 and level 1), and ages (20, 25 and 30 or 40, 45 and 50 years old consecutively). The main results suggest that female gender is in a positive and higher position than male since their marks were usually greater. However, the age factor is not completely related with the comprehension or memorization of the exercises since results did not show a clear influence. This confirms but contradicts previous researches about the age factor. These results are explained and suggestions for further research are given.

**KEYWORDS:** Second or foreign language, influence, gender, age.

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### I. INTRODUCTION

According to Singleton (1989) "the age factor has been a constantly recurring theme in the great expansion of language studies of the last few decades". Thus, researches into second language acquisition have carried out during the last fifty years in order to get a clear conclusion. On the one hand, there is a theory that explains that taking up languages when being older is much difficult and the level of acquired proficiency is lower than younger learners. Examples of this theory are the studies conducted by many researchers, (Penfield & Roberts, 1959; Yamada et al, 1980; Lenneberg, 1967) which have concluded that being younger is the recommended age to learn a foreign language. On the other hand, there are stated opinions based on forward experiments which conclude that being older has more advantages to the second language acquisition (Asher & Price, 1967; Politzer & Weiss, 1969; Smith & Braine, 1973). However, these studies have not forward analyzed whether there are other factors that influence second language learners despite the age. As suggested by Bialystok (1997) there must be psychological factors involved to promote learning. To support this statement Carmen Muñoz (2001) added that there must be other factors such gender, the first language influence, the social class or the exposure of the language which lead the learning.

#### I.2. Purpose of the present study

Taking into account the ideas explained above, the purpose of this research deals with two different aspects but also related. Firstly, to analyze whether it exists a definite influence of the age when learning a second language and more specifically English language and secondly, to examine the importance that gender can have when studying it.

### II. METHOD

#### II.1. Participants

The participants were 12 Spanish people with different level of English language. Firstly, a group of people who did not know anything of English and they had never studied it before this examination, (level 0) was selected. It was integrated by six people, three men and three women, who were 55, 50 and 45 years old. Secondly, another group of students, who knew English since they were children and they

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were used to use it in several contexts (level 1), was selected to complete another exam. They were three men and women which ages were 30, 25 and 20 years old.

## **II.2. Materials**

Materials used in the actual study included: a) a Basic exam (B) in order to explain the most common verb to people who did not know anything of the language, and b) a more Complex exam (C) with more difficult grammar which people being studied did not know. Both exams were administrated in order to analyze the influence that gender and age may have when learning a language.

### **II.2.1. Basic exam (B)**

All participants grouped in level 0, were supposed to pass the B exam, which was prepared in order to analyze the differences between men and women memorization, comprehension and abilities. This exam consisted of four different exercises related to the verb To Be, which was supposed to take place in a 30-minutes session with no breaks, after the previous explanation. All exercises punctuated 2 points and there were 4 sentences in each one, 0.5 each. The exercises were taken from Get it Right (2008) and were entitled: Linking exercise, Fill in the gaps, Correct the mistakes and Translate into Spanish. The first one had one column with the subjects and other with the three options of the verb to be (am, is and are) and participants had to link them. The second one consisted on fill in the gaps depending on the context explained in the sentences while the third one was about correcting three sentences of the four ones, because one was corrected. The last exercise, corresponding to Translate into Spanish, was a short translation with the verb to be and previous explained vocabulary.

### **II.2.2 Complex exam (C)**

In order to analyze the memorization, abilities and comprehension of the second selected group, participants were given C exam. It contained the same entitled exercises and punctuation than B exam, but with a different topic. Due to a higher level of English, the topic consisted of three expressions: Had better, It's time and should. These concepts were explained to the participants in all possible contexts and they were asked to complete the test. The exercises of linking, fill in the gaps, correct and translate were taken from English Grammar in Use (2004), more specific grammar book, since the level required was higher than the previous group.

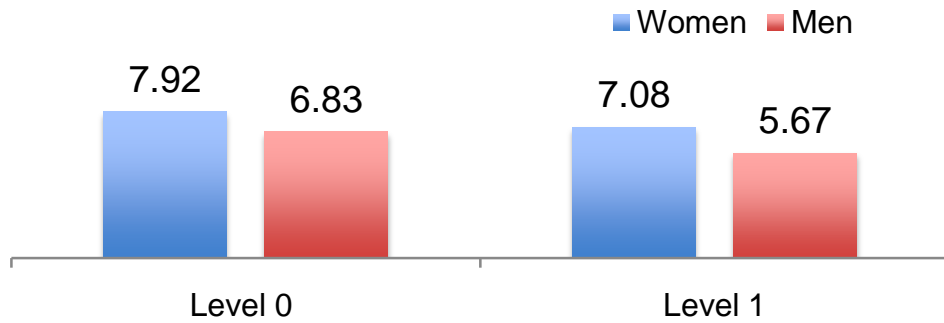
## **II.3. Data collection procedure**

The study was divided into two one-hour sessions which took place on two different days, one day for each group in an accommodated academy class with all the necessary materials. The materials were a blackboard to explain the theory they were asked in the exam and the doubts they could have, and papers for the participants to take notes about the given explanation. The session of one hour, was divided into two different times: a) 30 minutes in order to explain the theory and the exam activities, and b) 30 minutes for participants to complete the exam by themselves. They were not allowed to ask doubts related to the main topic of the exam since everything appearing in their exercises had been already explained.

## **III. RESULTS**

### **III.1. Effect of gender on learning a language**

The first question of the research asked whether gender had an influence on participants when learning a language. The average marks between women and men of different levels are shown in Figure 1. The highest levels of marks are observed since both women level 0 and level 1 got the greatest marks. These findings demonstrate that in my study the female gender has a positive influence and more facilities when learning a second or foreign language.



**Figure 1. Mean comparison between both masculine and feminine participants in the study.**

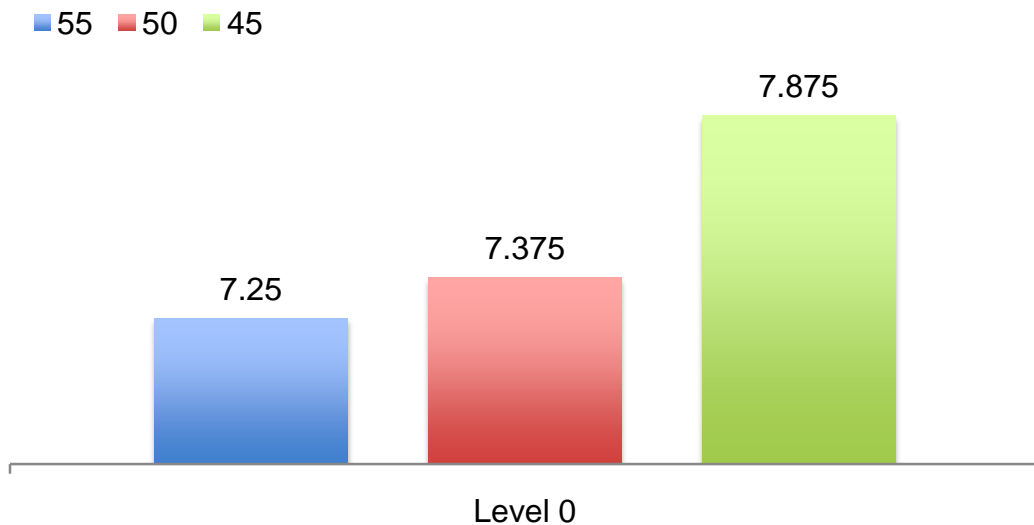
This study also found that in the exam results, the difference of marks between women and men was relevant since in the 90 % of the cases women had, at least, one point more than men had. As indicated by Figure 2, the women, on the average, increase their marks one point over men except in 10% of the results.



**Figure 2. Frequency and Percentages of Differences Analyzed between masculine and feminine marks.**

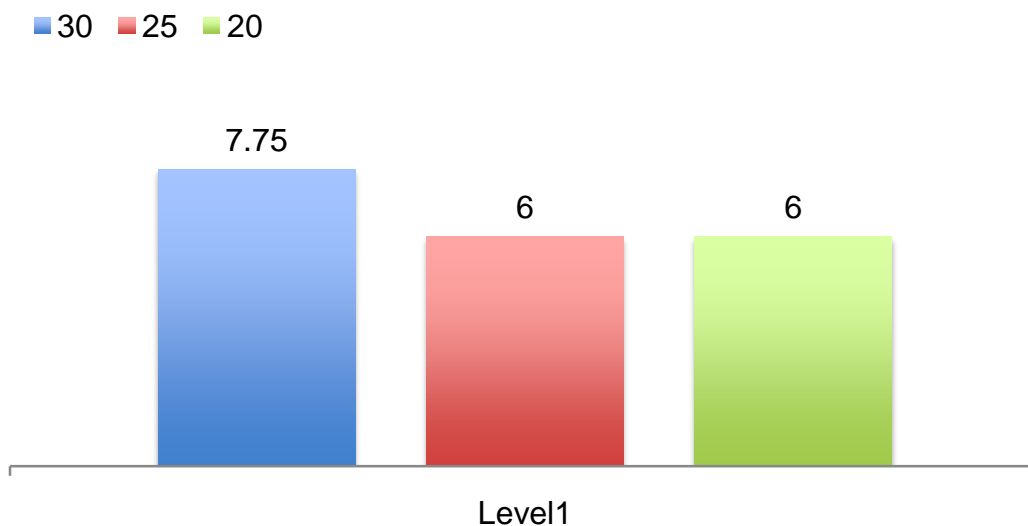
### III.2. Effect of age on learning a language

The second research question asked whether age had an influence of participants when learning a language. The results of level 0 are presented in Figure 3, and it shows the average of results according to the age of the participants, 45, 50 and 55. These findings fully confirm the information given by Patkowski (1980), that the highest marks are the ones obtained by the youngest people, in this case, corresponding to 45 years old.



**Figure 3. Mean comparison between marks obtained by people being different ages belonging level 0.**

However, Figure 4 represents the results obtained by the group of level 1, younger than the previous group. The results seem to follow the other way round. All participants of level 1 had a very wide vocabulary and level of English, but the highest marks were obtained by the oldest participants instead by the youngest as it happens in group 0. So, the results seem to follow the hypothesis which supports the "older = better" hypothesis (David Singleton, 1989). This theory is also supported by many researchers such as Asher & Price, 1967; Politzer & Weiss, 1969; and Smith & Braine, 1973.



**Figure 4. Mean comparison between marks obtained by people being different ages belonging level 1.**

#### **IV. DISCUSSION**

##### **IV.1. Effect of gender on learning a language**

Regarding the evident gender influence when learning a language, results reveal that there is a significant difference in the advantage that female gender has in the study of a new and different language. Thus, in both groups, those who had zero level and those who knew English, there was a gender preference to learn it. This result might be due to a) other factors such as motivation or speed comprehension (Carmen Muñoz, 2001) since women began their exams earlier than men did, and b) in the case of level 0, women knew little French since they had studied it before and it can be an advantage to know other language rules to understand new ones.

##### **IV.2. Effect of age on learning a language**

Regarding the influence of ages when studying a language, results revealed no significant difference between participants. These results might be due to two main reasons, a) people integrating level 1 being 30 years, might have more facilities to guess the expressions about the grammar since they were older and they had been exposed to the language during so many years, and b) some of the participants, although they did not know anything about the topic they were asked, had travelled more than others to countries where English is spoken and they could think about the context and understand the situation better. These results seem to refute the common belief that being younger is easier to acquire a language at 100 % but not deny it.

#### **V. CONCLUSIONS**

The results of the present study lead to the following conclusion related to the concrete experiment:

1) The gender affects learner's second language acquisition. This tendency is related to the female gender, which shows a favorable attitude in explanations and in comprehension due to their marks.

2) The age factor does not affect learner's second language acquisition since all participants both ages and gender, passed their exercises without problems. However, results were not clear-cut since the first group (level 0) showed a favorable attitude towards the youngest participants but the second group (level 1) showed a tendency to the oldest.

A follow-up of the present study could examine possible suggestions or experiments for further researches. The first limitation refers to the availability of participants to meet altogether in order to do the exam, which was difficult. Another related suggestion refers to the time both women and men needed to complete the exam (30 minutes). In my study, men did not begin their exams as quickly as women did, and they read the exam so many times after starting. When women had already finished and reviewed their exams, they started to write their answers.

A second limitation has to do with the motivation of the participants in the undertaken experiment. Depending on their likes, they paid more or less attention to the explanation and it had influence in the marks they got. Besides some of them knew little French and it could be an important advantage to understand the context of the sentences in English.

Despite these limitations, the results have been useful to demonstrate whether any person of any gender or age, is able to study a language when they feel like doing it, in spite of being older or younger and women or men, since although women got higher marks, men passed all the exercises with positive results.

“The misconception that adults cannot master foreign languages is as widespread as it is erroneous” (Marinova Todd, Marshall, & Snow, 2000:27)

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