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Exploring The Relationship between Age of Onset and Oral Proficiency

The Case of Second year Middle school and fourth year Primary school students.

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Dedication

Above all thanks to the help and guidance of ALLAH without which this work could never be accomplished.

I dedicate my humble work to my passed-away father, whose love and support encouraged me throughout life. May the All-Mighty ALLAH have mercy on him.

To my beloved mother, the strong person whom I can never repay for what you have done and still doing for me. Your endless love, care, support, and encouragement are the reasons behind my success.

I would like also to dedicate this work to my dear brothers Abdennour, Kosai, and little Younesse without forgetting my lonely sister Khaoula.

To all those who taught me love and patience, peace and pride, courage and self-confidence.

Maissa

To my father « Abdeldjabbar » and

my mother « Saadia Lebcir »

Hadjer

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Abstract

This study aims to explore the relationship between the age of onset and the oral proficiency of Algerian primary and middle school pupils learning English as a foreign language (EFL). To achieve this, a descriptive, mixed-method approach was employed. The study involved recording the responses of 40 pupils—20 from the fourth year of primary school and 20 from the second year of middle school—during self-introduction and descriptive tasks. The recordings were analyzed using a comprehensive rubric scoring based on established criteria from Farhady, Jafarpur, and Birjandi (2001), Heaton (1990), Hughes (2003), IELTS Testing Center (2000), and Underhill (1987). This rubric evaluated six key aspects of oral proficiency: fluency, comprehension, communication, vocabulary, structure, and pronunciation. Results indicated that middle school pupils generally outperformed primary school pupils in most aspects, demonstrating better fluency, comprehension, and communication skills. These findings suggest that the age of onset affects oral proficiency, highlighting the need for age-specific teaching strategies. Consequently, to achieve optimal language learning in EFL environments, this research recommends developing a curriculum that is specifically designed for each age group.

Keywords: *Age of onset, Oral proficiency, EFL, Primary school Pupils, Middle School Pupils.*

List of Abbreviations

CPH: The Critical Period Hypothesis

EFL: English as a Foreign Language.

SLA: Second Language Acquisition.

AO: Age of Onset.

SL: Second Language.

L2: Second Language.

L1: first language

AoA: Age of Acquisition.

FDH: Fundamental Difference Hypothesis.

CLT: the Communicative Language Teaching.

FL: Foreign Language.

PS: Primary School.

MS: Middle School.

DLD: Developmental Language Disorder.

OPT: Oral Proficiency Test.

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General Introduction

General introduction

1. Background of the Study

The process of learning foreign languages (FL) at different developmental stages has attracted considerable scholarly attention, as researchers seek to understand how the Age of Onset influences language acquisition. English has emerged as a prominent subject taught in educational institutions worldwide, integrated into curricula to address this strategic importance. Educational systems prioritize English language instruction from early education through effective learning, with comprehensive programs designed to develop reading, writing, speaking, and listening skills (Birdsong,2018). This emphasis on English proficiency aims to enhance students' academic and professional opportunities, reflecting the language's key role in global communication and collaboration (Fledge, 1999).

In the Algerian context, the integration of English language instruction schools represents a remarkable change in the country's educational environment that seeks to prepare pupils for the needs of an increasingly globalized world. Historically, the Algerian education system placed a strong emphasis on Arabic and French. However, recent policy changes have introduced English as a mandatory subject of the curriculum at earlier school levels. By embedding English education in the foundational years of schooling, Algeria aims to foster a generation of bilingual or trilingual individuals capable of navigating and contributing to the global community.

The Critical Period Hypothesis (CPH) suggests that there is a window of time during which language acquisition occurs most efficiently. Research consistently shows that the age of onset is a critical factor in achieving oral proficiency. Johnson

and Newport (1989) demonstrated that those who started learning a second language before the age of seven generally outperformed others who started later in life in terms of grammatical accuracy and near-native pronunciation. This phenomenon is attributed to the heightened plasticity of young learners' brains, which are better at absorbing new languages and mimicking sounds (Kuhl, 2004). Furthermore, early exposure to English additionally offers infants longer opportunities for practice and engagement, which is essential for strong language development. On the other hand, older students frequently struggle with issues related to accent and phonological problems. These latter make it more difficult for them to reach the same degree of oral proficiency as their younger counterparts. Research by Flege, Munro, and MacKay (1995) indicates that adults typically retain a noticeable accent in their second language, even after years of practice, due to the diminished plasticity of their brains. Additionally, older learners may find it harder to achieve native-like intonation and stress patterns. Therefore, this research aims to explore the relationship between the age of onset and oral proficiency of 4th-year primary school (PS) and 2nd-year middle school (MS) pupils in Algerian schools. The study also seeks to compare the English oral proficiency of 4th-year PS and 2nd-year MS pupils.

2. Statement of the Problem

Observations in Algerian primary and middle schools reveal a significant disparity in the oral proficiency of EFL students. Research by Omari (2015) in secondary schools highlights that while students show proficiency in reading, writing, and grammar, they exhibit low oral proficiency due to the neglect of speaking skills in the curriculum. This suggests that the current evaluation system, which prioritizes reading, writing, and grammar, leads to a lack of motivation among students to

develop their speaking skills, contributing to the proficiency gap observed across different age groups. It is generally observed that students who start learning English at an earlier age tend to have better oral proficiency. This correlation suggests the importance of the age of onset in language acquisition. Omari's study found that secondary school learners exhibit a low level of oral proficiency, and our research aims to investigate whether this trend is evident in primary and middle school students. Despite these findings, there is limited research on the relationship between the age of onset and oral proficiency specifically within the primary and middle school context in M'sila, Algeria. This gap necessitates targeted research to understand how early exposure to English influences language acquisition in these educational stages. Our study aims to explore the relationship between the age of onset and oral proficiency among 4th-year primary school and 2nd-year middle school pupils in M'sila, Algeria. By comparing these groups, the research seeks to identify effective age-specific teaching strategies and propose curriculum adjustments that enhance English language learning and proficiency.

3. Research Questions

This study is attempting to answer the following main question:

- Is there any difference between the oral proficiency of 4th year Primary school and 2nd year Middle school students?
- **Aims of the Study**

The present study is conducted to achieve the following objective :

- To compare the English oral proficiency of 4th-year PS and 2nd-year MS pupils.

5. Significance of the Study

This study aims to make needful contributions by exploring the relationship between the age of onset and oral proficiency among 4th-year primary school (PS) and 2nd-year middle school (MS) pupils. The findings will illuminate the comparative strengths and weaknesses in English oral proficiency between these two age groups.

This research also seeks to provide a comprehensive understanding of the impact of age on language development by contrasting factors affecting younger and older students. These latter are useful for educators and curriculum developers to design more effective, age-appropriate teaching strategies.

Furthermore, the study's findings will also be a useful tool for policymakers and educators, guiding them to make decisions that will improve English language education in Algeria. By addressing the distinct needs of different age groups, this research will help in formulating better pedagogical strategies, enhancing textbook quality, and ultimately raising the English oral proficiency of Algerian pupils. The ultimate goal is to enhance the educational curricula of both primary and middle school students, leading to higher levels of competence and proficiency in English.

6. Research Methodology

The present study investigates the relationship between age of onset and oral proficiency among 4th-year primary school and 2nd-year middle school pupils in Algeria. It employs a descriptive mixed-method analysis framework, using recordings of the test responses and a comprehensive rubric to evaluate oral proficiency. The study involves a sample of 40 pupils from two schools in M'sila district, with recordings rated by teachers from various regions to ensure reliability. This approach

enables a comprehensive exploration of the research aims and offers an understanding of the relationship between oral proficiency and age of onset.

7. Structure of the Study

This study is structured into a general introduction, two main chapters, and a general conclusion. Each chapter is further subdivided into sections. The initial chapter is devoted to an extensive review of the relevant literature, including a comprehensive synthesis of prior research. The second chapter is dedicated to the practical dimensions of the study and includes an in-depth exposition of the research methodology, data analysis, findings, and discussion, to address the research inquiries and expose the potential benefits and challenges arising from exploring the relationship between Age of Onset and Oral Proficiency of 4th-year PS and 2nd-year MS pupils. In conclusion, this chapter concludes with limitations and proposes some recommendations for further research.

8. Literature review

Learning to speak fluently and accurately in L2 is a challenging task for both old and young learners. The age at which learners start interacting with the target language, known as the onset age, is a crucial component that affects how well they can speak it, and the field of second language acquisition explores how much the age of onset affects oral proficiency. This literature review aims to explore the research findings surrounding the relationship between age of onset and oral proficiency across different age groups.

A study conducted by Muñoz (2006) examines age effects on oral fluency development within the framework of the "Age and the Rate of Foreign Language Learning" project. This study investigates the impact of age on various aspects of

language learning, including pronunciation, morphology, and oral fluency. The researchers employed a storytelling task to assess oral fluency development. Data was collected from learners at different stages of language instruction, measured at intervals of 200, 416, and 726 hours. Muñoz's (2006) study found that late starters demonstrated better oral fluency development compared to early starters in a formal EFL learning context, contradicting the idea that an early start always results in better second language acquisition outcomes. However, the study acknowledges two limitations, one is that younger learners may face challenges in acquiring oral fluency due to their developmental stage and cognitive limitations, which can slow down their progress in language learning. The other is that the instructional setting may not provide learners with sufficient exposure to authentic communicative situations. This lack of real-life language use can impede learners' ability to acquire new vocabulary and develop fluency according to their actual communication needs, particularly for older learners.

Another study by Gawi (2012) entitled "The Effects of Age Factor on Learning English: A Case Study of Learning English in Saudi Schools, Saudi Arabia" examines the impact of age on English language learning within the Saudi educational context, specifically focusing on enhancing early English language acquisition among students in elementary and intermediate schools in Dawadmi town, Saudi Arabia. By utilizing questionnaires and student tests, the research examines how age influences English as a foreign language (EFL) learning outcomes. The results show that the performance of foreign language was better in students who started learning English at an earlier age (5-6), emphasizing the significance of early exposure to language instruction in enhancing English language skills in Saudi schools. While his study sheds light on the benefits of early English language

instruction in the Saudi context, it faced some difficulties in dealing with Saudi female students and female supervisors of English, and it was conducted only in Dawadmi town, Saudi Arabia, which may limit the generalizability of the findings to other regions of the country.

Following similar lines of inquiry, Saito (2015) investigates the impact of age of acquisition (AoA) on the ultimate oral proficiency attainment in a second language (L2). The research involves 88 Japanese learners of English, along with baseline speakers (inexperienced Japanese speakers and native English speakers). The study evaluates the participants' spontaneous speech production through linguistic nativelikeness and comprehensibility assessments conducted by native English raters. The findings show a negative correlation between AoA and accentedness and comprehensibility in L2 speech, primarily influenced by segmental and prosodic factors. However, fluency and lexicogrammar attainment do not present significant age effects. Consequently, the study suggests that AoA mainly influences phonological aspects, such as consonant and vowel pronunciation and prosody, while temporal and lexicogrammatical aspects can be enhanced through increased L2 experience neglecting age. Despite the significant contributions of the study, it is important to recognize several limitations that need to be considered when interpreting the results. Firstly, the study's reliance on only 30 seconds of participants' spontaneous speech for raters' judgments may not have provided sufficient data for a detailed analysis of the relationship between AoA and vocabulary and grammar performance. Additionally, the speech samples used were relatively short compared to previous research, potentially limiting the depth of lexical analyses. The study's focus on a specific speaking task, the timed picture description task, may have restricted the

range of lexical items elicited, affecting the predictive power of lexicogrammar factors.

Baumert et al. (2020) conducted a study entitled "The Long-Term Proficiency of Early, Middle, and Late Starters Learning English as a Foreign Language at School: A Narrative Review and Empirical Study," which is a comprehensive investigation into the proficiency outcomes of early, middle, and late starters in learning English as a foreign language at school. The study utilized a mixed-methods approach, combining a narrative review with empirical data analysis. It examined the effects of early-start English on receptive language proficiency in a large sample of students from Year 9 classes in Germany. The findings indicate that the proficiency levels of early, middle, and late starters in English reading and listening comprehension only differed slightly by Year 9. The study suggests that the lack of a significant long-term impact of an early start in English may be due to insufficient adaptability of English teaching at the secondary level to students' prior knowledge. However, the study also highlights the importance of continuity in language instruction between primary and secondary education. Whereas, the study focuses on a specific educational context in Germany and the need for further research to explore the factors influencing long-term language proficiency outcomes in foreign language learners.

Another article by Caleffi (2023) "Teaching Pronunciation to Young Learners in an EFL Context: An Analysis of Pronunciation Activities in English Coursebooks for the Primary School," discusses the goal behind introducing English as a Foreign Language (EFL) teaching in mainstream primary schools, which is the increasingly shared recognition that "for young children learning another language has an educational value in itself" (Arnold, Rixon 2008, 39). The study focuses on

analyzing pronunciation activities in English coursebooks for primary school learners, emphasizing the significance of pronunciation exercises like songs, rhymes, and phonetic drills to improve pronunciation skills. The research found that the coursebooks primarily focus on consonant sounds in early primary school years, with less attention to vowel sounds crucial for distinguishing vowel-based minimal pairs. Additionally, the selection of sounds for pronunciation practice is based on their presence in the unit's vocabulary rather than focusing on sounds essential for intelligibility, like minimal pairs. The study also notes a lack of direct teacher involvement in providing pronunciation instruction, with students mainly engaging in repetitive activities without authentic interaction. Furthermore, the coursebooks do not address English as a lingua franca or offer suggestions for EFL-oriented pronunciation pedagogy, such as exposure to non-native speakers' recordings or involving bilingual students. However, the study has limitations as it only relies on coursebook analysis without classroom observations or teacher-student interviews, which may limit the additional perspectives on the implementation of pronunciation activities in real classroom settings. and it was conducted in the Italian context, where English is taught as a foreign language in primary schools, so the findings may not be directly applicable to other countries or contexts where English is taught differently.

In a more recent study, the study "Age of Onset, Motivation, and Anxiety as Predictors of Grammar and Vocabulary Outcomes in English as a Foreign Language Learners with Developmental Language Disorder" by Stolvoort, Mackaaij, and Tribushinina (2024) investigated the factors that predict English grammar and vocabulary outcomes in learners with Developmental Language Disorder (DLD). The researchers measured English receptive grammar and vocabulary twice, with a four-month interval, and assessed foreign language learning motivation, anxiety, and

exposure to English via questionnaires. The findings revealed that the age of onset of EFL instruction was a significant positive predictor of English grammar and vocabulary scores at "Time 1", with earlier starters performing better. Anxiety was negatively related to English grammar and vocabulary achievement at Time 1. For vocabulary, the achievement was also positively predicted by attitudes towards English lessons at "Time 1". However, the participants did not show any progress in English vocabulary and grammar over the four-month interval. Additionally, the study had a small sample size of 19 Dutch-speaking 7th graders with DLD, and the generalizability of the findings to other settings is unclear.

In conclusion, the reviewed literature highlights the important role of age of onset in shaping oral proficiency in second language acquisition. While mature learners may perform better in literacy-related skills due to cognitive maturity, younger learners often demonstrate better pronunciation. This emphasizes the importance of early language exposure for optimal language learning outcomes across different age groups.

Chapter One

Theoretical Background

Overview

This chapter presents the theoretical part focusing on the main variables relevant to the current study. It aims to provide a comprehensive understanding of terms related to the Age of Onset and Oral proficiency levels in learning a foreign language. The chapter is divided into two sections. The first section commences with the concept of "Age of Onset" in second language acquisition, the distinction between the rate of acquisition and ultimate attainment, implicit acquisition versus explicit learning, and the incidence of nativelikeness. It also examines the AoA-L2 attainment function and the Critical Period Hypothesis, including its definition, genesis, age range, and implications for second language acquisition. The second section seeks to offer an examination of oral proficiency and characteristics of speaking performance, such as fluency and accuracy (including pronunciation, vocabulary, and grammar). It also discusses learners' strategies for oral communication, speaking difficulties like inhibition and mother tongue use, and teaching techniques to enhance oral proficiency, such as group work, role play, problem-solving, and discussions and debates.

Section One: Exploring Age of Onset in Second Language Acquisition: Critical Perspectives and Teaching Implications.

The age of onset in second language acquisition is a significant element of study that explains how the age at which an individual begins learning a second language impacts their proficiency and learning process.

1. Second Language Acquisition

One of the major sub-fields of Applied Linguistics is Second Language Acquisition. It attempts to comprehend how a learner acquires another language after having mastered his mother tongue. Many researchers have defined second language acquisition. According to Krashen, Second language acquisition (SLA) appears when a speaker comprehends and utters a language that is different from the first or mother language (Krashen,1982).

In addition, Mitchell, Myles, & Marsden. (2013) and Crystal (1997) defined a second language (SL) as a language acquired after one's native tongue, commonly utilized for communication purposes such as education, government, or business. Essentially, any non-native language learned after acquiring the mother tongue falls under this classification. The field of second language acquisition encompasses the study and advancement of learning additional languages beyond one's first, including third, fourth, and subsequent languages (Gass & Selinker, 2008).

Traditionally, language acquisition is used as a term to refer to the unconscious process of learning which necessitates interaction with native speakers in the natural environment. However, in recent research, acquisition refers to both processes whether learning a language in the classroom or outside the classroom.

2. The concept of "Age of Onset" in Second Language Acquisition

In research exploring the influence of age on foreign and second language acquisition, a prevalent viewpoint among linguists is the significant emphasis placed on age compared to other variables when assessing language learners' progress. Scholars often prioritize Age as a fundamental aspect due to its perceived impact on

various cognitive, psychological, and social factors that can influence language acquisition.

The majority of studies concerning the impact of age of onset in second language (L2) acquisition center on contrasting children and adults, specifically examining whether these distinct learner groups achieve similar levels of ultimate proficiency as native speakers. This subject is covered in detail in recent reviews by Birdsong (2009) and DeKeyser (2012). Research investigating the effects of age compares individuals who commenced language learning at different stages of life, highlighting a benefit for those initiating learning at a younger age over those who began later in life.

BirdSong (2018) defined the term AoA as "the age at which L2 learning begins in earnest and continues with little or no interruption, most often in immersion contexts such as immigration, but not to limited acquaintance with the L2 that takes place in on trips or in the foreign-language classroom. Note that some studies use the terms 'Age of Exposure', 'Age of Immersion', or 'Age of Arrival' "(p.2).

Age of Acquisition (Onset) is understood not as the "age factor" but rather as a "meta-variable" (Fledge,1999) defined as a predictor variable in statistical analyses, AoA can be applied to both bilingual (simultaneous or sequential) development in childhood and immersion and immigration contexts later in life (Birdsong,2018). These definitions of Age of Acquisition (AoA) emphasize the importance of considering the timing of language exposure and immersion in understanding the language acquisition process.

2.1 Distinction between the rate of acquisition and ultimate attainment

To explain the inconsistent findings in many research on the relationship between age and the development of second or foreign languages. Krashen, Long, and Scarcella (1979) emphasized the distinction between the rate of learning and ultimate attainment. “ultimate attainment” has been used as a synonym for native-like proficiency. However, the term properly refers to the final product of L2A, whether this be native-like attainment or any other outcome (Larsen-Freeman,2005).

While adults or adolescents may appear to learn more quickly in the initial stages compared to children, especially in areas like morpho-syntax and phonology as evidenced by various studies, their long-term proficiency may not be as high as those who start learning at a younger age. Reference studies show that given equal input, adults and older children go through the early phases of proficiency development in L2 more quickly than younger children, as the authors noted in 1979. On the other hand, younger kids eventually become more proficient than older kids.

3. Age of Onset and Implicit Acquisition versus Explicit Learning

One of the ways of investigating child-adult differences in L2 acquisition has been to focus on how differently aged learners arrive at their L2 knowledge. This exploration examines whether children and adults engage in similar or dissimilar cognitive processes in learning L2 and whether the ultimate proficiency in L2 manifests qualitatively distinct characteristics in terms of its origin, development, and representation. Bley-Vroman's Fundamental Difference Hypothesis (FDH) posits that children and adults undergo fundamentally different ways in L2 development: children make use of their innate and domain-specific language acquisition mechanisms. while adults lack access to such mechanisms and must instead rely on

general learning strategies, that is, strategies belonging to the general cognitive system that are used for all kinds of learning and not language acquisition specifically.

In Paradis's (2004,2009) theory of L2 acquisition and bilingualism, L1 children and early L2 learners predominantly engage in incidental acquisition, facilitated by procedural memory (i.e., retrieving information necessary to perform learned skills) leading to implicit competence (or linguistic intuition). In contrast, adolescent and adult L2 learners, with limited capacity to form new procedural representations compared to children, intentionally learn L2 relying on declarative memory (i.e, recalling information involves some degree of conscious effort, as information must be consciously brought to mind and "declared"), leading to explicit competence (or metalinguistic knowledge, in Paradis's terminology).

Incidental acquisition impacts the whole language system, thus different parts of the system develop simultaneously and subconsciously, whereas intentional learning primarily influences those parts of the L2 in which the learner received explicit instruction and took a special interest.

4. Age of Onset and the incidence of Nativelikeness (The relationship Between Age of Onset and the Occurrence of Native-like Proficiency)

Numerous studies have been conducted to investigate the influence of age on second language acquisition. Coppieters' study (1987) sought to evaluate the language proficiency of learners in comparison to native speakers. This study entailed a comparison of the grammaticality and pronunciation judgments between proficient French learners and native French speakers. His study investigated a group of highly successful and educated learners of French as a foreign language (FL), all of whom

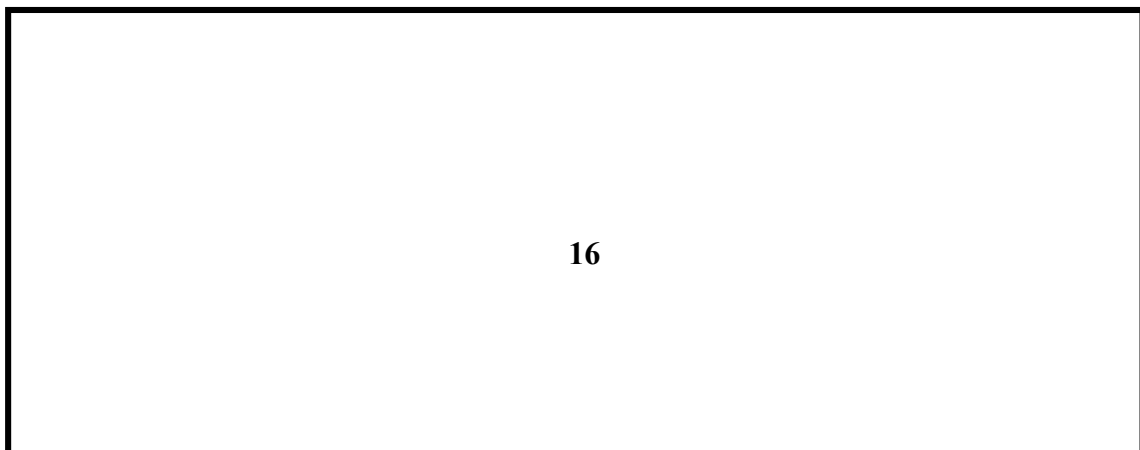
had no obvious foreign accent. However, despite their apparent native-like command of French, the results of a semantic-syntactic judgment test showed that their overall results were significantly lower than the results of a native-speaker control group, and recorded spontaneous speech revealed that these learners produced errors on features that were mastered in the judgment test.

Additionally, In the area of phonology and pronunciation, studies by Bongaerts and his colleagues targeted both highly advanced FL university students and immersed adult L2 learners of Dutch in the Netherlands (Bongaerts, Mennen, & van der Slik, 2000). In these studies, recorded sentences read aloud by the participants (as well as by native-control participants) were presented to juries of native evaluators who assessed the pronunciation of these speakers using a 5-point scale (e.g., from very strong accent; a nonnative speaker to no foreign accent at all; a native speaker); the result of these studies has been that a small subset of participants, typically one or two individuals, pass for native speakers.

5. The AoA-L2 Attainment Function

In Birdsong (2005) and Birdsong and Vanhove (2016) studies that relate AoA to ultimate L2 attainment argued that the relationship between the age of onset (AoA) and language proficiency may not be straightforward. Instead, different developmental factors could influence the brain's capacity for language learning.

The following figure illustrates how Age of Acquisition (AOA) affects L2 attainment:



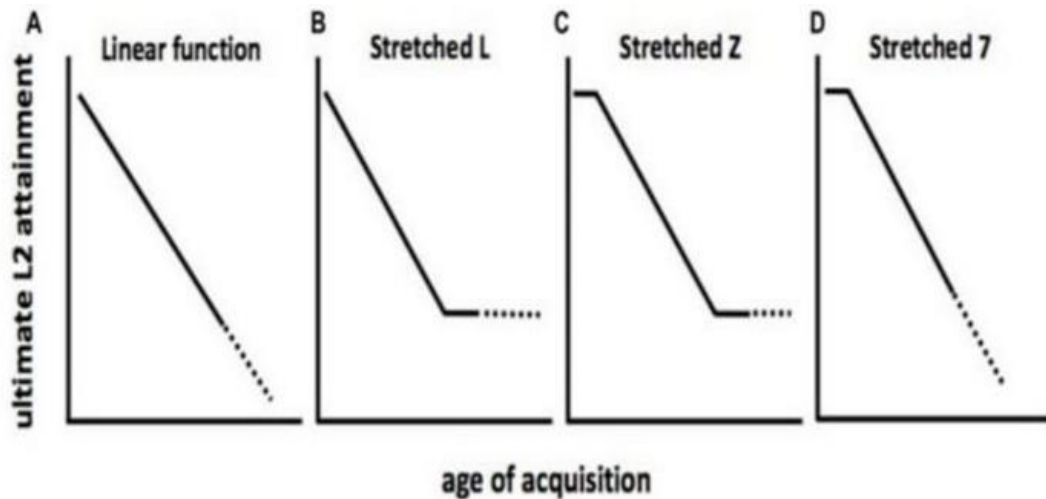


FIGURE 1 | Schematic representations of age of acquisition (AoA) effects on L2 attainment. (A) the linear decline of L2 attainment overall AoA; (B) initial decline of L2 attainment followed by leveling off over subsequent AoA; (C) L2 attainment plateau, followed by a decline, followed by leveling off over subsequent AoA; (D) L2 attainment plateau followed by a decline over subsequent AoA.

Extracted from Birdsong, D. (2018)

If the relationship between AoA and language proficiency is linear, as depicted in 1A. Some researchers argue that after people reach adulthood and finish growing, any further declines in language learning should stabilize. This means that while the age at which someone starts learning a language might affect their proficiency if they start early, it may not predict how well they will ultimately learn it if they start later. This idea suggests that the pattern of language learning proficiency over time might resemble an elongated "L" shape. Alternatively, some argue that language learning is most successful until a certain age, after which proficiency might decline. In this case, the pattern might resemble a stretched-out "7" shape, as shown in

Figure 1C. A third possibility is a combination of both patterns, showing an initial plateau, followed by a decline, and then stability, resembling a "stretched Z" shape as depicted in Figure 1D (Birdsong,2018).

To sum up, the relationship between age and language learning proficiency is complicated and can be affected by various age-related and developmental factors. The trajectory of language learning proficiency over time may manifest as an extended "L" shape, a protracted "7" shape, or a "stretched Z" shape, depending on the particular factors in play.

6. The Critical Period of Language Development

The term "critical period" describes a particular stage of development when children are more receptive to language and have a greater capacity to learn a language. Rapid language learning and acquisition are the hallmarks of this stage, which normally lasts from early childhood and extends from infancy until adolescence.

6.1. The Critical Period Definition

The critical period of language development is a fundamental concept in the field of linguistics and developmental psychology. "In 1982, Colombo defined the critical period as a time during the life of an organism in which the organism may be affected by some exogenous influence to an extent beyond that observed at other times. Simply, the organism is more sensitive to environmental stimulation during a critical period than at other times during its life' (Colombo, 1982, p. 261).

As per Lenneberg's findings in 1967, the challenges encountered in language development among children with limited or no exposure to language are linked to the notion of a critical period. The Critical Period Hypothesis (CPH) suggests that older learners find language acquisition more challenging than young children due to a limited window for easy learning, supported by studies on first language acquisition and research on deaf children exposed to sign language at different ages. Ultimately, while adults may initially appear to learn faster, their long-term proficiency may not match that of early learners (Penfield et al.,1959).

6.2. Anecdote and Assumptions in the Genesis of the Critical Period Hypothesis

The study of language acquisition and maturation has undergone substantial development over time, transitioning from subjective accounts to empirical research. Initially, discussions around second language acquisition (L2) lacked rigorous study, relying on observations and impressions. Early scholars, such as Tomb (1925) and Stengel (1939), based their arguments on anecdotal evidence or impressions rather than systematic studies.

A turning point in this discourse came in the 1950s when neurologist Penfield introduced neurological evidence to support his claims. Penfield's research suggested that children have a greater capacity for language recovery after neurological damage compared to adults, leading to the belief that language learning becomes increasingly challenging after the age of nine. He advocated for early exposure to L2s based on neurological principles, although subsequent analysis by Dechert (1995) revealed personal biases influencing Penfield's stance more than his neurological expertise.

Penfield's ideas converged with those of Lenneberg, who proposed the Critical Period Hypothesis, suggesting that language acquisition is most efficient during infancy and puberty, corresponding to the lateralization process in brain development. However, subsequent research has challenged aspects of Lenneberg's hypothesis, such as the completion of lateralization by early childhood and the alleged difficulties in L2 learning post-puberty.

While Lenneberg's arguments regarding brain maturation were supported by neurological evidence, his assertions about post-pubertal L2 learning lacked empirical backing, relying instead on popular assumptions. Therefore, the evolution of discourse from anecdotal to empirically grounded approaches highlights the ongoing refinement and complexity of understanding maturation and language acquisition in academic circles.

6.3. The Age Range of the critical period

There is a range of opinions on the age at which a critical period for language acquisition occurs. Some scholars have suggested cut-off points at 12, 15, 16, or 18 years old, while Lenneberg (1959) proposed that the critical period spans from two years old until puberty (around 14 years old). Unlike Lenneberg, many contemporary academics do not specify a starting age for this crucial period of language development. However, some argue that the critical period, especially for specific language domains like phonology, may end much earlier than puberty (e.g., at age 9 or even as early as 12 months for phonology) (Frisca Siahaan,2022).

7. Second Language Acquisition in the Critical Period

The examination of second language acquisition frequently involves the application of the Critical Period Hypothesis (CPH). It is a way to understand how age affects the ability to learn languages, not just for youngsters but also for adults who are trying to learn a new language after mastering their first language. The CPH primarily draws upon the comparison between the ability of older learners and that of children and adolescents in acquiring a second language. (Frisca Siahaan, 2022).

Frisca Siahaab (2022) highlights that younger learners tend to have a more comprehensive mastery of the language compared to older learners. One significant difference noted is that younger learners often do not retain a foreign accent, while adults frequently do. This phenomenon happens due to differences in neuro-muscular development affecting speech pronunciation. Adults generally struggle to achieve a native-like accent as they have surpassed the critical period for optimal neuro-muscular learning. Furthermore, other studies provided influential evidence supporting the notion that a CP influences SLA with a specific focus on pronunciation including a study by Flege et al. (2006) who assessed the degree of foreign accent in 62 native Korean speakers learning English as a second language. All in all, it was found that “native Korean children... were judged to produce English sentences with milder foreign accents than the native-Korean adults” (p. 168). That is younger means better.

Nonetheless, exceptions exist, some researchers are against the CPH for native-like attainment in L2 pronunciation. Bongaerts et al. (1997) reported on two studies that dealt with the issue of ultimate attainment by late SL learners to determine whether or not some could be identified with a native-like pronunciation in the SL being learned. Their results suggested that it is not impossible to achieve an authentic, native-like pronunciation of an SL after a specified biological period. Bongaerts, Mennen, and Slik (2000) tested whether a native-like accent is unattainable for those who start to acquire an L2 after the close of the

critical period. Sentences read out by late learners, who acquired Dutch in an immersion program, were rated for accent by native speakers of Dutch. The results revealed that late learners can achieve a native-like accent in an SL and that a combination of input, motivational, and instructional factors may compensate for the neurological disadvantages of a late start.

The Critical Period Hypothesis sheds light on the complexities of second language acquisition, highlighting the influence of age on linguistic proficiency. While younger learners often demonstrate superior language mastery, adults can still achieve significant levels of fluency albeit with potential challenges in accent acquisition.

Section Two: Developing Learners' Academic Oral Proficiency

Exposure to the FL skills of reading, speaking, writing, and listening is necessary for teaching English as a foreign language (TEFL). The primary and ultimate goal of developing these language skills is to reach a high level of proficiency in both oral and written L2 production and reception or, in other words, to become proficient in both productive and receptive skills. Speaking is considered the most important skill to acquire since it is required to demonstrate language proficiency. The focus is mostly on speaking because students will encounter situations where they must communicate in English.

1. Definition of Speaking

Speaking is a basic skill that language learners should master with other language skills. It is defined as a complex process of exchanging messages using verbal and non-verbal symbols such as gestures and facial expressions. According to Hedge (2000), speaking is a skill that influences first impressions, reflecting individuals' thoughts and personalities.

Mastery of speaking requires practice and experience, as it differs from writing in terms of structure and from reading and writing in terms of processing skills. Additionally, second-language speaking differs from first-language speaking due to learners' limited grammar and vocabulary knowledge, making the construction of accurate utterances and word retrieval less automatic (Thornbury, 2005).

2. The Importance of Speaking

Speaking was often neglected in traditional language teaching methods, such as the Grammar-Translation Method, which emphasized reading and writing over oral communication. The Communicative Approach, in contrast, places a higher value on speaking and listening, encouraging students to engage in verbal interactions. This shift minimizes teacher dominance in the classroom, promoting student participation. Ur (2000: 12) highlights the significance of speaking, suggesting that it is the most crucial skill among listening, speaking, reading, and writing.

In modern language learning, speaking skills are prioritized as they are seen as fundamental to overall language proficiency. Celce-Murcia (2001) argues that speaking a language is often equated with knowing it, emphasizing the importance of oral communication in human interaction. Developing speaking skills not only enhances vocabulary, grammar, and writing but also enables learners to express themselves effectively in various contexts, including professional settings where English proficiency is highly valued. Baker and Westrup (2003) support this view, linking strong English-speaking abilities to educational and career opportunities.

3. Oral Proficiency

Oral proficiency includes the ability to communicate effectively through spoken language. Hedge (2000) emphasizes that speaking is a fundamental skill upon which individuals are judged when forming first impressions. It involves conveying and receiving meanings through verbal expressions, gestures, and facial expressions. Speaking in a foreign language is challenging and takes time to develop, as highlighted by Hedge's insights. The importance of speaking has been undervalued in traditional language teaching methods like the Grammar-Translation Method, which focuses more on reading and writing. However, the Communicative Approach has shifted the focus to oral communication, recognizing speaking as a crucial skill for conveying ideas and personalities .

In the context of oral proficiency, fluency and accuracy are key components. Fluency refers to the ability to articulate thoughts clearly and logically without excessive hesitations, ensuring sustained listener engagement (Hughes, 2002). On the other hand, accuracy is defined as producing language by its rule system (Skehan, 1996). Pronunciation plays a critical role in achieving oral proficiency by influencing the clarity and comprehensibility of spoken language (Baker & Westrup, 2003). Additionally, grammatical accuracy is essential for effective communication (IELTS, 2001) .

Regarding strategies for oral communication, learners often employ communicative strategies to compensate for gaps in language knowledge or expression difficulties (Ellis & Barkhuizen, 2005). These strategies include achievement strategies like guessing and paraphrasing, as well as reduction strategies utilized when encountering obstacles in oral expression (Bygate, 1987). Learners

may encounter difficulties in speaking due to factors like inhibition and anxiety in classroom settings (Ur, 2000).

In conclusion, oral proficiency involves not only fluency and accuracy but also effective communication strategies to overcome challenges in spoken language. Developing oral proficiency is crucial for learners to convey ideas, express emotions, and engage in meaningful interactions both inside and outside the classroom.

4. Characteristics of Speaking Performance

In recent teaching contexts, there has been a notable focus on designing activities that strike a balance between enhancing fluency and accuracy in language acquisition. These criteria also serve as the basis for assessing oral skills.

Within the Communicative Approach, fluency, and accuracy are considered primary characteristics, and they are seen as complementary in accomplishing a given task. Richards and Rodgers (2001: 157) mention that "fluency and acceptable language is the primary goal: Accuracy is judged not in the abstract but in context." This highlights the Communicative Language Teaching (CLT) emphasis on the communicative exchange between learners or teachers and learners, rather than just mastery of language forms. However, Many questions have been raised about the role of accuracy in CLT theory. Hedge (2000: 61) points out that "The Communicative Approach somehow excuses teachers and learners from a consideration of how to develop high levels of accuracy in the use of grammar, pronunciation, and vocabulary." Learners then should develop communicative competence through classroom practice, simultaneously they should know how the language system works correctly and appropriately.

4.1 Fluency

The primary goal of teaching speaking skills is to encourage oral fluency, which is an important aspect of effective speaker performance. Hughes (2002) defines fluency as the ability to express oneself in an intelligible, reasonable, and accurate way without too much hesitation; otherwise, communication will be disrupted if listeners lose interest. Hedge (2000: 54) further mentioned that: “The term fluency relates to the production and it is normally reserved for speech. It is the ability to link units of speech together with facility and without strain, inappropriate shyness, or undue hesitation.”

In essence, fluency requires responding coherently by effectively linking words and phrases, articulating sounds clearly, and employing appropriate stress and intonation—all done quickly. Hughes (2002) also supports that fluency and coherence refer to the ability to speak at a normal level of continuity, rate, and effort in addition to linking ideas together in a coherent way. Speech rate and speech continuity are the key indicators of coherence.

However, many second language (L2) speakers relate fluency only to speaking quickly without pauses. However, frequent pausing is an indication that the speaker has problems speaking. In such cases, Thornbury (2005) suggests what is called 'tricks' or production strategies, i.e. the ability to fill the pauses. The most common pause fillers are "uh" and "um", and vagueness expressions such as "sort of" and "I mean". Another device for filling the pauses is the repetition of one word when there is a pause.

4.2 Accuracy

In current language teaching, there is a notable emphasis on accuracy alongside fluency, as learners often prioritize fluency over accuracy. However, without ensuring the correctness and completeness of speech, speakers risk not being

understood, leading to a loss of interest from their audience. According to Skehan (1996), and Ellis and Barkhuizen (2005), accuracy is defined as the extent to which the target language is produced by its rule system. This highlights the importance of focusing on pronunciation, vocabulary, and grammatical structures to achieve accurate spoken language production.

4.2.1 Pronunciation

Pronunciation plays a critical role in achieving oral proficiency in English, significantly influencing the clarity and comprehensibility of spoken language. Research indicates that learners experiencing difficulties with pronunciation often face challenges in being understood, which hinders their overall speaking proficiency. For example, Baker and Westrup (2003) conducted a study demonstrating that students with stronger pronunciation skills were more likely to be comprehended by both peers and teachers, resulting in enhanced oral proficiency. Their assertion highlights the necessity of employing accurate pronunciation for effective English communication, emphasizing its crucial role in shaping learners' overall language proficiency.

4.2.2 Grammar

In discussing grammatical accuracy, IELTS (2001, Hughes, 2002) emphasizes the importance of learners' grammatical structures, including the complexity and length of their utterances and their proficiency in using subordinating clauses. Thornbury (2005) further elaborates on the characteristics of spoken grammar, highlighting features such as the clause as the fundamental construction unit, the prevalence of direct speech, extensive use of ellipsis and question tags, the head-body-tail structure, and the incorporation of performance effects like hesitation, repetition, false starts, incompleteness, and syntactic blends.

4.2.3 Vocabulary

Precision in word choice is essential for effective verbal communication. When learners lack the appropriate vocabulary, expressing ideas becomes challenging and may lead to occasional misuse of words, particularly when dealing with synonyms in varying contexts. Therefore, students need to demonstrate proficiency in using words and phrases accurately. Harmer (2001) highlights the significance of understanding word classes, as it aids in constructing well-articulated utterances.

5. Learners' Strategies for Oral Communication

The primary goal of mastering a second language should focus on attaining oral communicative competence, which involves the ability to speak appropriately and confidently. Despite this objective, learners may encounter challenges when engaging in conversations. To address these communication obstacles, employing communicative strategies is essential. According to Ellis and Barkhuizen (2005), communicative strategies are learner-centered approaches utilized to compensate for a lack of second language knowledge or the inability to access existing knowledge. These strategies aid learners in preventing breakdowns in oral communication. Hughes (2002) similarly defines these strategies as learners' capacity to manage conversations and navigate interactions effectively, particularly in situations where expression and communication difficulties arise. Bygate (1987) categorizes communicative strategies into two main types: achievement strategies encompassing guessing, paraphrasing, and cooperative approaches, and reduction strategies.

5.1 Achievement Strategies

The speaker employs achievement strategies, wherein they substitute missing words to effectively convey their intended meaning. These substitution words may

include guesses, intuitive responses, or expressions recalled on the spot, or by explaining the missing words through comparison with other concepts. For instance, in a conversation, one might say, "Try reading this book. That one's not very good." Here, 'one's' serves as a substitution for 'book.' This example illustrates how ellipsis allows for the omission of essential elements from the text, which can be inferred by referencing the preceding context.

5.1.1 Guessing Strategies

Guessing strategies are used in verbal communication to replace unfamiliar words with more understandable alternatives. These techniques include adapting native language words, borrowing words without modification, or translating words word-for-word. They help overcome linguistic challenges and address speech difficulties. For example, Arabic speakers might use "Eid" instead of "holiday" in English. Additionally, speakers can create new words based on their understanding of the source language. (Torone, 1983, Bygate 1987).

5.1.2 Paraphrasing Strategies

This involves substituting a term or expression for the word or the expression that the speaker needs in the target language. He/She can explain a concept or a word by constructing phrases to convey their intended meaning. For example, describing a feeling as a mix of happiness and sadness as "bittersweet".

5.1.3 Co-operative Strategies

In this type of strategy, the speaker receives help from their interlocutor, who works with them to express a word. To encourage the listener to say the word they need, the speaker can indicate anything in the target language that they are unsure of

its name, use the term in their mother tongue, or construct sentences out of individual words or phrases.

5.2 Reduction Strategies (Avoidance Strategies)

When speakers find themselves unable to address difficulties using achievement strategies, they often turn to reduction strategies to navigate obstacles in their oral expression.

Learners often use these strategies to deal with various issues they encounter. For instance, learners might avoid using complex verb tenses, such as the subjunctive mood in Spanish, or complex grammatical structures, such as passive voice constructions in English. By using this kind of strategy, the learners may sacrifice part of their intended meaning. Finally, students may face some difficulties in expressing opinions too, because of the lack of vocabulary, so, they avoid some of the message content and look for something else to talk about or simply they keep silent.

Finally, strategies for oral communication are very widely used by learners to cover the obstacles that face in FL speaking, and it depends on the situation and the learner's character and which method can be used for each problem.

6. Speaking Difficulties in Foreign Language Learning

Engaging in spoken communication in a foreign language requires more than just language proficiency. Echevarria et al. (2008) emphasize the critical distinction between knowing how things should be done and being able to perform them, which is an essential aspect of the learning process. Individuals often encounter difficulties when practicing speaking skills, even those with a solid understanding of the foreign language system. To provide students the confidence and skills they need to take advantage of classroom tasks and speak English fluently, Parrott (1993) claims that

teachers must implement a sequence of activities. Ur (2000) identifies four primary difficulties that hinder students from actively participating in oral communication in foreign language classrooms.

6.1 Inhibition

When learners attempt to engage in classroom participation, various factors often impede their efforts. Littlewood (1999) highlights how easily a foreign language classroom can foster inhibition and anxiety. This inhibition stems from feelings of shyness and fear of making errors, which are deteriorated by less developed communication skills and a sense of linguistic inferiority. Students may pause to speak, particularly when facing a critical audience, fearing potential mistakes and criticism. Ur (2000) notes that learners frequently feel inhibited when attempting to express themselves in a foreign language classroom, worrying about errors, criticism, loss of esteem, or simply the spotlight on their speech. Bowman et al. (1989) also contend that speaking activities in class often induce stress, as students struggle with expressing themselves in front of their peers. Ultimately, stress and anxiety serve as significant barriers that hinder students from speaking confidently in classroom settings.

6.2 Nothing to Say

When L2 learners are prompted to engage in a discussion, they commonly resort to expressions like 'I have nothing to talk about,' 'I don't know,' and 'no comment,' or they simply remain silent. These responses stem from a lack of motivation to express themselves or disinterest in the assigned topic. Rivers (1968: 192) notes that this problem may occur when learners encounter topics that are uninteresting or unfamiliar to them, leaving them with little to say in either their native or foreign language.

Inadequate L2 practice can also make this problem worse. Backer and Westrup (2003) contend that many students struggle to respond when teachers ask them to speak in the target language. These learners may have limited ideas to contribute, lack confidence in their vocabulary usage, or feel uncertain about grammatical correctness. Moreover, students may find it challenging to engage in discussions about topics that do not capture their interest.

6.3 Low Uneven Participation

This problem deals with how much each student talks during class. Rivers (1968) suggests that some students talk a lot, while others hardly say anything. Harmer (2001) recommends putting less talkative students together in groups, so they feel more comfortable speaking. This helps balance participation in class discussions. Classroom seating can also affect participation negatively, as some arrangements don't encourage interaction (Bowman et al., 1989). Another issue is teacher motivation. If teachers don't encourage students to speak, even the talkative ones may not participate. Therefore, teachers need to motivate students to join in discussions.

6.4 Mother Tongue Use

L2 students who share the same native language often use it, both in and out of the classroom, because it feels easier and safer. Baker and Westrup (2003) highlight that this can cause problems because students might use cultural rules from their native language in a foreign language. As a result, they might struggle to use the foreign language properly, especially when they lack the necessary vocabulary, leading them to borrow words from their native tongue.

7. Teaching Techniques for Oral Proficiency

In language learning, developing oral proficiency stands as a crucial element for effective communication. To promote this important skill, teachers employ a variety of teaching techniques aimed at enhancing students' speaking abilities such as group work, role-play, problem-solving, and debates. These innovative approaches encourage students to express themselves fluently and accurately in their target language.

7.1 Group Work

In language classrooms, alongside whole-class teaching and individual tasks, group work is highlighted as another essential aspect of interaction. Group work involves students collaborating in smaller units or teams, providing them with opportunities for oral communication. Researchers suggest that such tasks play a significant role in developing both linguistic and communicative skills (Bright & McGregor, 1970).

Within group interactions, students engage in genuine attempts to collectively solve problems. This type of activity fosters meaningful negotiation and information exchange, emphasizing the importance of students being well-versed in the discussion topic. The primary aim of the teacher is to encourage student participation and stimulate their interest and creativity.

Group work offers several benefits for second language learners. It reduces the dominance of teacher-led instruction, providing more opportunities for students to practice using the target language authentically (Mackay & Tom, 1999). Additionally, it enhances collaboration among students, encouraging purposeful oral interaction rather than just an exchange of words.

In summary, group work involving communicative tasks is crucial for developing oral proficiency, as it encourages active participation in meaningful oral activities.

7.2 Role Play

Role play is a beneficial tool for language learners, serving both general oral proficiency development and specific skill training, especially in English for specific purposes. This technique is considered authentic as it simulates real-life interactive situations, providing students with opportunities to use language in meaningful contexts.

Students typically enjoy role-play activities, where they assume different roles and engage in dialogue. For example, they might enact scenarios like a customer returning a faulty product to a store or a tourist asking for directions in a foreign city. Such activities require students to prepare dialogues, expanding their language functions considerably.

Although role play has faced periods of decreased popularity, it offers distinct advantages. It fosters interactive language use, training students in skills such as arguing, persuading, and discussing in authentic contexts. Unlike rote memorization, role play encourages spontaneous oral exchanges, allowing learners to express themselves freely (Dickson, 1981).

Effective role play should be open-ended, allowing for diverse viewpoints and requiring consensus-building among participants. It promotes dynamic interaction and provides support for students with lower proficiency levels. Teachers play a crucial role in facilitating role-play activities, ensuring that roles match students' personalities and interests. By selecting relevant topics and providing appropriate

roles, teachers can enhance students' self-confidence and motivation to participate actively.

7.3 Problem Solving

Problem-solving involves a group of individuals working together to gather information about a problem, analyze it, and make decisions based on their findings (Barker & Gaut, 2002). This approach encompasses various activities that require learners to find solutions to different types of problems. Research by Duff (1986; Nunan, 1989) indicates that problem-solving tasks stimulate more interaction than debating tasks.

These tasks range from hypothetical scenarios to more practical situations with real-world applications, engaging students in collaborative efforts to achieve a goal. Students participate by sharing information, expressing opinions, and negotiating meaning. For example, students may be tasked with imagining themselves stranded on a desert island and determining what items they would need for survival.

While some activities may begin with individual work, most problem-solving tasks involve pair or group work. Students collaborate to generate suggestions, provide reasons, and evaluate proposed solutions. This cooperative approach encourages negotiation and decision-making skills among learners.

7.4 Discussion and Debates

Discussion involves the exchange of ideas and opinions either among students or between students and the teacher, to develop oral expression and exchange viewpoints (Hill and Ruptic, 1949; Byrne, 1976). This student-driven and teacher-guided technique can last for a few minutes or an entire lesson, depending on the learners' proficiency level.

Engaging in discussions offers several benefits for L2 learners, including improved comprehension, enhanced listening skills, and the opportunity to develop spoken language proficiency. It also encourages participation from quiet and shy students while providing the teacher with opportunities to observe student learning.

In a well-prepared discussion, the teacher's role is to facilitate rather than dominate the conversation. The teacher should encourage students to express their opinions freely, avoiding imposing their views. Additionally, the teacher should show genuine interest in students' ideas and offer assistance when needed to ensure clarity of communication. Stimulating discussion through thought-provoking questions helps foster lively exchanges and encourages students to express controversial opinions.

8. Age differences and oral proficiency (Age of onset and oral proficiency)

The age factor significantly shapes oral proficiency, with its effects on literacy-related second language (L2) skills distinct from those on interpersonal communicative L2 skills. According to Cummins (1980) and Cummins and Swain (1986), it has been posited that mature learners tend to demonstrate heightened aptitude in L2 syntax, morphology, and literacy-related skills, such as vocabulary acquisition and reading comprehension due to their advanced cognitive development. However, this demographic does not necessarily show superior proficiency in pronunciation and oral fluency, as these aspects are perceived to be less cognitively challenging across both L1 and L2 proficiency levels (Cummins, 1980,p.180); Cummins & Swain, 1986,p.88). Cummins (1981) suggests that assessments of syntax, morphology, and literacy-related skills evaluate a cognitive dimension of language proficiency, while evaluations of basic interpersonal communicative skills may be less sensitive to individual cognitive variations and academic progress. Moreover, L2

face-to-face communicative skills may rely more on personality traits and motivational factors (Cummins, 1983).

However, certain studies suggest that older learners may possess some benefits in these areas even with limited exposure. For instance, Ervin-Tripp (1974) observed that a group of 7–9-year-olds outperformed 4–6-year-olds in comprehension, imitation, and conversation after just 9 months of French instruction. Nevertheless, as the duration of exposure increases, younger learners who commence at an earlier age tend to achieve higher proficiency in communicative skills. Ekstrand's (1977) investigation found that older immigrant learners did not notably surpass younger learners in oral production. Moreover, Oyama (1976) observed that younger immigrant learners (ages 6–10 upon arrival) exhibited better performance in productive phonology than older learners, and subsequent research (Oyama, 1978) discovered that younger immigrants also do better than older learners in listening comprehension tests. Similarly, Asher and García (1969) discovered that the youngest immigrants in their study were most likely to achieve near-native English pronunciation, particularly with longer durations of stay (5–8 years versus 1–5 years). In summary, while mature learners may manifest advantages in literacy-related skills due to cognitive maturity, younger learners can excel in oral fluency and pronunciation with increased exposure and immersion.

Chapter Two

RESEARCH METHODOLOGY, FINDINGS AND DISCUSSION

Overview

This chapter introduces the practical part of the research where both the methods and process used to conduct this research are explained, and it consists of

two sections. The first section provides a full description of the research methodology and design used wherein the research methods, setting, population, and tools followed by the data collection and analysis tools. The second section is concerned with data analyses and interpretations, a discussion of the results, limitations of the study, pedagogical implications, and recommendations for further research.

1. Research Methodology and Design

The research adopts a descriptive approach, aiming to provide a detailed exploration of pupils' levels of oral proficiency. To achieve this objective, the current study employs the mixed method design, which is defined by Creswell as the purposeful integration of qualitative and quantitative research methods to achieve the desired empirical product (research results) (2015. p.2). It is characterized by the use of at least one qualitative and one quantitative data collection and analysis tool (Schoonenboom & Johnson, 2017). This method is used to attain a better comprehensive perspective of the pupils' oral proficiency. Specifically, the study involves recording students' responses to designated tasks, facilitating a thorough analysis of various linguistic aspects of overall oral proficiency levels. Additionally, quantitative methods are utilized through the application of a rubric for analyzing the recorded data, as recommended by Johnson (2020). While the rubric scores provide quantitative data, the process of evaluating each aspect (e.g., fluency, comprehension) involves a qualitative judgment based on the evaluator's expertise. It enables the quantification of specific performance criteria, including fluency, comprehension, communication, vocabulary, structure, and pronunciation. By integrating qualitative data with quantitative analysis, the research methodology ensures a strong examination of the relationship between age of onset and oral proficiency among primary and middle school students, according to the descriptive nature of the study.

1.1 The Sample and Population

The sample for this study was selected using a purposive sampling method which is Purposive sampling is a non-probability sampling technique where the researcher selects participants based on specific characteristics or criteria that are relevant to the research question. In this case, the researcher is interested in exploring the relationship between age of onset and oral proficiency, so they would purposefully select Second-year middle school students and Fourth-year primary school students.

This type of sampling allows the researcher to focus on the specific age groups that are relevant to the research question. Specifically, the sample includes fourth-year primary school (PS) students from Attabi Atallah PS and second-year middle school (MS) students from Shouhadaa Rezzig MS in Berhoum, M'sila. From these schools, two groups were selected, a total of 40 pupils were the sample of this study, 20 PS and 20 MS pupils. Justification for choosing these specific grade levels stems from the fact that students at these stages have had one year of English instruction and mostly have a similar curriculum, which helps conduct the same test accurately. This approach ensures that the selected participants are appropriate for the study, in line with the research goals of investigating the relationship between the age of onset and oral proficiency of the Algerian PS and MS EFL learners.

1.2 The setting

The study was conducted at Attabi Atallah Primary School and Shouhadaa Rezzig Middle School in Berhoum City in M'sila. Recording the pupils individually starting from 16 April in the last semester of the school year 2023/2024. just after the Eid Holiday.

1.3 Data Collection Tools

To facilitate the investigation aimed at investigating the correlation between age of onset and oral proficiency in Algerian EFL learners, a triangulation of research instruments was utilized. These instruments consisted of an Oral Proficiency Test (OPT) which serves as the main assessment tool to evaluate students' oral proficiency administered to a total of 40 pupils, 20 PS and 20 MS pupils. and a rubric scoring that was based on established criteria from Farhady, Jafarpur, and Birjandi (2001), Heaton (1990), Hughes (2003), IELTS Testing Center (2000), and Underhill (1987), covering six key aspects of oral proficiency: fluency, comprehension, communication, vocabulary, structure, and pronunciation.

Through this comprehensive approach, the study aimed to gather rich and detailed data on the oral skills of the participants, allowing for a useful exploration of the research objectives.

1.3.1 Oral Proficiency Test (OPT)

The Oral Proficiency Test (OPT), which was validated by Dr. Imane Cheriet from M'sila University, Dr. Souad Belgrimet from the University of Mostaganem, and Dr. Nour El Houda Abdelhai from the University of Algiers, serves as the primary assessment tool to evaluate students' oral proficiency in English. It consists of two different tasks :

Firstly, the self-introduction task encourages students to introduce themselves in English, providing information about their names, ages, and interests. This task assesses students' ability to initiate and engage in a conversation, as well as their pronunciation and fluency.

Secondly, the picture description task presents students with a picture that was extracted from online sources (Pinterest) and describes various parts of the school and the house. This task evaluates students' oral proficiency in providing detailed descriptions, using appropriate vocabulary, and constructing coherent sentences. It supports them to orally describe what they see in the image and it includes different elements commonly found in a school, such as classrooms, playgrounds, libraries, canteens, and administrative offices. And also in a house, such as a bedroom, bathroom, dining room, kitchen, and garage.

Through using a familiar context like the school and the house environment, the picture aims to engage students and elicit descriptive language that is relevant to their daily experience.

The OPT is administered individually to each student, allowing for personalized assessment, and their performances are recorded for later evaluation based on their fluency, comprehension, communication, vocabulary, structure, and pronunciation.

Overall, the picture serves as an effective tool for assessing students' oral proficiency by encouraging them to engage in spontaneous and descriptive language.

1.3.2 Rubric Scoring

The rubric used in this study was developed by Cherif (2011) to comprehensively assess the oral proficiency of university EFL students. Cherif (2011, pp. 30-31) claims that "the researcher appropriately modified the existing rubric to include an important factor, "communication" which is essential for assessing levels of oral ability, to help the test designers move from subjective teacher-made tests towards more standardized testing of oral/aural skills. This rubric is developed as comprehensively as possible so that the researcher can take into account most of the

required criteria in the tests for measuring oral proficiency. Sample models for developing this rubric is extracted from Farhady, Jafarpur, and Birjandi (2001), Heaton (1990), Hughes (2003), IELTS Testing Center (2000), and Underhill (1987). The most significant criteria considered in the rubric include accent, speed of response, diction, listening comprehension, communication, and fluency to name but a few."

Additionally, the rubric was edited based on students' levels after recording them. To ensure the rubric's reliability, the recordings of students were rated by 3 teachers at Middle School from different areas of Algeria (Miss. Rania Soltani from Biskra, Waffa Rekkas from Media and Khoulood Merrada from Bousaada). This method was chosen to reduce potential biases and to provide an objective assessment of students' oral proficiency. The diverse backgrounds and experiences of the raters contribute to a more reliable and valid evaluation process, ensuring that the ratings accurately reflect students' oral skills.

1.4. Statistical Tools of Data Analysis

To analyze the data collected in this study, two primary statistical tools were utilized:

SPSS (Version 22)

SPSS, a powerful statistical software, was used to organize and structure the tables of frequencies. It enabled the measurement and organization of descriptive statistics, including means, standard deviations, and frequency distributions. This facilitated accurate and detailed data interpretation through its statistical analysis capabilities.

Microsoft Excel (Version 2021)

Microsoft Excel was used to transform the tables produced in SPSS into graphical representations. Its flexibility in creating charts and graphs allowed for a clear and

concise visual presentation of the data which helped in better understanding and interpreting the findings.

By integrating these tools, a comprehensive and accurate analysis of the data was achieved, providing a solid foundation for the findings and conclusions of this study.

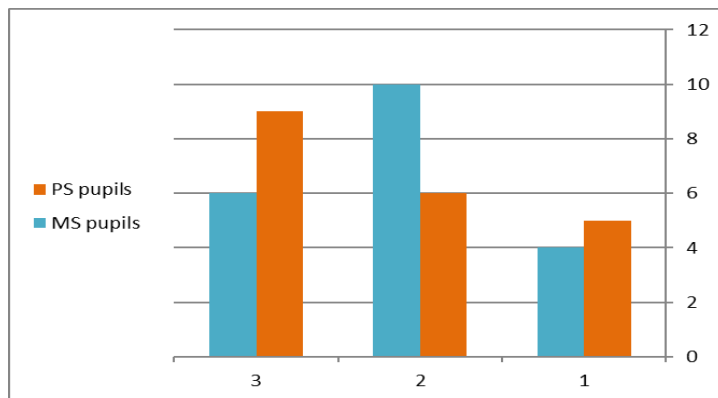
1.5. Pupils' Test Analysis and Interpretation

These graphs display the fluency, comprehension, communication, vocabulary, structure, and pronunciation scores of primary and middle school pupils categorized into three levels: Good, Fair, and Weak. The horizontal axis represents the fluency categories, while the vertical axis shows the number of pupils in each category.

1.5.1 Fluency

Table (01) *Primary and middle school pupils' fluency scores*

	PS pupils	MS pupils
Valid		
Good (1)	5	4
Fair (2)	6	10
Weak (3)	9	6
Total	20	20



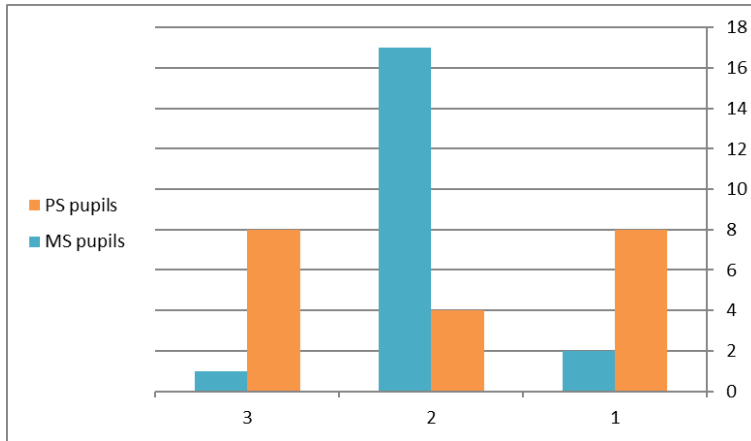
Graph (1) Bar Chart illustrating primary and middle school pupils' fluency scores

In the fluency graph, the majority of primary school pupils are categorized as 'weak' (9 pupils), whereas the majority of middle school pupils are classified in the 'fair' category (10 students). This significant difference suggests that middle school pupils generally show better fluency compared to primary school pupils, as a larger number of middle school pupils achieve the 'fair' level of fluency. Additionally, only a few middle school pupils (6) are placed in the 'weak' category, further emphasizing their relatively higher fluency skills. This disparity highlights the progression in fluency skills as pupils advance from primary to middle school.

1.5.2 Comprehension

Table (02) Primary and middle school pupils' comprehension scores

	PS pupils	MS pupils	
Valid	Good (1)	8	2
	Fair (2)	4	17
	Weak (3)	8	1
	Total	20	20



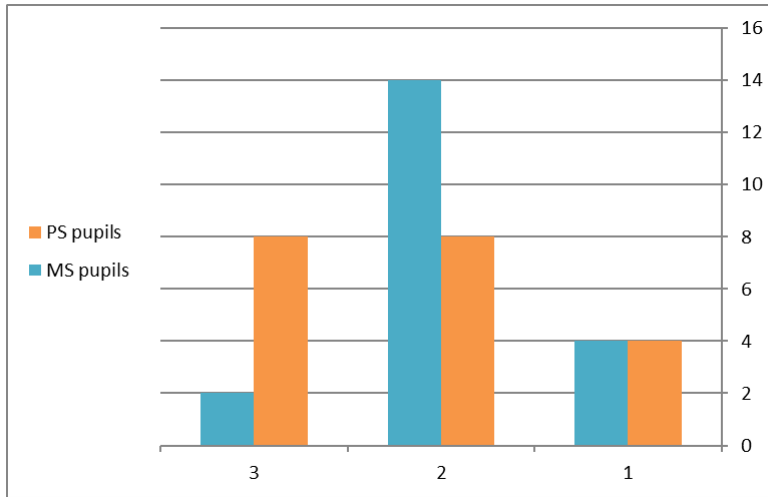
Graph (2) Illustration of Primary and middle school pupils' comprehension scores

The comprehension graph shows that the majority of primary school pupils are split between the 'weak' (8 pupils) and 'good' (8 pupils) categories. However, the majority of middle school students are in the 'fair' category (17 pupils). This indicates that middle school pupils have a more consistent level of comprehension skills, with most achieving a 'fair' level, whereas primary school pupils demonstrate a wider range of performance.

1.5.3 Communication

Table (03) Primary and middle school pupils' communication scores

		PS pupils	MS pupils
Valid	Good(1)	4	4
	Fair(2)	8	14
	Weak(3)	8	2
	Total	20	20



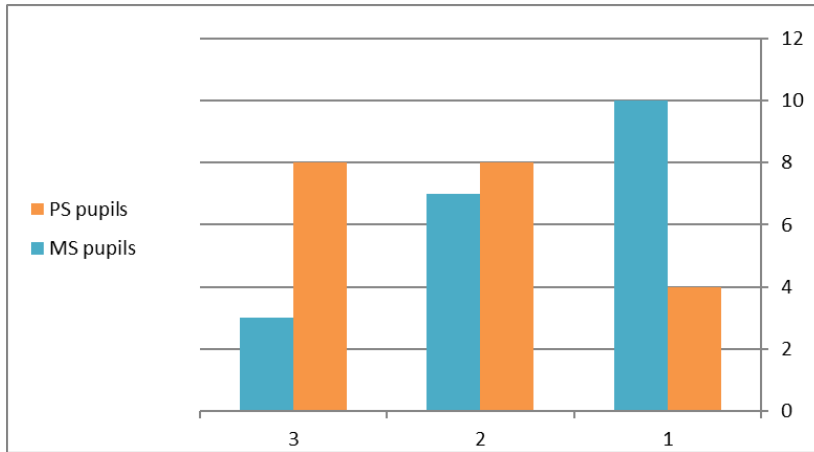
Graph (3) Illustration of primary and middle school pupils' communication scores

For communication, the majority of primary school students fall into the 'weak' (8 pupils) and 'fair' (8 pupils) categories equally. In contrast, the majority of middle school pupils are in the 'fair' category (14 pupils). This suggests that middle school pupils generally perform better in communication, with more pupils reaching at least a 'fair' level.

1.5.4 Vocabulary

Table (04) Primary and middle school pupils' vocabulary scores

		PS pupils	MS pupils
Valid	Good(1)	4	10
	Fair(2)	8	7
	Weak(3)	8	3
	Total	20	20



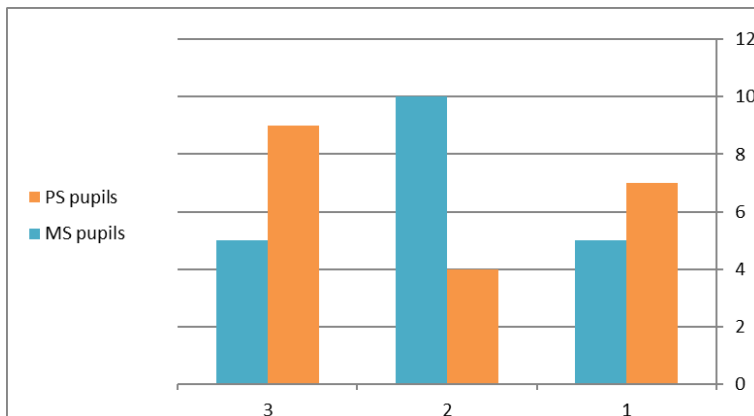
Graph (4) Illustration of primary and middle school pupils' vocabulary scores

In vocabulary, the majority of primary school pupils are in the 'weak' (8 pupils) and 'fair' (8 pupils) categories equally. However, the majority of middle school pupils are in the 'good' category (10 pupils). This shows that middle school pupils have a stronger vocabulary, with more pupils achieving 'good' vocabulary skills.

1.5.5 Structure

Table (05) Primary and middle school pupils' structure scores

		PS pupils	MS pupils
Valid	Good(1)	7	5
	Fair(2)	4	10
	Weak(3)	9	5
	Total	20	20



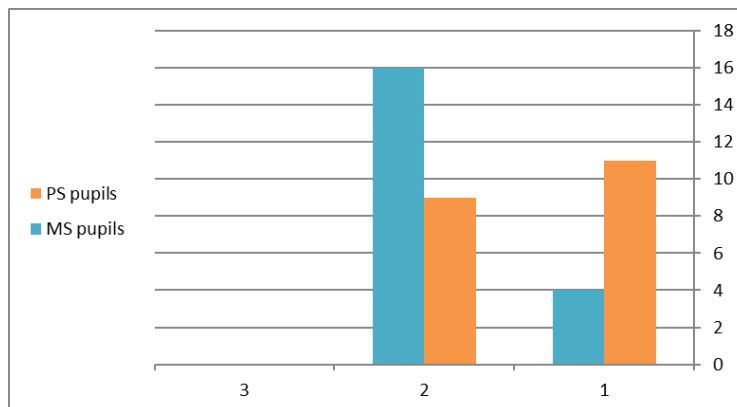
Graph (5) Illustration of Primary and middle school pupils' structure scores

The structure graph shows that the majority of primary school pupils are in the 'weak' category (9 pupils). In contrast, the majority of middle school pupils are in the 'fair' category (10 pupils). This suggests that middle school pupils generally have better structural skills in language, with more pupils reaching the 'fair' level.

1.5.6 Pronunciation

Table (06) Primary and middle school pupils' pronunciation scores

	PS pupils	MS pupils
Valid		
Good(1)	11	4
Fair(2)	9	16
Weak(3)	0	0
Total	20	20



Graph (6) Illustration of primary and middle school pupils' pronunciation scores

The graph shows that primary school students are more represented in the 'Good' category, while middle school pupils are more represented in the 'Fair' category. Specifically, for the 'Weak' category, zero (0) pupils are in both groups. In the 'Fair' category, nine (9) primary school pupils are compared to sixteen (16) middle

school pupils. In the 'Good' category, eleven (11) primary school pupils are compared to four (4) middle school pupils.

In light of graph (06) and cross-tabulation analysis, it is evident that primary school pupils generally have better pronunciation skills, with a majority in the 'Good' category.

1.6 Discussion of the Findings

This section deals with the discussion of the findings and the relationship that can be found between the literature review and the research questions. The current study aims to Explore the Relationship between the Age of Onset and Oral Proficiency of EFL Primary and Middle School Pupils.

For several years, it has been observed that the age at which students begin learning English as a Foreign Language (EFL) significantly impacts their oral proficiency. This study specifically examined the oral proficiency of fourth-year primary school (PS) students and second-year middle school (MS) students across six key aspects: fluency, comprehension, communication, structure, vocabulary, and pronunciation. The findings of this study are discussed in detail below, highlighting the various strengths and weaknesses observed in each group within these critical areas of language proficiency.

In terms of fluency, the majority of primary school pupils are in the 'weak' category (9 pupils), whereas the majority of middle school pupils fall into the 'fair' category (10 pupils). This suggests that middle school pupils generally exhibit better fluency compared to primary school pupils, as a larger number of them reach the 'fair' level of fluency. For example, in the self-introduction section of the test, many primary school pupils struggled to maintain a smooth flow of speech, often pausing

and hesitating, which placed them in the 'weak' category (10 of PS pupils mentioned only their names). On the contrary, middle school pupils were able to provide more coherent and continuous self-introductions, with fewer pauses, resulting in more 'fair' ratings. Similarly, when describing the picture, primary school pupils presented incomplete phrases, whereas middle school pupils produced more fluent and connected descriptions. These results can be referred to as brain maturity. In addition to that, there is a TD session in the middle school curriculum devoted to remedial work, which may include role plays and educational games, providing learners with greater exposure to the language and enhancing their fluency. This finding aligns with Muñoz's (2006) study, which found that late starters demonstrated better oral fluency development compared to early starters in a formal EFL learning context, proving that greater outcomes in second language learning are not always achieved with an early start.

Concerning the comprehension category, primary school pupils show a more varied distribution: 8 pupils in both the 'weak' and 'good' categories, and 4 pupils in the 'fair' category. In contrast, middle school pupils predominantly fall into the 'fair' category (17 pupils), with very few in the 'weak' (1 pupil) and 'good' (2 pupils) categories. This distribution suggests that middle school pupils have a more balanced comprehension skills compared to primary school pupils. For instance, when the conductor asked S12 the question "How old are you?" he answered, "I am fine, thank you," indicating a lack of comprehension. Such misunderstandings were more common among primary school pupils, indicating their comprehension difficulties. One reason for this outcome is middle school pupils' prior knowledge and life experience. Since French and English share similarities in vocabulary and grammar,

learners can transfer their knowledge of French to aid in understanding English. (MS pupils have been studying French for five years, while PS pupils have had only one year of exposure to both French and English). This positive transfer can facilitate the learning process and help learners make connections between the two languages (Negadi,2015). Another aspect that characterizes old learners more than younger ones is their Cognitive Development. MS students have more advanced cognitive skills, including better memory, abstract thinking, and problem-solving abilities, which enhance comprehension. these results match what is found by Cummins and Swain (1986). However, it contradicts Gawi's conclusions in 2012, who examined the effects of age on learning English, and found that learning English at an earlier age (5-6 years) led to higher proficiency levels compared to those who started at a late age (12-13 years), which means that older learners typically exhibit better comprehension.

For communication skills, primary school pupils are equally split between 'weak' (8 pupils) and 'fair' (8 pupils), with fewer in the 'good' category (4 pupils). Middle school pupils, however, display greater proficiency with more pupils in the 'fair' category (14 pupils) and fewer in the 'weak' (2 pupils) and 'good' (4 pupils) categories. These results demonstrate that middle school students are generally better communicators in English than primary school students. For instance, an example of a good student level is "Hello, my name is Safaa. I am 12 years old. I live in Barhoum. I am a pupil at Shouhadaa Rezzig Middle School. I love English". The findings suggest that older learners who acquire the language later tend to have better oral communication skills and overall comprehensibility compared to younger learners. The findings by Saito (2015) related to accentedness and comprehensibility provide evidence that older learners can be better communicators in a foreign language than younger ones. Through the Algerian middle school curriculum, which focuses on the

development of the four skills, learners can read texts, acquire knowledge, and then use it when involved in communicative situations. This contrasts with the primary school curriculum, in which pupils are mainly exposed to spoken language.

When examining vocabulary, primary school pupils again show an even distribution across 'weak' (8 pupils), 'fair' (8 pupils), and 'good' (4 pupils) categories. Middle school pupils, however, display greater proficiency with more pupils in the 'good' category (10 pupils) compared to 'fair' (7 pupils) and 'weak' (3 pupils). This suggests that middle school pupils have a stronger vocabulary, because of the increased exposure. Middle school students likely encounter a wider range of vocabulary through more advanced reading materials, textbooks, and also media. For example, primary school pupils often resort to the French language when they fail to express words in English. Examples include phrases like "Le stade," "Je vais au toilette," "I speak Arabic, English et Français," and "I am quatre pupil." Such code-switching indicates gaps in their English vocabulary. Middle school pupils, in contrast, have more consistent use of English vocabulary, reflecting their more extensive language exposure and learning. This result is consistent with Saito's (2015) research which primarily focuses on oral proficiency, it indirectly suggests that older learners, who acquire the language later, may have a richer vocabulary base compared to younger learners. which demonstrated that older learners often achieve higher vocabulary proficiency.

Regarding structure, PS pupils primarily fall into the 'weak' category (9 pupils), with fewer in the 'fair' (4 pupils) and 'good' (7 pupils) categories. MS pupils, however, are more evenly distributed with 5 pupils in the 'weak', 10 in 'fair', and 5 in the 'good' categories. This suggests that while primary school pupils struggle more

with sentence structure, MS pupils show a more balanced ability, which could be attributed to increased cognitive development. For example, PS pupils frequently commit structural mistakes when they introduce themselves. Two pupils said, "I am Algeria," "I am from Algerian," and "I live is Barhoum," instead of the correct forms. Another pupil said, "I nine years old." When describing the school, one PS pupil (S16) said, "The headmaster's office next to My classroom's", instead of "My classroom is next to the headmaster's office." MS pupils, on the other hand, made fewer structural mistakes and produced more accurate sentences, indicating better structural understanding. However, our finding contradicts Stolvoort, Mackaaij, and Tribushinina's (2024) results, who investigated the factors that predict English grammar and vocabulary outcomes in learners with Developmental Language Disorder (DLD) and found that the age of onset of EFL instruction was a significant positive predictor of English grammar and vocabulary scores at "Time 1", with earlier starters performing better.

For pronunciation, PS students pronounce words correctly; none of them are classified as "weak", 9 as 'fair', and 11 as 'good'. MS pupils, however, show a higher proportion in the 'fair' category (16 pupils) and fewer in 'good' (4 pupils). This suggests that younger learners may have an advantage in pronunciation, which allows for better phonetic acquisition at a younger age. Examples from the test include PS pupils correctly pronouncing words with accurate intonation and stress. In contrast, MS pupils demonstrated some common mispronunciations, such as /lʌv/ or /lɒf/ instead of /lʌv/ for "love", /haʊz/ instead of /haus/ for "house", /nɒm/ instead of /neim/ for "name", /fraʊn/ instead of /frɒm/ for "from", /'bɑ:ðrɒm/ instead of /'bɑ:θrɒm/ for "bathroom", and /'ɪŋɡlɪʃ/ instead of /'ɪŋɡlɪʃ/ for "English". These examples illustrate how younger learners exhibit a stronger ability to absorb and

reproduce sounds more accurately. In relation to our findings, the study by Caleffi (2023) supports the idea that younger learners have an advantage in acquiring L2 speech sounds due to their greater articulatory plasticity, ability to discriminate phonetic information, and proficiency in identifying and producing phonemes accurately compared to adults. This is in agreement with our observation that younger learners, such as PS students, perform better at pronunciation because of their enhanced ability to absorb and reproduce sounds effectively.

1.7 Limitations of the Study

The researchers encountered several challenges due to the nature of young learners. Firstly, the test required significant energy to assess each pupil individually. Additionally, primary school students often did not comprehend instructions the first time. As a result, the tester had to repeat instructions multiple times and sometimes resorted to using the mother tongue for clarification. Second, the study lacks a questionnaire or interviews for teachers, which would have provided more information about other factors that may affect students' oral proficiency. Finally, while our study focused on Exploring the relationship between Age of Onset and Oral Proficiency in Attabi Atallah Primary School and Shouhadaa Rezzig Middle School in Berhoum City in M'sila, it is important to recognize that the results and conclusions of this study may have limited generalizability to more diverse student populations. Our participants primarily consisted of students from a single demographic background, and the school setting may not adequately represent the varied educational contexts found in different regions or among more diverse student groups.

1.8 Pedagogical Implications for teachers ,learners and policymakers

Based on the findings of the study at hand, several pedagogical implications can be suggested to improve the oral proficiency of Algerian EFL students. It can help teachers ,learners and policymakers.

Differentiated Instruction: Teachers should recognize the varying levels of oral proficiency between 4th-year primary and 2nd-year middle school students and adapt their teaching strategies accordingly. This could involve using more interactive and engaging speaking activities for younger students and more advanced, conversation-based tasks for older students.

Focused Skill Development: Emphasis should be placed on developing specific aspects of oral proficiency, such as fluency, pronunciation, and comprehension, tailored to the age group. For primary school pupils, basic conversational skills and vocabulary building should be prioritized, while middle school pupils should be challenged with more complex language structures and communicative tasks.

Feedback and Assessment: Continuous and constructive feedback is crucial. Teachers should use the rubric of oral proficiency aspects (fluency, comprehension, communication, vocabulary, structure, and pronunciation) to provide targeted feedback that helps students improve specific areas of weakness.

For learners:

Early Exposure: Younger learners should be encouraged to engage in speaking activities from an early age. This early exposure will help build their confidence and competence in using the language orally

Active Participation: Learners should be motivated to actively participate in speaking exercises, group discussions, and language games. This active engagement will enhance their fluency and overall oral proficiency.

Self-Assessment: Encouraging students to self-assess their oral proficiency using the same rubric can help them become more aware of their strengths and areas for improvement, fostering a more proactive approach to language learning.

For policymakers:

Curriculum Design: Policymakers should consider integrating age-specific oral proficiency goals into the English language curriculum. This would ensure that teaching practices and assessment methods are aligned with the developmental stages of primary and middle school students.

Teacher Training: Investing in professional development for teachers, with a focus on effective methods for teaching speaking skills, is essential. Workshops and training sessions can equip teachers with the tools and strategies needed to enhance oral proficiency among students.

Resource Allocation: Adequate resources, such as interactive language labs, audio-visual materials, and access to native speakers, should be made available to support the development of oral proficiency. Policymakers should ensure that schools are well-equipped to provide a conducive environment for practicing spoken English.

By addressing these pedagogical implications, it is possible to enhance the oral proficiency of students at different educational stages, ensuring a more effective and comprehensive approach to English language learning in Algeria.

1.9 Recommendations for Further Research:

In light of the limitations of this study, future research could explore several areas to further knowledge of The Relationship between Age of Onset and Oral Proficiency in Primary and Middle School, including:

- This study was pupil-centered in which researchers investigated the pupils' oral proficiency, other research can focus on different angles of the factors that affect students' oral proficiency.
- Future research can be more teacher-centered, and focus on teachers' requirements and teaching needs to teach speaking in a suitable setting.
- Future research should also investigate the teaching-learning environment to develop suitable teachers' training programs.

- Studying the phenomena of language interference (in Arabic, French, and English) and how it affects students' academic performance must be given top priority.
- Future research should also examine the cognitive and psychological factors that influence language learning, such as the brain plasticity to absorb a language, memory, motivation, anxiety, and self-confidence, and how they interact with the age of onset.

Examine the Impact of Instructional Approaches: Compare different instructional approaches and their effectiveness in enhancing oral proficiency. For example, explore the impact of task-based learning, communicative language teaching, and immersive language experiences.

Conclusion

This chapter covered the practical side of the thesis, such as data collecting, and data analysis of the test using the rubric scoring. The findings indicate that MS pupils generally outperform PS pupils in most aspects of oral proficiency, except for pronunciation where primary school pupils perform better. These results reflect and support various aspects of the Critical Period Hypothesis, as well as other studies such as those by Saito (2015) and Muñoz (2006). These results emphasize how important it is to take age into account when creating efficient language-learning strategies for various age groups. This chapter also provides a series of recommendations and suggestions for educators and policymakers, emphasizing that the age at which students begin learning English significantly influences their oral proficiency. MS pupils generally outperform PS pupils in most aspects of oral proficiency.

General Conclusion

General Conclusion

This dissertation explores the relationship between age of onset and oral proficiency among primary and middle school EFL students. The study aims to explore the relationship between the age of onset and oral proficiency of 4th-year PS and 2nd-year MS pupils. Also, to compare the English oral proficiency of 4th-year PS and 2nd-year MS pupils. However, it is important to acknowledge that one of our research objectives was not fully achieved:

- To contrast the factors influencing language learning among pupils of different ages in 4th-year primary school and 2nd-year middle school.

This objective was not reached due to limitations in the scope of our study and the available data. Future research could address these objectives by conducting more comprehensive analyses and incorporating a wider range of data sources.

The study consists of two main chapters. The first chapter provides a comprehensive review of relevant literature, starting with critical perspectives on the age impact in SLA, emphasizing how young learners absorb languages differently compared to adults. Also, The Critical Period Hypothesis is discussed, highlighting how it influences the ease and success of learning a new language. Section two explores the development of academic oral proficiency in learners, focusing on fluency, accuracy, and communicative competence. It discusses learners' strategies for oral communication, including guessing, paraphrasing, and cooperative techniques. It also addresses common speaking difficulties in foreign language learning and recommends teaching techniques like group work, role play, problem-solving, and discussions to foster effective speaking skills.

The second chapter focuses on the research methodology, findings, discussion, limitations, and recommendations for further research. The conductors of the study apply a descriptive method, utilizing two tools: one for data collection (a standardized test administered to 4th-year PS and 2nd-year MS pupils and one for data analysis (a rubric to analyze the recordings in six scales: fluency, comprehension, communication, vocabulary, structure, and pronunciation).

After the analysis of the data collected from the oral proficiency test and the rubric , it becomes evident that the overall findings of this study indicate middle school pupils generally outperform primary school pupils across various aspects of oral proficiency. **First**, MS pupils generally perform better in fluency, providing more coherent and continuous self-introductions and more connected descriptions, which indicates their brain maturity. This improvement is further enhanced by the MS curriculum, which includes remedial work sessions including role plays and

educational games. **Second**, MS pupils have more balanced comprehension skills compared to PS pupils. Their prior knowledge and the five years of French language experience, associated with their advanced cognitive skills, facilitate their comprehension of the English language. This positive transfer of knowledge helps bridge the gap between the two languages, in contrast to PS students who have just one year of exposure to the French language. **For communication skills**, MS students are generally better communicators in English than PS students. The findings suggest that older learners who acquire the language later tend to have better oral communication skills and overall comprehensibility compared to younger learners. This is likely due to the Algerian MS curriculum, which focuses on the development of all four language skills Speaking, listening, reading, and writing allowing learners to read texts, acquire knowledge, and then use it in communicative situations. However, the PS curriculum mainly exposes pupils to spoken language. **Moreover**, MS students have a stronger vocabulary due to increased access to varied reading topics. PS students often switch to French when English is not clear, indicating gaps in their vocabulary, while MS students consistently use English. **Also**, PS students struggle with sentence structure, while MS students show balanced ability. They make fewer mistakes and produce more accurate sentences. **Finally**, Younger learners may have an advantage in pronunciation due to their greater articulatory plasticity, ability to discriminate phonetic information, and proficiency in identifying and producing phonemes. This leads to better phonetic acquisition and performance in PS students.

Similar to other studies, the current research faced several limitations due to the nature of working with young learners. Firstly, the individual oral proficiency assessment required significant time and energy from the researchers. Additionally, PS students often did not comprehend the test instructions on the first attempt. As a

result, the tester had to repeat the instructions multiple times and sometimes resorted to using the mother tongue for clarification. Another limitation of the study is the lack of a questionnaire or interviews for teachers. Gathering data from teachers would have provided valuable information about other factors that may influence students' oral proficiency, such as teaching methods, classroom dynamics, and extracurricular language exposure. Finally, the participants in this study primarily consisted of students from a single demographic background, and the school setting may not adequately represent the varied educational contexts found in different regions or among more diverse student groups. Despite these obstacles, the researchers have made significant efforts to improve the state of the study. The investigation's findings are expected to open up new research directions in the field of language acquisition and pedagogy, particularly concerning the impact of age of onset on oral proficiency. By highlighting the differences in language development between PS and MS pupils, this study emphasizes the need for teaching strategies that accommodate the unique needs of different age groups. Future research could explore the effectiveness of various instructional approaches and materials, the role of cognitive development in language learning, and the potential benefits of early versus later language exposure. Additionally, this study sets the stage for examining how multilingual contexts, such as the interplay between Arabic, French, and English in Algeria, influence oral proficiency and learning outcomes.

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Appendices

Appendix:01

Oral Proficiency Assessment

Part 1: Self-Introduction

Instructions: Please say your name, age, school, and one thing you like to do. You have one minute to talk about yourself.

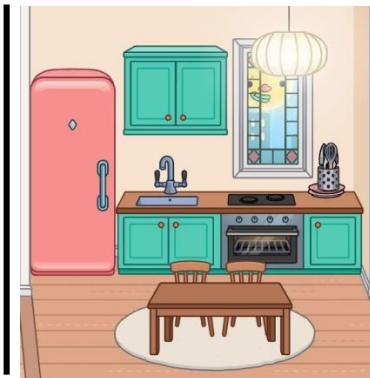
Sample: Hello, my name is Sara, I am (...) years old. I am a pupil at (...) Middle / Primary School. I like (...)

Part 2: Describing School Parts (2nd MS pupils)

Instructions: Look at the picture. Talk about what you see in the school. What rooms are there? You have two minutes to talk.



Part 2: Describing House Parts (4th PS pupils)





Sample: "This is our school. We have classrooms, a playground, and a canteen."

Sample: " This is our house. We have a bedroom, a dining room, and a kitchen."

Appendix:02

The Sample rubric scoring for Measuring Communicative Abilities: Extracted from

Farhady et al. (2001), Harris (1968), and Hughes (2003)

1. Fluency:

3- Speaks with occasional hesitations.

2- Speaks hesitantly and slowly because of rephrasing and searching for words.

1-Speaks in single words or short phrases, unable to make connected sentences.

2. Comprehension:

3-Understands simple spoken language with some repetition and clarification.

2- Understands simple sentences and words; requires repetitions, slower than normal speech.

1- Understands very little or no English.

3. Communication:

3- Initiates and sustains simple conversation on personal topics, with occasional errors.

2- Begins to communicate for personal and survival needs.

1- Almost unable to communicate. even personal informaion,

4. Vocabulary:

3- Uses a range of basic vocabulary words appropriately in context.

2- Uses limited vocabulary, often repeating the same words.

1- Has a very limited vocabulary, and relies heavily on single words.

5. Structure:

3- Uses simple sentence structures with some errors, but the meaning is generally clear.

2- Uses basic sentence structures, with frequent errors that may affect understanding.

1- Unable to form grammatically correct sentences.

6. Accent/Pronunciation:

3- Pronunciation is generally understandable, with accurate intonation and appropriate sentence stress.

2- Pronunciation may be unclear at times due to inconsistent intonation and sentence stress patterns.

1- Pronunciation lacks accurate intonation and sentence stress, making understanding difficult.

Appendix:03

Dr. Imane Cheriet from M'sila University

Dr. Souad Belgrimet from the University of Mostaganem

Dr. Nour El Houda Abdelhai from the University of Algiers

الجمهورية الجزائرية الديمقراطية الشعبية
وزارة التعليم العالي والبحث العلمي



الى السيد : مدير مدرسة المجاهد
عطاني عطاالله

كلية الآداب واللغات
قسم الآداب واللغة الإنجليزية

الرقم: 2024/22

الموضوع : التماس لإجراء تربص ميداني

نلتهمس نحن رئيس قسم الآداب واللغة الإنجليزية من سيادتكم الترخيص للطالبة المذكورة
أدناه لإجراء بحث بمؤسستكم وفق القوانين والنظم المعمول بها وحسب طبيعة الدراسة الميدانية.

للطالب (ة): رياحي ميساء

تخصص : لسانيات

المستوى: سنة ثانية ماستر

رقم التسجيل: 1735083478

وفي الأخير تقبلوا منا فائق الاحترام والتقدير

المسيلة في: 15 أفريل 2024.....

رئيس القسم



رئيس قسم الآداب و اللغة الإنجليزية

و بن يحي طارق

الجمهورية الجزائرية الديمقراطية الشعبية
وزارة التعليم العالي والبحث العلمي



الى السيد : مدير متوسطة الشهداء
رزيق

كلية الآداب واللغات
قسم الآداب واللغة الإنجليزية

الرقم: 2024/س.ا.

الموضوع : التماس لإجراء تربص ميداني

نلتبس نحن رئيس قسم الآداب واللغة الإنجليزية من سيادتكم الترخيص للطالبة المذكورة
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تخصص : لسانيات

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وفي الأخير تقبلوا منا فائق الاحترام والتقدير

المسيلة في: 15 أفريل 2024.....



رئيس قسم الآداب و اللغة الإنجليزية
و بن يحي طارق

ملخص

تهدف هذه الدراسة إلى استكشاف العلاقة بين سن البداية والكفاءة الشفوية لتلاميذ المدارس الابتدائية والمتوسطة الجزائريين الذين يتعلمون اللغة الإنجليزية كلغة أجنبية. لتحقيق ذلك ، تم استخدام نهج وصفي مختلط. تضمنت الدراسة تسجيل ردود 40 تلميذاً — 20 من السنة الرابعة من المدرسة الابتدائية و 20 من السنة الثانية من المدرسة الإعدادية — أثناء التعريف بأنفسهم ووصفهم للصور التي يحتوي عليها الاختبار. تم تحليل التسجيلات باستخدام قائمة مرجعية شاملة بناءً على المعايير المعمول بها من فرهادي وجافار بور وبيرجاندي (2001) وهيتون (1990) وهيز (2003) ومركز اختبار الأيلتس (2000) وأندرهيل (1987). قيمت هذه القائمة ستة جوانب رئيسية للكفاءة الشفوية: الطلاقة والفهم والتواصل والمفردات والبنية والنطق. أشارت النتائج إلى أن تلاميذ المدارس الإعدادية تفوقوا عمومًا على تلاميذ المدارس الابتدائية في معظم الجوانب، مما أظهر طلاقة وفهمًا ومهارات اتصال أفضل. تشير هذه النتائج إلى أن عمر البداية يؤثر على الكفاءة الشفوية، مما يسلط الضوء على الحاجة إلى استراتيجيات التدريس الخاصة بالعمر. وبالتالي ، لتحقيق تعلم اللغة الأمثل في بيئات اللغة الإنجليزية كلغة أجنبية ، يوصي هذا البحث بتطوير منهج مصمم خصيصًا لكل فئة عمرية.

الكلمات المفتاحية : عمر البداية، الكفاءة الشفوية، تعلم اللغة الإنجليزية كلغة أجنبية، تلاميذ الطور الابتدائي، تلاميذ الطور الإعدادي.