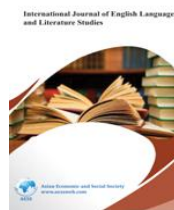




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THE RELATIONSHIP BETWEEN ATTENTION PROBLEMS AND LANGUAGE LEARNING DIFFICULTY

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ABSTRACT

Knowing that a student has attention deficits rather than weak language, for example, helps the teacher make decisions to better support the student. Without a handle on the root cause, choosing from among the numerous possible solutions is like flying blindfolded. So, it is first necessary to pinpoint the real culprits. To do so, 52 students all learning English at Kermanshah Azad University were randomly selected. A questionnaire (see Appendix A) was designed for the subjects to elicit their opinions as to the relationship between attention problems and language learning difficulty. Having finished with the questionnaire, to ensure the results, the subjects were asked some interview questions. The results showed that although it is taken for granted that language learning difficulty is to some extent due to the complexity of a given language system, with regard to responses to the questioner and subjects' opinions from the interview questions it can be claimed that attention problems can make learning a language or new materials difficult.

Keywords: Language learning, Attention, Problem.

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INTRODUCTION

Recently, there has been growing interest in whether difficulties in learning a language are due to the language itself or students' attention problems. Learning a language has turned out to be difficult for some people but not for the others. It may be due to language itself. Some languages having a complex structure are more difficult to learn than other languages. But language learning difficulties may be due to some other factors such as attention problems. When kids miss or don't understand information in class, it is often due to not paying adequate attention. Coming to attention involves being ready to attend to any communication in the classroom. The importance of this characteristic in the learning process cannot be overstated. Schmidt (1993) stated that if children do not orient their attention to important communications and task instructions from

teachers, over time this will greatly affect what they know and what they can do. Teachers need to understand both the importance of securing attention and the difficulty many children will have trying to come to attention (Hulstijn, 1994).

Stormont (2000) believed that most attention problems are caused by poor auditory or visual processing abilities: the person has difficulty staying focused for extended periods of time. Schmidt (1990) also claimed that consciousness, in the sense of awareness of the form of input at the level of "noticing", is necessary to subsequent second language acquisition (SLA). Dr Paul Hutchins (1990) stated that "to help children who have difficulty in learning and behavior, we need broad and realistic understanding of the balance between a child's resources and the demands on them. Specific learning disability (SLD) is identified when achievement in academic tasks is less than expected for presumed or assessed cognitive ability. Language learning disability (LLD) refers to learning disability which includes specific impairments (SLI) in the use or comprehension of language. , usually spoken but also written. Attention deficit disorder (ADD) is the term given to problems in cognitive or behavioral control, organization or 'fine tuning' which is not developmentally appropriate for the child's level of ability, for the situation and other obvious vulnerabilities in the child, family or the world."

However, the previously conducted research has just focused on the attention problems in learning a language. And little work has been done regarding whether difficulties in leaning a language are due to the language itself or students' attention problems. The purpose of this paper is to find out if language learning difficulties are related to the language itself or the attention problems.

Attention Problems

Whether children are able to quickly and successfully come to attention is greatly influenced by factors such as their

- Physical well-being (tired, hungry)
- Ability to understand directions
- Classroom environment including the
 - Temperature
 - Noise level
 - Seating arrangements
 - Number of children

Selective Attention

Selective attention involves the ability to direct attention to specific information in the environment (after coming to attention). To be successful in a class activity or during a transition, children need to selectively attend to what they are supposed to do. Sometimes, task instructions appear to be clearly provided for most children and they get started on their work without problems, whereas

children who did not attend to all or part of the instructions are typically lost. In the early primary grades, children are required to selectively attend to large amounts of verbal information as they cannot be expected to process significant amounts of written material. If children are not able to direct their attention to teachers' oral communications or to visual cues that help illustrate routines, tasks, or directions, then they will be at a great disadvantage. Further, without specific direction, children may not use the existing cues in the environment to help guide their attention. For example, a teacher could have components of the current activity illustrated with words or pictures on a large whiteboard, which are to be spontaneously followed by children; however, children with selective attention problems will need to be told explicitly to look at the board and use the information to direct their attention. As children get older, they need to be able to direct more attention to written forms. When children are required to read instructions, children with limited English proficiency and those who are behind in reading will have problems getting started because they may not know what to do.

Sustained Attention

For many children who are vulnerable, sustaining their attention in academic tasks is a significant problem. Sustaining attention to one task may be particularly difficult if the task is boring. For other children, sustained-attention problems may be due to

- The difficulty level of the task (too easy or difficult)
- Interest in the content
- The way the information is communicated to them (oral instructions, multiple steps)
- The requirements of the task (writing, oral retelling)
- The time of day (later in the day is more difficult)

Often problems sustaining attention are due to a poor match between children's characteristics and certain classroom settings. For example, if the task is language based and long, then children who have limited English proficiency may have great difficulty staying on task. If children with challenging behavior do not like a specific content area or activity, then they may have trouble staying on task. Children may also have difficulty staying interested in a task due to fatigue, hunger, anxiety about family issues, and/or other factors in their school environment. Classroom activities typically require all three types of attention—coming to attention, selective attention, and sustained attention—to some degree.

Statement of the Problem

Learning a foreign language is not an easy job. There are some problems facing students when learning a particular language. Whether these problems are because of a language itself or attention problems of students has been a topic of interest that still remains controversial.

Significance of the Study

Knowing that a student has attention deficits rather than weak language, for example, helps the teacher make decisions to better support the student. Without a handle on the root cause, choosing from among the numerous possible solutions is like flying blindfolded. Also, students have the right to know about their own minds, to better understand themselves. So in order to demystify students about learning, it is first necessary to pinpoint the real culprits.

Research Question

Is there any relationship between attention problems and language learning difficulty?

Hypothesis

In this study the following hypothesis will be tested:

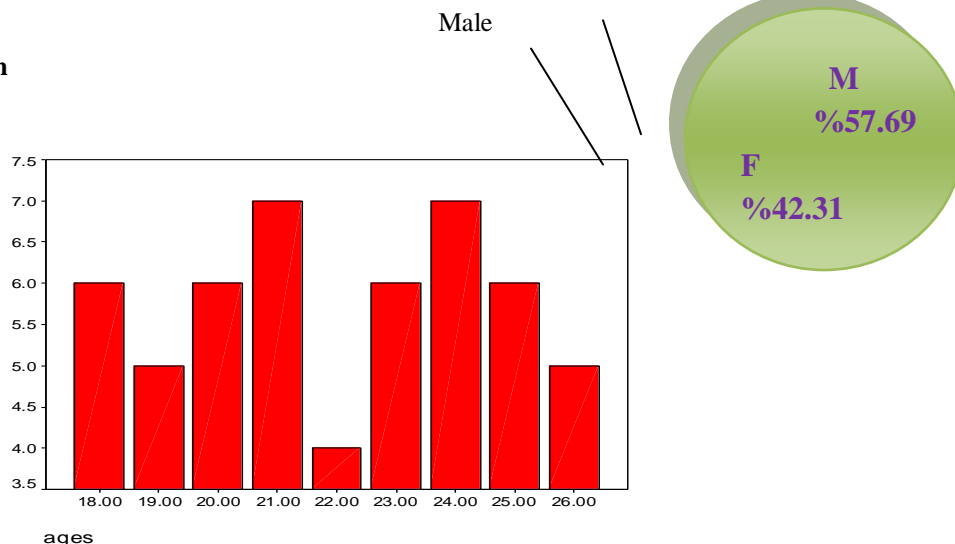
There is no relationship between attention problems and language learning difficulty.

METHODOLOGY

Participants

This study is conducted with 52 randomly selected university students, including 32 male and 20 female students, all studying English at Kermanshah Azad University. Their age ranged from 18 to 26, and they had different language learning experiences.

Graph



Instruments

In this study in order to collect data I used an oxfords questionnaire design entitled “the relationship between attention problems and language leaning difficulty” (shown in the appendix A of this paper). The first part of the questionnaire concerned bio-data information followed by instruction section. This questionnaire included 15 items, and for each item four choices were provided (strongly disagree, disagree, agree, strongly agree,). To make the interpretation easy, they

were codes as 1,2,3,4 respectively. The subjects could give their judgments on a scale ranked in four categories; from strongly disagree to strongly agree. Having finished with the questionnaire, to ensure the results, the subjects were asked some interview questions.

Procedure

First of all 52 randomly selected university students all studying English at Kermanshah Azad University were selected for the study. They included 32 male and 20 female students with their age ranging from 18 to 26. The questionnaire including 15 items was handed out among the subjects. In order to ensure its comprehension, I explained the directions and statements, also provided in writing, before they did it. I also observed the answering process in order to make sure that they do it seriously. They were told that their true response and sincere support would be greatly appreciated. It was pointed out that that only one response for each item should be given. They were also asked to read each item carefully and patiently. It was hard, though, to control all the variables of attention problems in such a small study by an application of a questionnaire. So I designed some interview questions to dig out the deep reasons. After they were finished with the questionnaire, I recorded their responses to the interview questions with a tape recorder.

Data Analysis

After the data were collected, it was time to analyze the subjects' responses to the questionnaire as well as the interview questions. Here I used a descriptive statistic to summarize the subjects' responses to the questionnaire. In order to ensure the results, I also listened to their responses to the interview questions and took note of them for the final analysis.

The Results

category	N	M	SD	Frequency Strongly disagree 1	Frequency disagree 2	Frequency agree 3	Frequency Strongly agree 4	percent Strongly disagree 1	percent disagree 2	percent agree 3	percent Strongly agree 4
Age	52	22	2.58	-	-	-	-	-	-	-	-
Sex											
M	30	-	-	-	-	-	-	-	-	-	-
F	22	-	-	-	-	-	-	-	-	-	-
Years of study	52	3.07	.81	-	-	-	-	-	-	-	-
Items											
1	52	-	-	0	8	32	12	0	15.38	61.53	23.7
2	52	-	-	4	28	20	0	7.69	53.84	38.46	0
3	52	-	-	0	4	14	34	0	7.69	26.92	65.38
4	52	-	-	2	6	10	34	3.84	11.53	19.23	65.38
5	52	-	-	28	16	8	0	53.84	30.76	15.38	0
6	52	-	-	4	16	32	0	7.69	30.76	61.53	0
7	52	-	-	0	2	16	34	0	3.84	30.76	65.38
8	52	-	-	0	2	30	20	0	3.84	57.69	38.46
9	52	-	-	2	8	32	10	3.84	15.38	61.53	19.23
10	52	-	-	18	28	6	0	34.61	53.84	11.53	0
11	52	-	-	30	20	0	2	57.69	38.46	0	3.84
12	52	-	-	0	0	18	34	0	0	34.61	65.38
13	52	-	-	4	8	26	14	7.69	15.38	50	26.92
14	52	-	-	2	0	10	40	3.84	0	19.23	76.92
15	52	-	-	12	16	20	4	23.7	30.76	38.46	7.69

The Results

After the data was collected I used a descriptive statistic to summarize the results. This study was conducted with 52 subjects with different ages. The mean for their age was 22, with the standard deviation of 2.58 and it was 3.07 for the number of years they were studying English with the standard deviation of .81. Male subjects constituted %57.69 and female ones constituted %42.31 of all subjects. As it is shown in table the frequency and percentage scales of the responses were computed. The most important attention problems that most of the participants strongly believed that could affect language learning were those of stress (%65.38) , the way information in communicated (%65.38), lack of interest (%76.92), fatigue (%65.38), and sickness (%65.380). With regard to items 1, 6, 8, 9, and 13 most of the participants agreed that Poor Auditory and visual processing (%61.53), time of the day (%61.53), noise (%61.53), personal problems (57.69), and difficulty level of a given task (%50) could make learning the new materials difficult. The kinds of attention problems that most of the students strongly disagreed that could cause language leaning difficulty were those of temperature (%53.84), seating arrangements (%57.69), and personal problems (%50). Most of the subjects also disagreed that the number of students (53.84) and hunger (53.84) make it difficult to learn the new materials. With regard to the last item, 50% of the participants agreed that complexity of a given language system can to some extent make it difficult to Learn.

DISCUSSION

Although it is taken for granted that language learning difficulty is to some extent due to the complexity of a given language, with regard to the results taken from the questioner and subjects' opinions from the interview questions it can be claimed that attention problems can make learning a language or new materials difficult. So, we can reject the null hypothesis and claim that language learning difficulty can be due to attention problems that learners have during the learning process. It should be mentioned that According to the views of Kermanshah Azad university students, participated in this study, not all attention problems cause language learning difficulty. Some attention problems have stronger effects than others. For example; stress, the way information in communicated to the learners, lack of interest, fatigue, and sickness had stronger effects than other problems such as Poor Auditory and visual processing, time of the day, personal problems and noise. And according to the subjects' opinions attention problems like temperature of the classroom, seating arrangements, the number of students, and hunger could not make the learning process difficult. Moreover; based on the recordings of the subjects responses to the interview questions, it was found- as most participants agreed- that most attention problems, but not all, can make learning new materials or a given language difficult.

CONCLUSION

To sum up, some languages having a complex structure are more difficult to learn than other languages. But language learning difficulties may be due to some other factors such as attention problems like those mentioned in this study. So, it is very important for language institutes, concerned organizations, managers and, teachers to find out those attention problems that interfere and hinder the learners from processing the new materials or a given language.

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Appendix A

The relationship between attention problems and language learning difficulty

Name ----- Age -----

Gender (circle one): M F

Years of studying English-----

Direction: We are interested in your experiences and attitudes. Please take a few minutes to complete this survey. Circle the number that corresponds to your degree of agreement with the statements listed on the left (strongly disagree = 1; disagree = 2; agree = 3; strongly agree = 4). Only circle one number for each item.

	1	2	3	4	St. disagree	Disagree	Agree	St. agree
1. Poor Auditory and visual processing affect learning a new language.	1	2	3	4				
2. Language learning difficulty is due to the number students in a language classroom.	1	2	3	4				
3. Being stressful makes it difficult for the learners to learn the new materials.	1	2	3	4				
4. Language learning difficulty is due to lack of interest in the content.	1	2	3	4				
5. Temperature of the classroom makes learning a given task difficult.	1	2	3	4				
6. Time of the day the materials are presented affects language learning.	1	2	3	4				
7. The way the information is communicated the students affect learning a new language.	1	2	3	4				
8. Personal problems make it difficult for the learners to learn the new materials.	1	2	3	4				
9. Noise level makes it difficult for the learners to learn new materials.	1	2	3	4				
10. Students who are hungry when coming to the class may find it difficult to learning the materials presented.	1	2	3	4				
11. Seating arrangement affects language learning.	1	2	3	4				
12. Fatigue is a factor which can make it difficult for students to learn a new language.	1	2	3	4				
13. Difficulty level of the task takes student's attention away from concentrating on the materials.	1	2	3	4				
14. Student who are not physically well being may find it difficult to learn the new materials.	1	2	3	4				
15. Difficulty learning a language is due to the complexity of the language itself.	1	2	3	4				

Appendix B

Name	Age	gender	Years of studying English
1	18	M	2
2	18	F	3
3	18	M	2
4	18	M	2
5	18	M	3
6	18	F	2
7	19	F	3
8	19	M	2
9	19	F	2
10	19	M	3
11	19	M	3
12	20	M	2
13	20	M	3
14	20	F	3
15	20	F	4
16	20	M	3
17	20	M	4
18	21	F	3
19	21	M	3
20	21	M	3
21	21	F	3
22	21	M	2
23	21	M	3
24	21	F	4
25	22	M	3
26	22	F	3

Name	Age	gender	Years of studying English
27	22	F	2
28	22	M	3
29	23	M	3
30	23	F	4
31	23	M	3
32	23	F	2
33	23	M	4
34	23	M	4
35	24	F	3
36	24	M	4
37	24	F	3
38	24	M	3
39	24	M	4
40	24	F	3
41	24	M	3
42	25	M	4
43	25	F	3
44	25	M	4
45	25	M	3
46	25	F	3
47	25	M	3
48	26	F	4
49	26	M	4
50	26	M	4
51	26	F	3
52	26	M	3

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