

Title : The Age Factor in Second Language Acquisition

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1.0 INTRODUCTION

1.1 Background of the study

This case study aims to find out the age of the highest proficiency to acquire second language. The process by which a person learns a language is sometimes called acquisition instead of learning. Language, a system of conventional spoken, manual, or written symbols by means of which human beings, as members of a social group and participants in its culture, express themselves. The functions of language include communication, the expression of identity, play, imaginative expression, and emotional release (Crystal, 2020). Hence, language plays a major role in human lives as we are actively socializing species. Our first language which could be addressed as mother tongue, native language or primary language is acquired during the early phase of childhood starting before the age of about 3 years. However, second language acquisition usually refers to any other language acquisition after the acquisition of the native language. There are many general factors that influence second language learning such as age, aptitude, intelligence, cognitive style, attitudes, motivation and personality (Ellis, 1985). In short, we can say that second language acquisition is influenced by many factors and age is one of the factors.

Age is one of the important factors which influence second language acquisition. In addition, age has strong influence on the level of native language acquisition and thus has additional meaning for the study process. Multiple researches have been conducted in order to trace the relations between the age and second language acquisition. All these studies agree that age has an extremely important influence on language learning and that different researches in this field may greatly contribute to the theory and practice of second language acquisition. Many authors such as Ellis (2008), Larsen-Freeman (2008) and Mayberry and Lock (2003) state that younger learners are more successful in language acquisition than aged ones. The interconnection between age and second language acquisition is evident and it is necessary to trace peculiarities of this connection.

1.2 Objectives of the study

- i. To study the age of the highest proficiency to acquire second language
- ii. To identify the external factors that affected the acquisition of second language which might be associated with age as well
- iii. To find out the overall mastery level of acquired second language

2.0 LITERATURE REVIEW

In this chapter, the theoretical framework of the study is defined. As we all know, second language acquisition is the stage in which a person obtains another language apart from its mother tongue. Hence, different person acquires it in a different approach from one another depending on each individual. Commonly, it is somewhat correlated to the age factor that would probably influence the actual proportion of acquisition. For that reason, an adequate number of researches have shown some results in determining this study.

2.1 Critical Period Hypothesis and SLA

Penfield & Roberts (1959), two neurobiologists, first put forward the notion of the critical period hypothesis, which was primarily derived from biology. The Critical Period Hypothesis (CPH) refers to a particular time of human life that allows people to acquire a language in a natural environment faster and easier without any outside intervention and formal instruction (Fromkin, Rodman, & Hyams, 1983). Later, a theory called, Biological Foundations of Language, developed by Lenneberg (1967), suggested that natural language acquisition “by mere exposure” could only take place during a critical period, lasting from about age two to puberty. The conclusion that Penfield and Roberts made was that after the ninth year or Critical Period, the human brain becomes progressively stiff and rigid for learning languages (Singleton, 2005). Contrastingly, Lenneberg (1967), suggested puberty was the offset point for the critical period and further explained: “the incidence of “language-learning-blocks” rapidly increases”, “foreign languages have to be learned through a conscious and laboured effort”, and “foreign accents cannot be overcome easily” (p. 176). Nevertheless, the bottom line is that if the hypothesis is true, then the Critical Period Hypothesis (CPH) must have a crucial role to play in the attainment of a second language as well.

2.2 Critical Period for Second Language Acquisition

Based on the article “The Critical Period for Language Acquisition: Evidence from Second Language Learning”, by Catherine E. Snow and Marian Hoefnagel-Hoihle found that a few studies

using the second approach have shown that older children are faster than younger children in acquiring second language morphology and syntax (ErvinTripp 1974; Fathman 1975, Ekstrand) and listening comprehension (Asher & Price 1967). Studies of age differences in the acquisition of second language pronunciation have produced conflicting results. Ekstrand and Snow and Hoefnagel-Hijhle (1978) found better pronunciation in older subjects, whereas Fathman (1975) and Seliger, Krashen, and Ladefoged (1975) found a negative effect of age. However, Seliger et al. did report on a few postpubertal second language learners who had achieved accentless pronunciation in their second language, as well as some cases of prepubertal learners who maintained foreign accents. As a result, we can say that it is not necessarily accurate to point the CPH precisely as totally acceptable in responsible for the second language acquisition. Nonetheless, the studies are still reliable just that it could not address the exact result.

2.3 Adult Second Language Acquisition

Next, Deng and Zou (2016) analyzed whether the adults' second language acquisition is easy or not from the perspective of children's native language acquisition. This study uses relevant theories to explore on this study. Deng and Zou (2016) found that adults acquire second language easily by the aspect of cognitive level, logical thinking and self-monitoring ability follow by adults acquire second language difficulty by the aspect of age, environment, device, mode and motivation. The aspect of age in this study relates to the critical period of language acquisition. Krashen (1982) stated that after puberty, language acquisition is not likely to naturally acquired only through conscious learning and working hard.

2.4 Maturation Approaches

Maturation approaches to language acquisition assume that the observed age effects in second language acquisition are temporally aligned with maturation to biological changes affecting the human language acquisition capacity. Long (1990, 2005) and Meisel (2007) assume that there is a biological 'window of opportunity' for reaching native-like competence in a language that closes throughout or after (brain) maturation, leading to a sharp decline in success around the end of the critical period and the attainment of native-like competence to be impossible.

3.0 METHODOLOGY

This chapter discusses the research approach, data collection method, justification of the method and the limitation of the adopted approach.

3.1 Research Design

This research was conducted to study whether the proficiency for second language acquisition is biologically linked to age or not. As Critical Period Hypothesis has been the subject of a long-standing debate in linguistics, this study aims to assess the most proficient age for second language acquisition by acquiring quantitative data based on the experiences of adolescents. The data acquired in this study are primary data that we collected on our own and applied descriptive statistics, thus all the data are presented in charts form. Due to current circumstances, we approach this research through a survey in which the questions are designed to gain the necessary data, the age-related ones are the key questions of the survey. The rest of the questions are simply added to consider the possible external factors that might affect the respondents' second language acquisition. The survey was carried out via Google Form which consisted of 9 multiple choice questions, 2 fill in the blank questions and 2 tick boxes questions. The aim was to gain at least 100 respondents in the span of 3 days from 22nd June to 25th June. The demographic of this study ranged from age 16 to 25. The data are gained through non-probability sampling as we spread the surveys to our friends and families, therefore it is not suitable to produce generalized results.

3.2 Justification of The Method

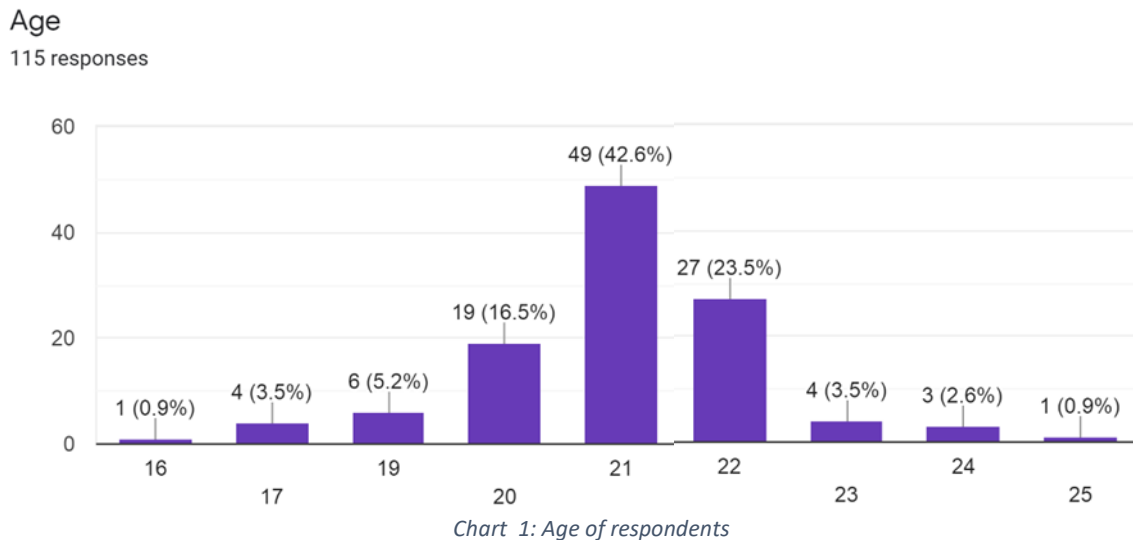
The data collection method we utilized is the most convenient one to gain a large number of respondents without taking too much time.

3.3 Limitation of The Method

The method that we employ is severely limited to truly reach our objective as this method only inquires the respondents' experiences of SLA and cannot measure the rate of acquisition of their SLA during their childhood. Therefore, the result from our method would leave much to be desired due to its inaccuracies and lack of other empirical details.

4.0 FINDINGS AND DISCUSSION

This chapter describes our findings and overall discussions on the data. A total of 115 respondents have participated in our survey ranging from age 16 to 25.



The majority of the respondents are 21 years old with a number of 49 respondents (42.6%). The survey was limited to 25 years old and below to reduce the external factors such as lack of time as most people beyond that age are already involved in the working environment. On top of that, it is likely that they have already started building family and relationships resulting in almost zero opportunity for them to commit to their SLA. Lenneberg (1967) stated that the scope age of the critical period stretched from age 2 to puberty at which he posits at age 14. Therefore, we decided that demographics of 16 to 25 years old is the best range to for our survey as their cognitive thinking have already matured from the said period and unlikely to have little time and opportunity to fully acquire their second language as most of them are still studying in their educational institution.

Gender
115 responses

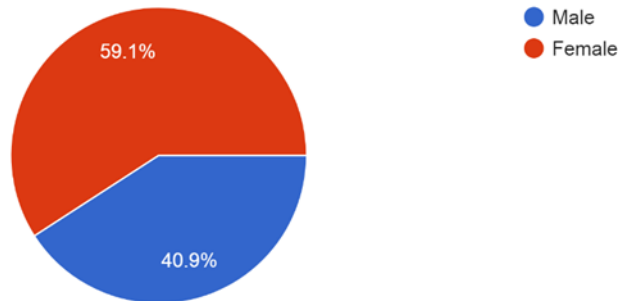


Chart 2: Gender of respondents

The majority of respondents are female with a percentage of 59.1% while the male percentage 40.9%, almost 3:1 ratio. This data is only for demographic purposes. While it is a fact that gender also plays a role in language acquisition, the scope of this study is only limited to age-related factors in SLA.

What is your second language?
115 responses

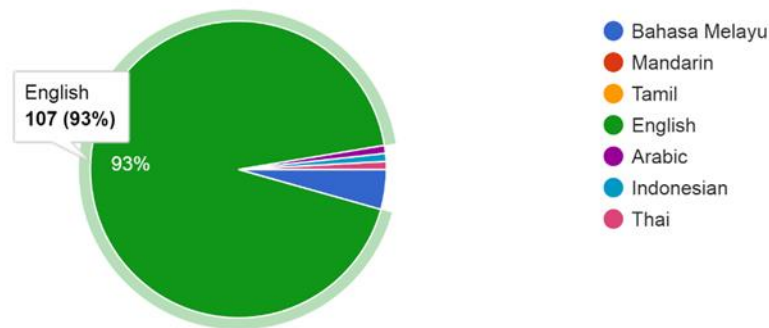


Chart 3: Second language of choice

107 out of 115 (93%) respondents chose English as their second language, The majority result are most likely due to the fundamental implementation of English subjects in elementary schools. The result was just as we expected.

When did you start to learn or acquire your second language?

115 responses

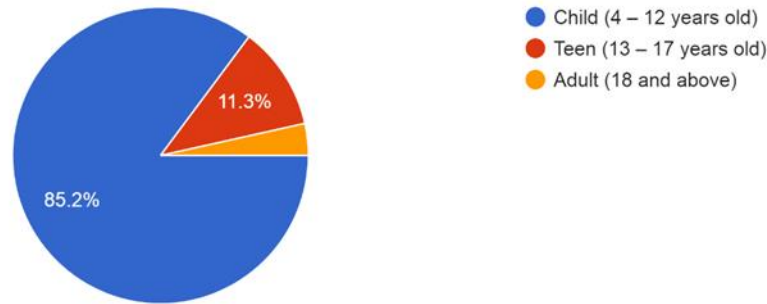


Chart 4: The starting point of respondents' SLA

Most of the respondents learn or acquire their L2 during their childhood period (85.2%), followed by teenage period (11.3%) and adulthood (3.5%). This is one of the key data for our study as the starting point of learning the L2 could heavily affect said acquisition. According to Lenneberg (1967), adolescents or adults who just started to learn L2 would fail to achieve fluency while those who are exposed at an early age have the potential to achieve high proficiency to that of a native speaker. The age at which SLA begins is reliably the strongest predictor of ultimate attainment. (David, 1992, p.83). While they may not even approach to native-like levels, it is undeniable that exposure during younger age resulted in a high rate of acquisition. However, decrement in performance or even discontinuity of their SLA is possible and cannot be predicted thereafter. On top of that, varying possibilities of experiential factors that are related to age could potentially affect their acquisition as well.

Education could be one of the experiential factors, where they only started learning their second language through their schools. If their SLA only occurs in the learning environment in school and rarely practiced outside of it, there could be a significant decrement in their performance once they graduated from the institutions. The level of education for the second language they received plays an important part in determining the end state of their SLA. The further they study their second language, the higher the end state can be achieved. Nevertheless, the late learners such as teens and adults have the capability to gain an advantage in understanding

grammar rules and sentence expression. When it comes to phonological performance, they often struggle more than children as addressed by Singleton and Ryan (1989).

How often do you speak your second language with your parents/close ones?
115 responses

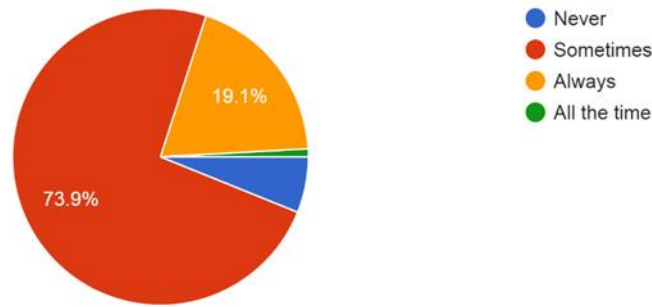


Chart 5: Frequency of L2 speech with parents/close ones

73.9% of the respondents sometimes speak their second language to their parents while 19.1% of them always practice them. Those who often speak with their second language to their parents most likely have already been put into practice at an early age and could potentially achieve native-likeness.

Which skill(s) have you acquired for your second language?

115 responses

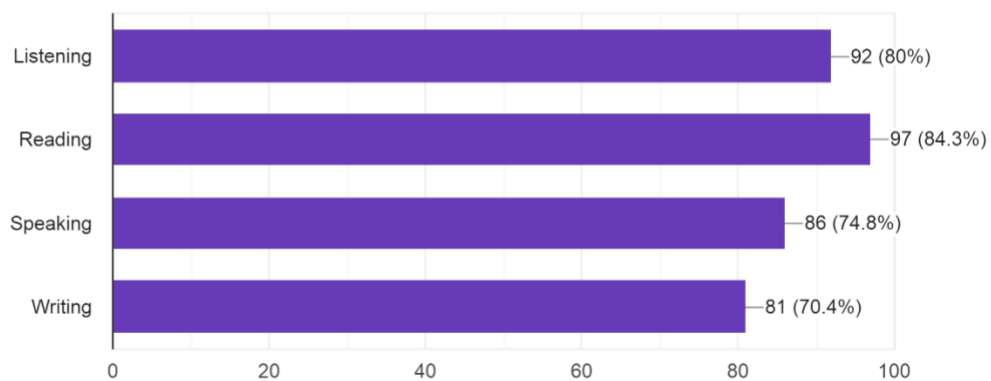


Chart 6: Skills acquired for L2

Generally, above 80% of the respondents have achieved all the basic skills for their SLA. It could be inferred that they attained these basics since elementary schools for those who took English as their L2.

Overall, what is your current mastery level of your second language?

115 responses

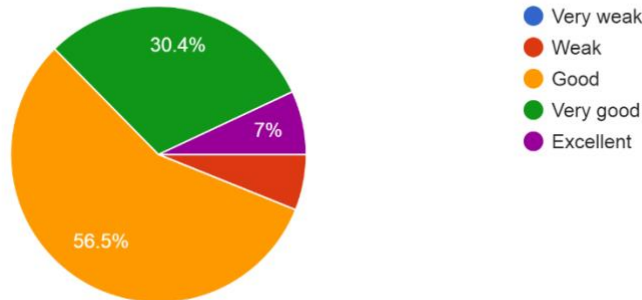


Chart 7: Current mastery level of L2

Overall, almost 96.5% of the respondents place their mastery level at intermediate or higher level. As English is the most chosen second language, those who posit themselves at an intermediate level and above may have received a good education for their English and have already started since elementary level. Add to the fact that most respondents (85.2%) have already started their SLA during childhood, suggests that they may already reach the end state.

What is your main motivation for acquiring your second language?

115 responses

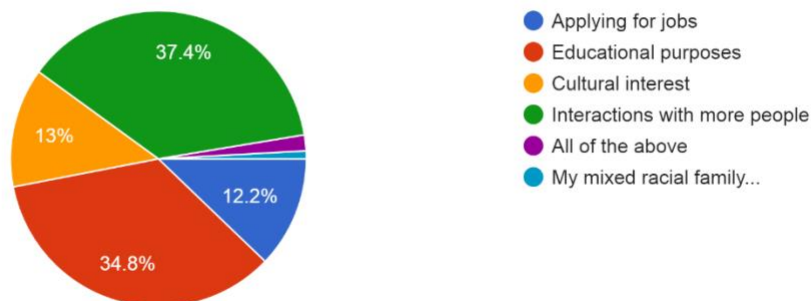


Chart 8: Main motivation for SLA

It is unexpected that there is a larger percentage of the respondents chose “interactions with more people” than those who chose “educational purposes”. The smallest minority of them however does not seem to understand the question so they made and chose an alternative “all of the above”. This was not an option in our survey as we want to assess the main motivation of the respondents, meaning only one choice can be made.

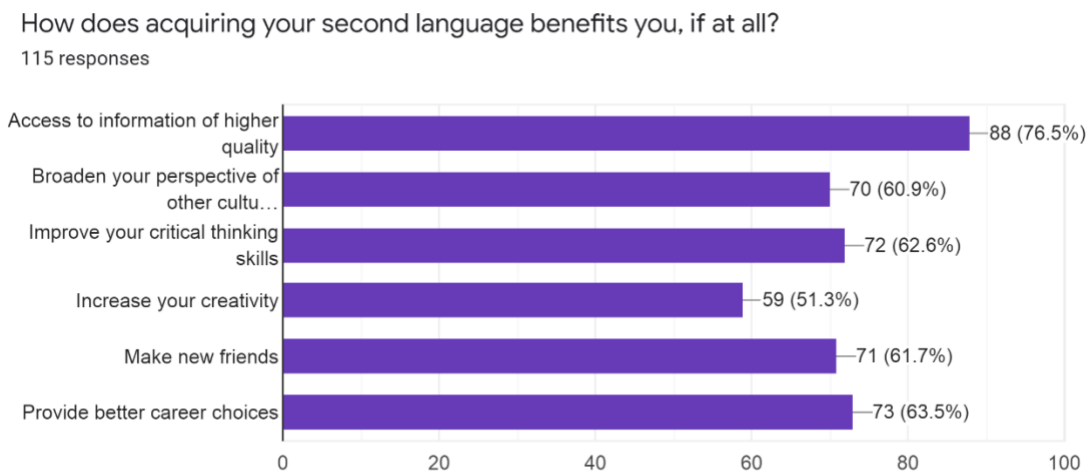


Chart 9: Benefits of SLA

This result is also from one of the other tick box questions, multiple choices can be made and it is the only question that is skippable if the respondent chose to do so. Apparently, most of the respondents are aware of the benefits of mastering their L2. Access to information of higher quality gained the most tick is reasonable since nearly all academic studies are widely available in English.

What is the biggest challenge in acquiring your second language?

115 responses



Chart 10: Biggest challenge in SLA

Do you still practice your second language?

115 responses

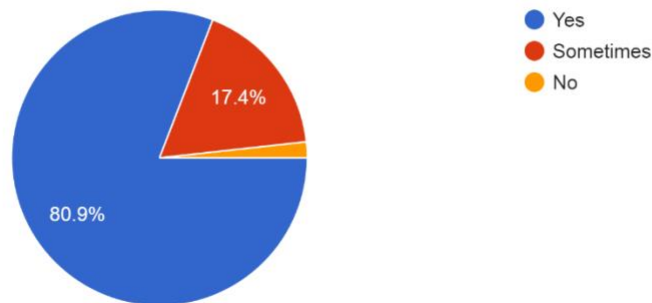


Chart 11: Practicality of L2

80.9% of the respondents still practice their second language while 17.4% of them only practice occasionally. Since most of the respondents' second language is English and still involved in high educational institutions, it is expected for them to exercise the language regularly.

Based on your own experience, at which stage of your life you had the easiest time learning your second language?

115 responses

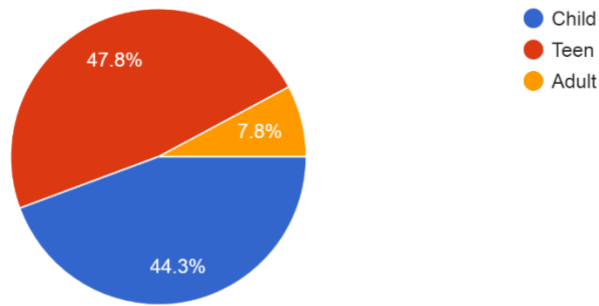


Chart 12: Easiest time to learn L2

47.8% of the respondents think they had the easiest time to learn their second language during teenager while 44.3% of them had it easy during childhood. Only 7.8% think they can their second language better during adulthood. This result was certainly not expected when it is viewed from the CPH standpoint as it is stated that language acquisition is much more difficult after puberty. After we assess the reasons that were given to the last question, it seems most of their SLA during teens are significantly affected by their environments and motivations. During secondary school, they practiced their L2 mostly English more extensively with their friends and their consensus is that having proficient English is very helpful to get through education and landing their desired career choices. With higher cognitive skills, it is plausible that they acquire English better during teenager compared to their childhood when they are driven with these motivations and learning environment. Those who think they learn better during childhood, gave reasons that correlate with CPH, such as the higher rate of acquisition and able to accept new knowledge easily.

5.0 CONCLUSION

. In this case, English is the current lingua franca hence it is the most chosen second language. Accordingly, there are numerous benefits of acquiring this language especially in educational institutions where the finest studies are substantially available in English. Not to mention, the mastery of the language will give an advantage in acquiring the desired career as employers are always looking for proficient English speaker quality for their future employees. Add to the fact that the utilization of the internet has been widespread since a decade ago and the language is used extensively in the virtual world serves as a stepping stone to those who are trying to improve their English.

Constant exposure to the language built an awareness of the importance of acquiring the language. Those who might not receive large exposure during their childhood mayhap practice their English mostly inside their classroom. In addition, the internet is not widely used before the 2010s hence the exposure is much smaller than the current times. Despite the small exposure, it is likely that they already have the basics skills of reading, listening, speaking and writing in the language. Upon reaching the teen period, the influence of their friends boosted their utilization of the language in their conversations and writings. Along with the heightened cognitive level, logical thinking skills and self-monitoring ability, they are able to push themselves to acquire the language easily during teenage.

As a conclusion, the age of the highest proficiency in acquiring L2 posits between childhood to teenage as these are the periods where most people commit to their studies and have larger free time than adults .While it is undeniable that the age factor plays a huge role in SLA, other factors such as social, environment and motivations each plays an equally large role as well especially in the combinations of all those factors.

6.0 APPENDIX

The Age Factor in Second Language Acquisition (SLA)

Hello there! We are students of Universiti Sultan Zainal Abidin (UniSZA) from Bachelor of English with Communication (BEN) are conducting a survey for our case study under the course, Introduction to Psycholinguistic (BIK20803).

The purpose of this questionnaire is to assess how age affects second language acquisition (SLA). Your responses are greatly appreciated and we would like to thank you in advance for your cooperations.

Age *

Short-answer text

Gender *

Male

Female

What is your second language? *

Bahasa Melayu

Mandarin

Tamil

English

Arabic

Other...

When did you start to learn or acquire your second language? *

- Child (4 – 12 years old)
- Teen (13 – 17 years old)
- Adult (18 and above)

How often do you speak your second language with your parents/close ones? *

- Never
- Sometimes
- Always
- All the time

Which skill(s) have you acquired for your second language? *

- Listening
- Reading
- Speaking
- Writing

Overall, what is your current mastery level of your second language? *

- Very weak
- Weak

Overall, what is your current mastery level of your second language? *

- Very weak
- Weak
- Good
- Very good
- Excellent

What is your main motivation for acquiring your second language? *

- Applying for jobs
- Educational purposes
- Cultural interest
- Interactions with more people
- Other...

How does acquiring your second language benefits you, if at all?

- Access to information of higher quality
- Broaden your perspective of other cultures
- Improve your critical thinking skills
- Increase your creativity
- Make new friends
- Provide better career choices
- Other...

What is the biggest challenge in acquiring your second language? *

- Fear of failure
- Fear of prejudice from surrounding people
- Limited learning environments
- Lack of time and opportunities
- Lack of guidance and education
- Native language influences (ex: entirely different word order)
- Other...

Do you still practice your second language? *

- Yes
- Sometimes
- No

Based on your own experience, at which stage of your life you had the easiest time learning your * second language?

- Child
- Teen
- Adult

Why is that? State the reason(s).

Long-answer text

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