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IS CRITICAL PERIOD HYPOTHESIS LINKED TO AGE?

Saydasheva Angelina Anvarovna
Adjunct Professor, INHA University in Tashkent

Abstract
This work presents a complete investigation of the Critical Period Hypothesis (CPH) in second language acquisition (SLA) by means of empirical evidence on age-related language learning as well as theoretical underpinnings. Starting with Lenneberg's 1967 and Penfield and Roberts's 1959 basic studies, which hold that adolescence is the last stage to acquire a language since neurological changes in the brain define adolescence, "Genie" and "Isabelle" help to show the impact of early exposure—or lack thereof. Research by Patkowski (1980), Johnson and Newport (1989), and DeKeyser (2000) then takes front stage. These studies all show greater proof that younger children than adults are more readily acquiring native-like ability. Still, research by Snow, Bialystok, Krashen, and others highlight the advantages of older students—including sharpening of analytical and cognitive abilities. Though the argument is still under development, the author gets to the conclusion that several learner traits—including motivation, instructional tactics, and social context—are rather important. Teachers must thus design suitable learning environments that maximize language development independent of the developmental level of a student.

Keywords: Critical Period Hypothesis (CPH), Second Language Acquisition (SLA), Target Language (TL), Foreign Language Learning (FL), lateralization, puberty.

Introduction

By large-scale study on the Critical Period Hypothesis (CPH), I firmly believe that determining The CPH competence constitutes one of the main goals of second language acquisition (SLA) as there has been much debate if it is linked to age or not. In order to teach a target language (TL) successfully, it is an integral part to determine different learning variables and the Critical Period Hypothesis is not an exception here. Currently, the demand in foreign language learning (FL) is increasing each year due to globalization, for this reason, much research has been conducted when to start learning an FL. According to Lenneberg (1967), children before their puberty age are much better at learning a second language (L2) rather than adults since a child's brain is prepossessed to success. As per Krashen, Sferlazza, Feldman, and Fathman (1976) children and adults acquire L2 in different ways, and a child's language acquisition may be attained between the ages of two and puberty. However, other researchers Harley and Wang (1997) proposed that adult learners are able to make rapid progress in attaining grammar and lexicon of a second language due to better cognitive development and higher analytical skills, saying that mature students can achieve a great proficiency in an FL. Thus, this article aims to redefine the CPH to clarify the situation in the practices of modern language teaching.

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Many people believe that it is better to learn an FL at an early age, and the ideas suggested by Penfield and Roberts (1959), and Lenneberg (1967) can prove that. Penfield and Roberts (1959) point out that the children before the age of nine can master up to three languages due to neurological mechanisms that promote a reflex in the brain to use the languages unconsciously and effortlessly. Also, Lenneberg (1967) points out that the language acquisition coincides with the lateralization process which dominates the left hemisphere of the child's brain, which in turn has a function responsible for language learning, thus proposing that the lateralization process is completed after puberty period, meaning that people find it difficult to acquire the language after the age of 13.

The research on children suffering from brain impairment before puberty can recuperate and develop language skills. However, mature people are usually unable to recover their verbal abilities [Penfield and Roberts, 1959; Lenneberg, 1967].

Good examples here are famous cases of "Genie" and "Isabelle". Genie suffered from her father's cruelty and mistreat, being locked and tied to a chair, and deprived of society. Till the age of thirteen, she did not use any language. After she had been found, she went through rehabilitation.

However, there still was a lack of linguistic skills. The second case was "Isabelle" who was living with her deaf-and-dumb mother and did not use any language till the age of six and a half (pre-pubescent). In contradiction to Genie, after specialist training, she acquired language abilities. These examples show that savage children who are not nurtured in the monolingual environment or multilingual communities are lacking SLA competence and proving that a child can achieve language competence before the puberty period proving a famous saying "the younger, the better" [Newport & Johnson, 1989].

Mark Patkowski (1980) also supports the hypothesis of a critical period. In his study, he recorded immigrants to the United States of America who had a degree and had lived in America for five years. All of them had started learning English at different ages. Along with immigrants, Patkowski registered the colloquial language of native Americans, who also possessed a university degree. His research showed that the L2 learners who had started to learn a language before puberty or in puberty were indistinguishable from native speakers, while those who had started to learn English after-puberty period, did not do well in language learning. Thus, Patkowski proved the connection between early age and language learning, supporting the Critical Period Hypothesis.

Further study to maintain the CPH was conducted by Jacqueline Johnson and Elissa Newport (1990). They recorded Chinese and Korean speakers who had been students of American University for three years and had started learning English at various ages. And as Patkowski (1980), they also recorded native speakers for comparison. In the research, the participants' task was aimed to judge the sentences, trying to find grammatical mistakes. After the data were collected, they found out that the students who had started learning L2 between the ages of three and fifteen were much better at recognizing the mistakes than those who had begun mastering the language after the age of seventeen.

A more recent scholar approves the CPH as well. Robert DeKeyser (2000) conducted updated research of Johnson and Newport's study, having examined Hungarian immigrants to the USA. He applied the second language aptitude test along with a grammar test. He discovered that children were more successful in the grammar tests rather than adults. However, he also points out that the aptitude test result was higher for adults, which related to their personal success. It means that children and adults acquire the language in different ways.

Nonetheless, the success of language learning does not always depend on age since different learning variables such as family background, culture and social context should be taken into account. Krashen, Sferlazza, Feldman, and Fathman (1976) indicate that while comparing children and adults, both found learning grammar hard or easy since they had similar difficulty orderings, and puberty does not play a major role here.

Further study of Krashen, Long, and Scarcella (1979) supports the idea that not "the younger the better", but "the older the better", since younger learners are slow learners, whereas older students are faster learners because of their better mental skills. Snow and Hoefnagel-Hohle (1978) proposed the idea that older learners learn a second language faster than pre-teenagers or teenagers. They carried out research in Holland measuring the progress of English speakers learning Dutch as an L2.

They evaluated different aspects of the language, namely pronunciation, grammar, translation, vocabulary, and storytelling.

After the year of the study, adolescents and adults learned much faster than children. On top of that, Snow (1983) suggests that mature learners are better learners as they are more superior at most other spheres compared with children. The main reason is the inequality of cognitive development between children and adults. Mature language learners are more experienced in language as well as they have more background knowledge than children.

Bialystok (1997) conducted the other study which also supports the idea of older learners' success in SLA. He carried out research with Chinese learners who immigrated to Canada and learned English as an L2 at various ages. He indicates that those who started learning English after the age of fifteen did better than pre-puberty learners and this was due to the rate of learning, not the ultimate-attainment, which is usually found in children.

After an in-depth analysis of the CPH and acquiring the second language either at home or abroad, it is possible to start learning the language after the age of twelve, and to be successful in it provided the learners have a good language environment and right teaching methods (SHU, 2004).

To conclude, a number of linguists and scholars have conducted considerable studies in line with the Critical Period Hypothesis (CPH), including Penfield and Roberts (1959), Lenneberg (1967), Patkowski (1980), Johnson and Newport (1989), and DeKeyser (2000). Their findings show that faster language processing and more natural mastery than in an adult's left hemisphere enable the constant lateralization of the left hemisphere of a youngster. Usually, there is two to thirteen years of window of opportunity for learning second languages (L2). Other studies questioned the assumption that children had a general advantage; Krashen, Sferlazza, Feldman, and Fathman (1976); Krashen, Long, and Scarcella (1979); Snow and

Hoefnagel-Hohle (1978); Snow (1983); Bialystok (1997); and SHU (2004). Their findings reveal that due of their higher cognitive maturity, analytical ability, and more extensive life experience, adults often improve swiftly in learning an L2 and often surpass younger learners in many respects. These several points of view highlight the complexity of age-related issues concerning language development. Personal learner elements such as cultural background, social environment, motivation, and target language exposure significantly affected learning outcomes. This complexity makes it difficult to project how aging by itself could affect language abilities. Therefore, teachers have enormous responsibility for creating a dynamic, motivating environment that satisfies numerous needs of their pupils and makes use of the capacities of many age groups. By adopting various instructional strategies and encouraging frequent practice, teachers can help students—whether they are adults or children—achieve maximum language proficiency, therefore transcending current debates on the CPH.

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