

CRITICAL PERIOD HYPOTHESIS AND SECOND LANGUAGE ACQUISITION, CONTEMPORARY PERSPECTIVES

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ABSTRACT: *The Critical Period Hypothesis aims to examine the significant of the age factor in second language acquisition. Over the past few decades, scholars carried out a numerous study to test the validity of the hypothesis. This article looks into the relationship between age and second language acquisition, relying on the critical period hypothesis*

KEYWORDS: The Critical Period Hypothesis, native-like proficiency, second language acquisition

INTRODUCTION

The acquisition of language for children has been compared to the development of biological functions in antecedent research studies. Chomsky, the famous linguist, maintains that language develops in the child in the way other biological functions develop; thus the ability to learn a language is similar to walking the ability to learn a language in children is a paramount element in understanding the language itself, and associated languages that the child grows up and learns (Lightbown, Spada, Ranta, & Rand, 1999). Optically investigating how a child grows, one will note that many of the things the child learns are autodidactic. For example, a child will feel the urge to commence crawling without the mother exhibiting him/her how to crawl. After a while, the child will feel the urge to stand and know that since he /she has never stood before, he /she requires help. Towards this end, the child will depend on furniture and other auxiliary material to stand gradually the child will commence walking. It is consequential to point out that not once is the child edified to crawl or stand or walk. According to Roberts (2014), the environment is critical to both the physical and phrenic magnification of a child. The same can be applied to learning a language. A child is not edified to verbalize. However, in a conducive environment, the child will learn a few first words and utilize them. The process of acquisition of the language is, thus, autodidactic. Parents only edify opportune pronunciation and at times congruous utilization of complex words. By reviewing few recent linguists' perspectives, this article looks into the relationship between age and second language acquisition, relying on the critical period hypothesis which suggests that adults are slower learners at learning a second language as compared to children.

Second Language Acquisition

According to Vanhove (2013) 40% of the world population can only speak one language. The premise purports that 60% of the world population can speak more than one language. The

acquisition of a second and even third language is more rapid now than ever. Roberts (2014) argues that it is natural for human beings in this day and age to feel the urge to learn a second language. the researcher (2014) maintains that the complexity of learning a second language are pegged on the linguistic roots of the first language. For individuals that have fully understood their first language, introducing a language that has more complex or different word roots will be difficult. This brings in the argument of native-like proficiency in the use of the second language. However, master classes and even technology have been used to try and teach many individuals second languages.

In the same breath, different countries have introduced a compulsory second language in their schools to ascertain their citizens can communicate with the more sizably voluminous world. For example, many African countries have English or French as their official languages. The premise denotes that the language is utilized in any official capacity in any organization or company in that country. Such denizens are bilingual as they have their native language, and they, also, have English or French. Mohades et al. (2014) argue that many other countries, especially in the third world, utilize more than two languages. The premise is true as many of the communities there have native languages as opposed to just one prevalent national language.

Additionally, globalization plays a key role in second language acquisition. As verbalized, currently, it is more facile for people to peregrinate from one place to another, thus, the desideratum to learn a second language. Mohades et al. (2014) expound that a majority of the people that relocate to a different country customarily do so due to work requisites. Whereas it would be infeasible for such individuals to learn all the ethnic languages in a country, the majority will learn the official country language. For instance, if a Chinese is relocating to Canada, he / she will have to learn English or French as opposed to the indigenous or native languages. Globalization has, thus, made it more facile for people to peregrinate to their desired countries as trade and businesses have been made more simplified. Foreigners now have a more facile time investing in other countries. For such individuals to get their money's worth, they have to learn the language of their country of interest.

Statistically, more of the world population is open to learning more than one language. In fact, 43% of the world's population can speak two languages while 13% can speak more than two languages. Despite the urge to learn second languages, adults often find it much more arduous to decipher and acquire verbally expressed extra languages. Various theories have been established on why adults have a more arduous time acquiring second languages. Abutalebi, Cappa, & Perani (2001) analyzed the first language barrier, arguing that the structure of the first language often affects the ability to learn a second language. For instance, Chinese and Arabs have been identified as having much arduousness in learning English as their second language. However, this is only true of adults, and not children. Chinese and Arabic children have the same chance and likelihood of learning English as French children. The article will now look into the issue of age and second language acquisition.

Scholars have also analyzed native-like proficiency in the use of second languages (Harley & Wang, 1997; Moyer, 2004). Whereas some argue that second language speakers cannot have native-like proficiency, some argue that people who learn the second language as children, can attain native-like proficiency of the same. The argument entails that children are better equipped to learn a second language fully, as compared to adults. Birdsong (1999) reported that the claim in all current versions of the critical period hypothesis indicate that native-like attainment cannot be obtained if the start of second language acquisition is delayed past a certain critical age. One can argue that the child's brain is not "overwhelmed" by the structure of the first language that would otherwise interfere with acquisition of the second language. The next section of the article will look into some of the evidences presented in the academic field on the relationship between age and second language acquisition.

Age and Second Language Acquisition:

Roberts (2014) argues that indeed, children have a more trite time understanding and grasping the rudiments of an incipient language compared to adults. This refers to both semantics and phonetics of the language. In the US, 21% of children aged 5 and 17 are bilingual. Several studies and theories support this premise (Long, 1990). Debates on whether children have a higher utilization of their encephalon power as compared to adults, have a "less crowded" mind or are more perspicacious than adults have all been poised in regards to why children incline to learn second languages more expeditiously than adults (Mohades et al., 2014). Roberts (2014) argues that it is gregarious factors as opposed to biological ones that make it more facile for children to learn languages. As expounded at the commencement of the paper, children utilize their circumventions to learn. It can be argued, therefore, that if the circumventions are right, children will learn language facily as well.

For example, a child who is exposed to a sizably voluminous family will have a more facile time beginning to verbalize compared to a child who is brought up in a more diminutive family. The reason behind this is the fact that the child in the larger family has more exposure; he /she is exposed to many conversations. More so, the conversations emanate from different people. So, pronunciation and utilization of terms differ. The child is, therefore, exposed more to the fundamentals and utilization of the language. On the other hand, the child who is brought up in a minute family is not exposed to a plethora of conversations because his / her family has fewer people as compared to the child with a more astronomically immense family. In the same breath, Roberts (2014) observes that children who play or have older children in their families incline to learn how to verbalize at a more expeditious rate than children who do not play and do not have other children in their homes. The premise suggests that more minuscule children (of the same age group) avail and incentivize younger children to verbalize.

Werker and Hensch (2015) on the other hand, argue that it is biological factors that make it easier for children to acquire languages much more expeditiously than adults. They state that at the age of two, the human mind has a dynamic structure that sanctions for more facile retaining of cognizance. Werker and Hensch (2015) argue that at age 2, a child has twice the synapses as an

adult. This denotes that the encephalon connections in the child are twice as those in an adult. Therefore, the child's brain is not only more alert, but can additionally retain cognizance facilely. According to Werker and Hensch (2015), the brain of the child is so potent at this age that it does not matter how many languages they learn. Thus, children can learn their native language, and concurrently, learn the national and official languages (in the case of third world countries).

Werker and Hensch (2015) go further and explicate that if the languages are not used often, the child will forget them as he/she grows up. They argue that due to the surge of incipient information and cognizance, the child's encephalon commences to optate cognizance to retain predicated on pertinence. For languages, pertinence is predicated on use. Thus, the more the child utilizes the language, the better he / she becomes. The languages that are not utilized, however, are forgotten. The premise implicatively insinuates that for a child to learn and be able to utilize language, he / she must practice it. The reinforcement of the language at that adolescent age, however, can be confounding if the child has to learn many languages at once. Scholars have over the years analyzed the right age for children to learn languages, and this age is referred to as the critical period.

The Critical Period Hypothesis

The critical period hypothesis (CPH) concurs with the general argument that adults learn second languages much more gradual than children (Lightbown et al., 1999). Within the same school of cerebrated, some scholars believe that gregarious factors still play a role in the acquisition of language. Other scholars argue that maturational constraints in biological factors play the vital role of cognizance and language acquisition. Regardless of the ideology within the school of cerebrated, it is pellucid that age is vital when analyzing the facileness of language acquisition in human beings.

Hyltenstam & Abrahamsson (2003) report that the research on maturational constraints; or on CPH to be more specified, has developed research questions that are based on factors that were actually mentioned by Lenneberg (biological), or on other factors that could be derived from his formulation. One of these factors is fully similar to Lenneberg, CHOMSKY, & MARX (1967) formulation and it focuses on the attainability of native like ultimate proficiency from mere exposure to a given program. The second conceptualization concerns the relationship between age and ultimate attainment and suggests that younger language learners outperform older learners.

Vanhove (2013), Harley & Wang (1997) argue that CPH has several characteristics. It is the construal of these characteristics that sanction one to identify the critical period rightfully. The characteristics identified for CPH are onset, terminus, intrinsic component, extrinsic component, affected system, and ultimate causes (Archila-Suerte, Zevin, Bunta, & Hernandez, 2012). According to this school of cerebrated, the CPH does not commence and culminate at age 2. However, it is a protracted process that utilizes the verbally expressed characteristics to make a good communicator.

Onset is the first event in the linguistic acquisition ladder. At this stage, the child can absorb whatever he / she learns faster than at any age in the human life-span. To some extent, this is age 2. According to Vanhove (2013), there is an expedition in linguistic development that is fortified by the many encephalon connections in the child at this particular age. The second stage is the terminus. As the denomination might suggest, the terminus is a form of a linguistic journey that commences with the onset at age 2 and ends at puberty (Stölten, Abrahamsson, & Hyltenstam, 2014). The ability to acquire and retain linguistic erudition reduces through the verbalized time span due to other intellectual activities. As verbally expressed, the encephalon organizes events regarding priorities. As the child grows older, the priorities, according to the brain, change from linguistic acquisition to other things such as self-identity.

The third characteristic mentioned, the intrinsic component, relies on inborn factors that make it more facile for one child to learn language more expeditious than another child of the same age. On the other hand, the extrinsic factors utilize the environment to expound why children learn languages more easily than adults. The affected system is the language itself while the ultimate causes involve the general human capabilities to learning languages (Friedmann & Rusou, 2015). CPH has become very mundane as it coalesces all possible factors that would affect learning at that early age. Thus, scholars that believe that biological factors offer the reason as to why children learn languages more expeditiously than adults can still fit within the confines of CPH. The same can be verbally expressed for researchers who believe that it is gregarious and environmental factors that make children learn languages much more facile than adults.

Vanhove (2013) argues that CPH is salutary in describing why children learn languages much more facile than adults as it provides the critic with the different aspects or stages of cognition. Vanhove goes further and explicates that at a puerile age, the encephalon is already structured to learn. The puerile encephalon understands that for purposes of survival, the child has to learn crucial life elements, such as communication. Consequently, the child will absorb all manner of communication afore the encephalon culls the most germane. Thus, CPH coalesces the characteristics of the biological, convivial and environmental factors that avail in learning.

Despite the numerous studies and scholars who support CPH, there have been some eminent reprehension of identically tantamount. Carroll and Bailey (2016) argue that the concept of ultimate procurement or native-like proficiency that is fortified by CPH is a fallacy. Native-like proficiency refers to the competency of an individual to utilize the second language as their first. According to CPH, individuals who learn their second language as children more often than not have native-like proficiency of the second language. Carroll and Bailey (2016) dissent with the premise arguing that the time utilized in learning the second language is circumscribed compared to that utilized in learning the first language at that minute age. The argument is pegged on the fact that the child cannot utilize the two languages (first and second) concurrently. More often, one will be primary and the other secondary. In such a scenario, the primary language will be the first language while the secondary language will be the second one.

Upbraiders of CPH have additionally argued that the grammatical distinctions between the first and second languages cannot sanction for native-like proficiency in the second language, despite the age of the learner. For example, in French, all items are categorized as male or female, including inanimate and non-living objects. In English, only living things can be categorized (mainly) as male or female. Thus, when a French child learns English, he or she might have difficulties not utilizing feminine or masculine linguistic aspect to all objects. Carroll and Bailey (2016) argue that it is such minor grammatical differences that make the conception of native-like proficiency for second language a fallacy.

Long (1990) summarized the findings of studies that were conducted since Lenneberg (1967) developed their versions of a critical period hypothesis for second language acquisition. Long argued that the combined findings of these studies indicated one conclusion that is the ability to achieve native-like phonological skills in a second language begins to decline by age six in many individuals and to be beyond anyone beginning later than age of twelve, despite their high motivation or how much opportunity they might have. Native-like morphology and syntax only seem to be achievable for those beginning to learn the second language before the age of fifteen. Despite the reprehension, one can argue that indeed, children still learn language quicker than adults.

CONCLUSION

With over 50% of the world's population speaking more than one language, second language acquisition has become more compulsory in this day and age. Due to this, many countries have introduced extra languages in their curriculums. Over the years, more children have become exposed to extra languages at a very puerile age as it was realized children learn language more expeditiously than adults. Due to several socio-economic factors, second language acquisition has become mandatory. However, due to the biological and social influences that affect one's ability to learn a new language at an older age, scholars have obsessed over finding the right age to learn a new language. Out of the 50% nearly half are aged between 3 years and 17 years. Various studies proved the fact that children learn languages much more expeditious than adults. The additional fact that word roots of first languages make it difficult for some individuals to learn second languages supports the main concepts of the Critical Period Hypothesis. The critical period hypothesis suggests that there is a phase when encephalon can absorb language at a more expeditious rate than mundane. This period commences at the age of 2 and ends at puberty.

Different scholars investigating the effect of age on second language learning have implicitly based their research on conceptually different interpretations of critical period hypothesis. As mentioned earlier in this paper there are at least three different conceptualizations of CPH. This may be one major source of confusion in the CPH research area. Additional source for disagreement about maturational constraints comprise the many ways in which the notion of language is defined and operationalized, whether the mastery of the targeted language grammar is considered as an ultimate attainment, is it the ability to speak with a native like competence, how it can be measured,

what notion of language proficiency should be investigated. Thus, some studies investigating the effect of CPH focus on grammatical competence, oral performance of second language learners, while other studies deal with the differences in the rate of learning between young children as compared to older second language learners, each one of these areas is completely different from the other. In most studies the social factors are not discussed at all. Social factors are also important as more exposure to the second language and educational opportunities is believed to lead to better second language learning.

CPH has become a prevalent theory in discussing second language acquisition because it amalgamates several elements that affect learning into one discussion component. For instance, CPH accedes with the fact that there are gregarious and environmental factors, termed extrinsic factors that make it more facile for children to learn second languages more expeditious than adults. Concurrently, the theory gives paramountcy to biological factors and their impact on second language acquisition. The question on whether age affects native-like proficiency is also covered under CPH. Since children are yet to fully understand the structure of the word roots of the first language, learning a second language is easier compared to adults. Obviously, there is an issue with determining standards and correctness and a problem of scope and generalizability in research conducted in CPH.

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