

A perspective on the study of age and second language acquisition

Uma perspectiva sobre o estudo da idade e da aquisição de segunda língua

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Abstract: Language acquisition at varying ages has been a subject of debate in the literature. In this perspective, the Critical Period Hypothesis (CPH) is examined to evaluate the relationship between age and ease of second language acquisition. This essay presents an overview of the CPH, including its social, cognitive, and neurological aspects, which will allow the evaluation of the relationship between age and ease of a second language acquisition.

Keywords: Second language acquisition. Age. Critical Period Hypothesis.

Resumo: A aquisição da linguagem em diferentes idades tem sido um assunto de debate na literatura. Nesta perspectiva, a Hipótese do Período Crítico (HPC) é examinada para avaliar a relação entre a idade e a facilidade de aquisição de segunda língua. Este ensaio apresenta uma visão geral da HPC, incluindo aspectos sociais, cognitivos e neurológicos, permitindo uma avaliação da relação entre idade e facilidade de aquisição de segunda língua.

Palavras-chave: Aquisição de segunda língua. Idade. Hipótese do Período Crítico.

Intensive study of how people acquire a second language began in the second half of the twentieth century. There are many differing opinions on the optimal age of acquiring another language. Some believe children retain a second language more readily than adults, while others argue adults are more suited to learning a new language. Children in Brazil start learning English at school in fourth grade, so they are introduced to a foreign language at about 10 years old. Parents believe it is critical that one study a foreign language in childhood to fully master it. However, this is debatable: Will children be more skilled in their second language (L2) the earlier they start learning it? The Critical Period Hypothesis (CPH) proposes that a person is better suited to acquire a language before the onset of puberty, due to specific biological processes that occur before this “critical period”. This essay presents an overview of the CPH, including its social, cognitive, and neurological aspects, which will allow for evaluation of the relationship between age and ease of second language acquisition.

The idea that children are better L2 learners than adults comes from the Critical Period Hypothesis (CPH), which is the subject of a long-standing debate in linguistics and language acquisition, first introduced in 1959 by Penfield and Roberts (see, among others, Birdsong, 1999a; Harley & Wang, 1997; Lenneberg, 1967; Newport, Bavelier & Neville, 2001). These researchers hypothesized that there is a period within the first ten years of life when language acquisition takes place naturally and effortlessly, also known as brain plasticity. When a person reaches puberty, brain plasticity begins to disappear, which has been attributed to the lateralization of language function in the

left hemisphere of the brain (Ellis, 1994). Lenneberg (1967) showed that children rapidly recovered total language control after surgeries in the brain, which was not seen with similar surgeries in adults. These observations suggested that the neurological basis of language, both its acquisition and control in children and adults, is different.

One major difference between children and adults is the ability of the latter to comprehend language as a formal system. Older learners can learn a language by consciously studying linguistic rules and applying them when using the language; young children, however, are not yet able to respond to language as a formal system. To provide insight into this observation, Rosansky (1975) has made a number of arguments about children's behavior. These arguments are the supposed prerequisites of automatic language acquisition due to an absence of meta-awareness associated with them. First, a child sees only similarities and patterns, lacks flexible thinking to apply topics, and is "self-centered" in order to learn the language. Second, the child is totally unaware of the language acquisition process. Finally, the child has not yet developed social attitudes towards the use of one language as opposed to another, so the child is cognitively "open" to another language.

On the other hand, adults cannot learn a second language naturally like children. The onset of abstract thinking comes around the age of twelve, which is the final stage of cognitive development before puberty (Rosansky, 1975). The older learner is predisposed to recognize similarities and differences, to think flexibly in various scenarios, and to become increasingly less self-centered, thereby possessing a strong meta-awareness of the new language. In Rosansky's view, it is awareness which comes with age that inhibits natural learning and leads to the necessity of alternative approaches to language acquisition. Nonetheless, we cannot assume that it is impossible for older learners to be highly proficient in a foreign language. Oxford and Shearin (1994) claim that there are other factors that play an important role in second language acquisition, including the learner's age, the quality of the target language, the amount and quality of input of the L2, and the amount of practice and instrumental motivation.

The CPH can be supported using many cognitive arguments (Rosansky, 1975). For instance, some people believe that children have an advantage over adults in learning a second language as it seems they can learn an L2 at an accelerated rate. According to McLaughlin (1992), this popular belief is a myth because the requirements to communicate as a child are different from the requirements to communicate as an adult. The child's constructions are simpler, and their vocabulary is relatively small compared to what is necessary for adults to speak at the same level of competence in the second language. Brown (1994) states that adults, more cognitively secure, seem to operate from the solid foundation of the first language, and as a result of the interference with the foundation, comparatively fewer adult learners are very efficient at L2 acquisition.

Conversely, researchers have found results against the evidence for a "critical period hypothesis". The strongest evidence that contradicts the idea for a critical period is found in studies which show that adults can attain native-like competency in a second language: the ability to learn another language does not diminish with age.

Birdsong (1992) studied adult native speakers of English taking L2 French, and found that 15 out of 20 participants achieved native-like competence in grammatical tasks and speaking performance. Therefore, from this data, adults are not at a disadvantage to children in the ability to learn a second language.

In conclusion, the relationship between age and successful second language acquisition is very complex and controversial in the literature. It is clear that the importance of early language acquisition has been recognized and is gaining attention by experts in the field of language acquisition. The Critical Period Hypothesis has been used here to compare the learning abilities of children and adults. Though it is clear that people of all ages can learn a second language, learning a second language should take less time to learn as an adult than it does as a child. The assumption *the earlier the better* cannot be taken as absolute, since there are many variables that may influence language acquisition and many adults are very efficient learners due to their clear objectives. There is no conclusive evidence to the right time to learn a language, as the learning process depends on a multitude of factors.

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