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**SECOND LANGUAGE ACQUISITION AND THE CRITICAL PERIOD**

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**Hristina Miteva Tanaskoska**

ES‘Malina Popivanova -Kochani, Republic of North Macedonia, kika4england@yahoo.com

**Abstract:** Is there a critical period for second language acquisition? When should one begin learning a second language? These are questions that have always been present and they still have not become any less controversial or complex. There is not any specific age that could be determined or proclaimed to be the most appropriate. A lot of things must be taken into consideration with specific emphasis on the goals of the learner. Whether reaching a native-like accent and proficiency is the ultimate aim or obtaining a certain level that will enable an everyday communication? Since a great number of experiments and research have shown that both younger and older students can achieve high levels in their second language, a fair attribute and attention should be paid to both theories respectfully. It has been hypothesized that there is a critical period for second language acquisition as well as for first language acquisition. According to this theory there is a time in human development when the brain is predisposed for success in language learning. It is believed that some developmental changes in the brain affect the nature of language acquisition. Therefore, any language learning that occurs after the end of the critical period may not be based on innate biological structures believed to contribute to first language acquisition or second language acquisition in early childhood. The general learning abilities that the older learners depend on, are claimed to be less effective than the innate capacities available to young children. Most studies of the relationship between age of acquisition and second language development have focused on learners' pronunciation. It is frequently observed that most children from immigrant families eventually speak the language of their new community with native-like fluency and accent, while their parents quite often fall behind in this mastery even long after they had been living and working in the new community. Nevertheless, some researches argue that older learners may have one advantage: they appear to be able to learn faster in the early stages of second language learning. Age is one of the characteristics that determine the way in which an individual approaches second language learning. But the opportunities for learning (inside the classroom and outside), the motivation to learn, and individual differences in aptitude for language learning are also important determining factors that affect both rate of learning and eventual success in learning. It must be acknowledged that achieving native-like mastery of the second language is neither a realistic nor a necessarily desired goal for many second language learners in many educational contexts.

**Keywords:** native-like accent, proficiency, critical period, innate, community, approach, factors, goal, skills

**1. INTRODUCTION**

Is there a critical period for second language acquisition? When should one begin learning a second language? These are questions that have always been present and they still have not become any less controversial or complex. There is not any specific age that could be determined or proclaimed to be the most appropriate. A lot of things must be taken into consideration with specific emphasis on the goals of the learner. Whether reaching a native-like accent and proficiency is the ultimate aim or obtaining a certain level that will enable an everyday communication? Since a great number of experiments and research have shown that both younger and older students can achieve high levels in their second language, a fair attribute and attention should be paid to both theories respectfully.

**2. RESEARCHES ON THE TOPIC****2.1 International researches in favour of the Critical Period Theory**

It has been hypothesized that there is a critical period for second language acquisition as well as for first language acquisition. According to this theory there is a time in human development when the brain is predisposed for success in language learning. It is believed that some developmental changes in the brain affect the nature of language acquisition. Therefore, any language learning that occurs after the end of the critical period may not be based on innate biological structures believed to contribute to first language acquisition or second language acquisition in early childhood. The general learning abilities that the older learners depend on, are claimed to be less effective than the innate capacities available to young children. Most studies of the relationship between age of acquisition and second language development have focused on learners' pronunciation. It is frequently observed that most children from immigrant families eventually speak the language of their new community with native-like fluency and accent, while their parents quite often fall behind in this mastery even long after they had been living and working in the new community.

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Mark Patkowski (1980) hypothesised that even if accent were ignored, only those who started learning the language earlier, specifically before 15, could reach native-like proficiency. The spoken English of sixty-seven highly educated immigrants was recorded. Moreover, they had all started to learn English at various ages. Fifteen native-born Americans were also recorded. In this research Patkowski is making an attempt to discover what we all were interested in: "Will there be a difference between those who started later and those who began learning English before puberty?" He transcribed five minute samples from an interview and removed them from any identifying or revealing comments about immigration history or language background. The transcribed samples were rated by trained native-speaker judges. They were asked to place each speaker on a scale from 0, representing no knowledge of the language, to 5, representing a level of English expected from an educated native speaker. This research had shown rather dramatic findings. For instance, all native speakers and thirty-two out of thirty-three second language learners who had begun learning English earlier were rated 4+ or 5. In contrast, the majority of the post-puberty group were rated around 3+. If one lives in the country longer than the other it is very clear that he or she have arrived in the country at an earlier age. Therefore, they were able to acquire the language faster and better. Thus, this provides support for the thesis "the younger the better". Age of acquisition is an important factor and this does not apply only to accent.

Jacqueline Jonson and Elissa Newport (1989) conducted a study of forty-six Chinese and Korean students who came and began learning English at different ages. All of them were students or faculty members at an American university and all had been in the United States for at least three years. The study also included a comparison group of twenty-three native speakers of English. This study was not about accent but it was more concerned with the grammaticality of a large number of sentences that tested twelve rules of English morphology and syntax. The sentences were heard on a tape and they had to indicate whether each sentence was grammatically correct. Half of the sentences were grammatical, however half were not. Once again the age of arrival in The United States was the predominant factor and significant predictor of success on a test. Thus, those students who began their exposure to English between the ages of three and fifteen achieved the highest scores. In comparison, those students who began later did not have native-like language abilities and therefore their performance on the test varied most widely.

In addition, another study also favours and proves the theory that it is better to start learning second language at early age. Robert DeKeyser (2000) carried out a replication of the Jonson and Newport study, working with Hungarian immigrants to the United States. A strong relationship between age of immigration and second language proficiency was also found. This study differs from the previous ones in terms that the participants were asked to be tested not only on the grammaticality but they were also asked to take aptitude tests. It was acknowledged that the participants who began learning English as adults, aptitude scores correlated with success. However, there was no such correlation for those who learned the language in childhood. In a way, this also confirms the hypothesis that adults may learn in a way different from the way children do.

## **2.2 International researches opposing the Critical Period Theory**

So far all of the above mentioned studies offer a support for the Critical Period Hypothesis. Nevertheless, some researchers argue that older learners may have one advantage: they appear to be able to learn faster in the early stages of second language learning. There is an interesting project carried out in Holland by Catherine Snow and Marian Hoefnagel (1978) on a group of English speakers who were learning Dutch as a second language. What makes this research appealing is the fact that it includes participants as young as three years old as well as older children, adolescents, and adults. Moreover, a large number of tasks were used in order to measure different types of language knowledge. They assessed: pronunciation, auditory discrimination, grammatical morphemes, grammatical complexity, sentence translation, grammatical judgement, vocabulary, story comprehension and storytelling. Participants were first tested within six months of their arrival in Holland and within six weeks of their starting to school or work in a Dutch-language environment. They were tested two more times at four or five-month intervals. This study showed that adolescents were by far the most successful learners. Surprisingly, it was the adults, not the children, whose scores were second best at the first session. In other words this proves something else, something different from what we had seen previously and maybe expected. Adolescents and adults learned faster than children in the first months of exposure to Dutch. So, as a result of the outcome of this study, Snow and Hoefnagel-Hohle concluded that their results provide evidence against the critical period for language acquisition.

There are other researches who share this opinion too. It is argued that older learners, who were thought to have kept their accent, may have done this consciously as they wanted to continue being identified with their first language cultural group and not as they could not have acquired the new accent. Another thing in favour of the adults the fact that adults do not get the same quantity and quality of language input that children receive at school or play settings. It must be acknowledged that achieving native-like mastery of the second language is neither a realistic nor a necessarily desired goal for many second language learners in many educational contexts. The kind of skills that

the older learners were able to acquire in a relatively short period of time will satisfy the needs of learners in many learning contexts where the goal is the ability to use the language for everyday communication rather than native-like mastery. This has so far some how been connected to learning a second language but in a way that the students are exposed to it everyday since they live in a country in which the language that is being spoken is not their mother tongue.

### **3.LEARNING A FOREIGN LANGUAGE**

When the goal is basic communicative ability for all students in a educational system, and when it is assumed that the child's native language will remain the primay language, it may be more efficient to begin second or foreign language later. When learners receive only a few hours of instruction per week, learners who start later(for example ,at age ten, eleven, or twelve)often catch up with those who began earlier. This could be mainly because some second or foreign language programes that begin with very young learners offer only minimal contact with the language and consequently do not lead to much progress. Age is one of the characteristics that determine the way in which an individual approaches second language learning. But the opportunities for learning (inside the classroom and outside), the motivation to learn, and individual differences in aptitude for language learning are also important determining factors that affect both rate of learning and eventual susscess in learning .However, this last study could be looked otherwise as the proponents of the critical period would certainly agree. Ironically, the very same study that was previously used as an evidence against this hypothesis, now if we analyse is a bit deeper it would only confirm it. For example, the English children in the Dutch language study were said to have made the least progress. That is true, but what if we look at this from another point of view. By the end of the year, the children were catching up, and even surpassed the adults and the adolescents on several measures.The explanation to this could be in the different language characteristics and different learning conditions. First of all, the children had the freedom to be silent, nobody forced them to talk, they have ample time, they can just sit, observe, learn, form the grammatical rules and once they are ready they start speaking and achieve grater results.

### **4.CONCLUSION**

To sum up, It is true that the Critical Period Hypothesis offered some undisputable proofs, but to some extend many interesting points were made against this theory too .So this question still remains open for discussion . As far as I am concerned, starting learning a second language early is by all means efficient and usefull especially if the goal is to achieve a native-like proficiency, fluency, and grammatical accuracy. But in order this to be obtained it is necessary for the child to be exposed to the language as much as possible and it is of a huge importance to encounter vast range of vocabulary. It is a perfect opportunity to put into effect the child's innate ability of acquiring languages. If the child starts learning a secong language, ign language, at school, then I would recommend more classes a week and if possible additional afterschool classes in order to achieve similar success.

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