

Factors Affecting Second Language Learning

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What does second language learning involve? In *Factors affecting second language learning*, Lightbown, P. M. and Spada, N (2000 : 28) states: “In addition to personality characteristics, other factors generally considered to be relevant to language learning are intelligence, aptitude, motivation, and attitudes. Another important factor is the age at which learning begins.” Their article begins with an activity of personal characteristics of the “good language learner” and rates these characteristics with 5 catalogues: “very important, quite important, important, not very important and not at all important.” (ibid: 29)

But the characteristics of a good language learner are hard to be defined or measured. There are also many different perspectives on how successful a good language learner is, which makes it impossible to directly observe and measure the relationship among these characteristics. “Finally, there is the problem ... the fact that two things tend to occur together does not necessarily mean that one caused the other.” (ibid: 30) So soon, they find more learner characteristics as follows:

(1) Intelligence

Traditionally, the term “intelligence” refers to the mental abilities measured by an IQ (intelligence quotient test). These tests create a

connection between intelligence and second language learning to predict how successful a good language learner would be. Research shows that intelligence, especially measured by verbal IQ tests, may play a very important role in involving language analysis and rule learning, but it may be a weak factor in language learning on communication and interaction. All in all, intelligence is a complex term with diverse individual “abilities and strengths” (ibid: 31). Students, poor in academic performance, still have a great potential in second language learning.

(2) Aptitude

The term “aptitude” refers to the learner’s potential of language acquisition. The most distinguishing feature of aptitude is learning quickly. Although earlier research found a substantial relationship between aptitude for language learning and performance in foreign language that was taught with grammar-translation or audio-lingual methods, more and more researchers came to see the irrelevance to L2 learning with a more communicative teaching approach. Aptitude seems irrelevant to L2 learning with the adoption of a more communicative approach to teaching. Lightbown, P. M. and Spada, N (2000: 32) argues that “Successful language learners may not be strong in all of the components of aptitude.” To help students to achieve their full potential in second language learning., teachers should find appropriate teaching

approaches and classroom activities in accordance with their differences in aptitude.

(3) Personality

Personality is a confusing term in L2 learning because it is hard to clearly define the relationship between personality and SLA. For example, some researchers have found that learners' success in language learning is associated with extroversion, such as assertiveness and adventurousness, while others have found that many successful language learners do not get high scores on measures of extroversion. Another example is inhibition is a negative force for second language pronunciation performance. Personality may be a major factor only in the acquisition of conversational skills, not in the acquisition of literacy skills. Despite so many contradictions in studies, personality still plays an important role in a successful second language learning.

(4) Motivation and attitudes

Numerous researches show that positive motivation and attitudes have a close relationship with successful proficiency in second language learning, but "motivation in second language learning is a complex phenomenon" (ibid: 33) in terms of learners' communicative needs and their attitude under the social dynamic relationship. In motivating students in classroom setting, it is appreciated to encourage students to immerse in the lesson, to enrich classroom activities, tasks and materials,

and to cooperate rather than to compete in interactions. In general, positive learning L2 experience produces enrichment, while negative L2 learning causes resentment.

(5) Learner preferences

The term “learning style” is widely used to describe learners’ individual preference in the process of their SL learning. Many recent studies are focusing on the development of learning style assessment instruments, while few are examining the interactive relationships and results in second language acquisition. Learner preferences is a matter of different strokes for different folks. Therefore, it is an elusive task to find a textbook or teaching method suitable for all learners.

(6) Learner beliefs

Learner beliefs are often based on their previous learning experiences and assumptions on how to learn efficiently. Second language learners, especially older ones, have strong beliefs in which type of instruction is better for them. Learner beliefs will have a great impact on the kinds of strategies they choose to learn new material, therefore, teachers are advised to help learners to expand their learning strategies, “and thus develop greater flexibility in their second language learning.”

(ibid: 36)

(7) Age of acquisition

It is a complicated relationship between a learner's age and his or her potential in a successful second language learning. In immigrant families, children can speak the L2 with native-like fluency more easily, especially in pronunciation / accent, while their parents and older learners (i.e. post-puberty learners) can make more rapid progress towards mastery of an L2, especially in contexts, where they can take full advantage of language in a social interaction. Some researchers (Lenneberg, 1967; Strid, 2017) suggest that there exists a critical period for second language acquisition. But when does this critical period begin? How does it work in second language development? How to guide it in an effective way? These are all good questions for us to explore.

Critical Thinking on the Critical Period Hypothesis Based on the Age of Acquisition

Age is often considered as one of the most important factors determining how successful a learner is in SLA. According to DeKeyser & Larson-Hall (2005), earlier language acquisition is frequently associated with a great second language proficiency in a critical period.

The term "Critical Period" came from biology. It is said Austrian biologist Konrad Zacharias Lorenz (1903-1989) once observed that the ducklings or goslings regarded the first moving objects they witnessed as their mothers after they were hatched within eight or nine hours. This

phenomenon of imprinting only occurred within their born day, and then disappeared over 30 hours.

As early as in the mid-1920s, when was the critical period for learners to best start their first language caught a lot of attention. It is thought that after a certain period of their birth, children can easily learn their mother tongue without much difficulty. But after this period, it is hard for them to acquire their mother tongue, for “Once this period of time is passed, ... the ability to learn language declines.” (Birdsong, 1999: 1) Later, this term has also been applied in second language acquisition. Hence, Brown (2007: 57) defines “**the critical period**” as a “biologically determined period of life when language can be acquired more easily and beyond which time language is increasingly difficult to acquire.”

Generally, the youths have a great advantage in learning a second language. Eric Lenneberg was among the first ones to propose **the critical period hypothesis**. In his masterpiece *Biological Foundations of Language*, Lenneberg (1967) introduces the critical period hypothesis for language acquisition and claims that “... although the incidence of ‘language-learning-blocks’ rapidly increases after puberty. Also, automatic acquisition from mere exposure to a given language seems to disappear after this age, and foreign languages have to be taught and learned through a conscious and labored effort” (Lenneberg, 1967: 176).

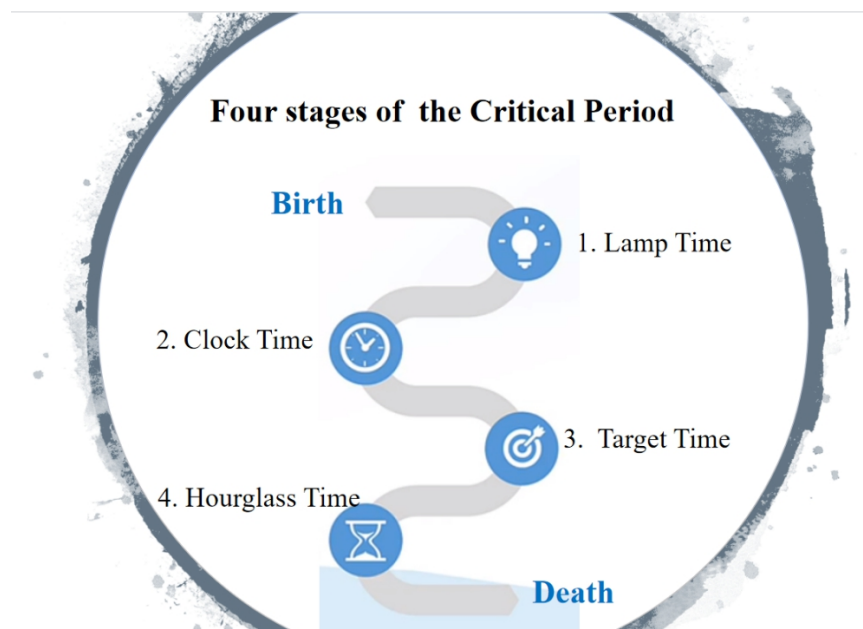
The critical period has been criticized for decades for two main reasons: First, it is no definite age. Age 7 may be a critical time, but it is not suitable for everyone. Second, the environment to trigger it is so complex for factors affecting SLA, such as intelligence, motivation, aptitude, personality, age, etc. are interacting with each other, overlapping with each other and even integrating with each other.

Because of these two main elusive reasons, many researchers challenge CPH. Cardimona K., Smith P. and Roberts L. S. (2016: 559) state that there is no difference in the strength of translation and semantic relationships in terms of age of acquisition. If anything, the group acquiring L2 after they are 7 years old may a little weaker in lexical performance, or more prone to error. Strid, J. E. (2017: 711) directly point out that the wide acceptance of the CPH does great harm in second language teaching and learning by reinforcing misbeliefs, which needs to be overturned for a more reality-based understanding at any age in any language.

Based on the studies above, we conclude that a critical period in a second language learning is an enlightening time span during which a strengthened sensitivity has been stimulated to trigger a faster linguistic and cultural development. Many confusing issues of CPH comes from oversimplification. For example, after lateralization, the brain loses plasticity which lags adolescents' language acquisition behind. This

misconception can not be applied universal for although children may speak the L2 more native-like with fluency, adults and adolescents can perform more sophisticated in professional and academic contexts.

The greatest mistake in CPH lies in its mistargeting. Instead of studying a group of people with different ages in second language learning, it should focus more on how a particular learner master a second language more efficiently at various ages. To solve this, four rough stages of the Critical Period is proposed in picture 1.



Picture 1: Four rough stages of the Critical Period

In picture 1, the big circle stands for all the factors affecting second language acquisition, such as a learner's intelligence, personality, aptitude, motivation, preferences, beliefs, age of acquisition, etc. The curving line represents an individual's life span from birth to death. There are roughly four critical periods in his or her language acquisition: lamp time, clock time, target time and hourglass time.

- (1) Lamp time: a stage of critical period that after some SL accumulation, a learner is suddenly enlightened as gaining a kind of “Satori” that he or she can use this SL for his basic needs. For example, after a full exposure in Spanish for a month, an English traveler can use some Spanish to satisfy his basic needs in Spain, but in his later life, he never uses Spanish anymore. Then he stopped at his Spanish lamp time.
- (2) Clock time: a stage of critical period that after years of academic or professional study, a learner has accumulated enough knowledge in SL through scheduled education. For example, a Chinese student, majoring in English has graduate from his college, but he turns out to be a driver in Xiangtan city who need not use English in his daily life. Then he stopped at his English clock time.
- (3) Target time: a stage of critical period that after years of career training, a learner has great capability in performing like the natives in completing practical tasks. For example, a successful English translator, lawyer, or guider in China.
- (4) Hourglass time: a stage of critical period that that our linguistic abilities fade way with ages. Some even suffer from senile dement or aphasia when they are old. Hourglass time is just a trend, and not everyone should pass through it.

The gap between the lamp time and the clock time lies in whether the learner gets a formal SL education (Learners of the clock time have a formal SL education, while learners of the lamp time have not.), while the gap between the clock time and the target time lies in whether the learner can perform successful native-like interactions (Learners of the clock time know what to do in a native way, while learner of the target time can successful perform them out). The hourglass time describes a common phenomenon that when we are getting old enough, L2 is really hard to acquire. Even we have SLA, our ability to perform it well is getting weaker and weaker. So is our mother tongue.

To sum up, it is a confusing chaos to study CPH in a large group of people at different ages, what matter most is “How can I learn a SL at my stage of critical time now under CPH?” DeKeyser (2018: 916) states that “The critical period phenomenon, however, is not like an onion where nothing is left after peeling off layer by layer, but rather a diamond in the rough, which sparkles more brightly after a good conceptual cleaning.” There is still a long way to run under CPH, and now it is the time to do an overturn.

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