

HPEN7006 (SLA): Assignment 2

Critical Period Hypothesis, L2 Children's and L2 Adults' L2

Acquisition

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There is a widespread assumption that kids should start learning a foreign language as soon as they can. The idea that “the younger, the better” became one of the most popular conceptions in China. The ability to acquire a second or foreign language successfully has often been attributed in large part to age. It is widely accepted that children are capable of learning a new language at a rather quick rate. This is reinforced by the hypothesis of Critical Period Hypothesis (CPH), which states that there is a defined span of years during which the acquisition of a second language may take place spontaneously and easily, and that beyond this point, it is no longer feasible to be entirely successful. However, CPH is the focal point of never-ending discussion in both domestic and international studies on second language acquisition. According to the “Difference Hypothesis”, there are differences between Children's and adults' second language learning and processing (Steinhauer, 2014). This paper is going to discuss and compare the similarities and differences between L2 children and L2 adults in L2 acquisition, based on the theory of CPH.

I. Critical Period Hypothesis

The scope of the critical period and its empirical investigation have been the main topics of domestic and international research on the critical period theory since the 1980s. The CPH research achieved successful outcomes from the macro-level verification of the psychological and neurological reality of Chomsky's universal grammar to the micro-level inspection of the characteristics of each category (phonetics, grammar/syntax, and vocabulary/morphology) of second language acquisition. Theoretically, it shifted from the strong critical period hypothesis (including practice-hypothesis and mature-state hypothesis) (Johnson and Newport,

1994) to the Multiple Critical Period Hypothesis, (MCPH) (Dekeyser, Alfi-Shabtay, and Ravid, 2010). From the weak critical period theory, also known as the sensitive period hypothesis (Patkowski, 1980), to the multiple sensitive period hypothesis, also known as the MSPH (Long, 2005). The critical period hypothesis examines the biological age component of language acquisition, specifically the impact of the age effect (beginning age or acquisition age) on learning rate and ultimate attainment. This is referred to as the critical period effect. On one hand, due to their more developed cognitive learning mechanisms, adults are able to acquire morphology and syntax more quickly than children. Despite this, children's ultimate acquisition state is superior to adults' in terms of long-term language development. On the other hand, there is a linear negative correlation between the initial learning age of different second languages and the final acquisition state, that is, the younger the initial acquisition age, the better the final language acquisition state (Long, 2005). This confirms children's acquisition advantage during the language critical period, but the generalised explanatory power of these studies has been questioned. Related studies have shown that phonetic acquisition is most likely to be affected by the critical period, followed by grammar/syntax acquisition, and vocabulary acquisition is least affected (Silverberg and Samuel, 2004).

In general, the question of whether there is a critical period for language acquisition is mainly explained by the following five theories: Firstly, the Strong critical period hypothesis states that there is one and only one critical period with a clear start and end time, but different studies have different start and end times of the critical period. Secondly, the Multiple Critical Period Hypothesis: There are multiple critical periods at different language levels, which improves the explanatory power of different micro-categories of language acquisition, but still emphasizes the unity of the age effect and the criticality of the critical period. Thirdly, the Sensitive Period Hypothesis: Language development does not have an impulsive critical period, but a sensitive period of transition and gradual regression. Language development is not only affected by age effects, but also by other individual differences, such as motivation, learning strategies, social environment, cognitive strategies, native

language proficiency, etc. Fourthly, the Multiple Sensitive Period Hypothesis: there are multiple sensitive periods, emphasising the multiple declines and non-critical transitions of language acquisition. Fifthly, the Unified Competition Model: negates the critical period of language acquisition and development, emphasizes the similarity between the mother tongue and the second language, and believes that the decline in linguistic ability is the demise of brain neurons, and that there is no essential difference between the mother tongue and the second language. The deficit is caused by the transfer in competition with the native language (Mac, 1997).

Although there is a vast amount of research literature on the critical period hypothesis, there is still a lack of literature that organises these studies into a relevant and powerful argument, which provides ideas and lays the foundation for the continued development of related research in the future.

II. Comparison Between L2 Children's and L2 Adults' L2 Acquisition

Similarities

In the same cultural background, children and adults of the same ethnicity have similarities in the process of second language acquisition. To begin with, they are all confined to the same setting, which offers little opportunity for English practise. The majority of their progress in the English language comes from classroom instruction. The mother tongue is still the main language they use to communicate with their parents, friends, classmates, and teachers in their daily lives. In this approach, both children and adults are able to take part in "casual" English learning in an atmosphere where the language is naturally spoken. They are unable to pick up a second language in any other way than through engaging in purposeful study and consistent practise.

Furthermore, in order to acquire a second language, language learners, whether they are children or adults, will be favourably or adversely impacted by their first language, depending on whether or not it is their mother tongue (Clahsen and Felser, 2006). For children and adults whose mother tongue is Chinese, they already have an installation of universal grammar and a complete grammatical structure of Chinese when learning a second language, or, at this time, children do not have a complete Chinese grammatical structure. Children and adults who are acquiring L2 will be

positively or negatively influenced by their mother tongue. Moreover, this preexisting mindset suggests that both children and adults are affected by the similarities and distinctions between English and Chinese when learning English. Assuming the first and second languages are similar, the first language will actively aid in the acquisition of the second language. In contrast, the first language will hinder the acquisition of the second. Chinese and English are notably distinct in numerous respects. Therefore, both children and adults whose native language is Chinese will experience considerable difficulty in acquiring English.

Thirdly, SLA shares the same learning process with both children and adults. Their method of education progresses from the basic to the advanced levels. Chinese SLA learners who study English in China progress from elementary to advanced levels. Even though children and adults do not often begin their acquisition with the same vocabulary and grammatical structures, both age groups are required to construct dictionaries and acquire appropriate sentence patterns for future usage. The present simple, the simple future, the simple past present perfect, and the past perfect are the first tenses covered in every beginning-level textbook, regardless of whether it is intended for children or adults (Ellis, 2006).

Differences

Based on the theory of CPH, the researchers further found out that there are disparities in how children and adults learn and comprehend a second language. (Steinhauer, 2014). It is mainly manifested in the following two aspects: differences in language acquisition strategies, and differences in language acquisition motivation and needs. In point of fact, learning a second language has its own set of challenges and opportunities for both young children and mature individuals.

Language acquisition strategies

Children, adolescents, and adults have neurological (Lenneberg, 1967), cognitive (Taylor, 1974), and social-psychological (Brown, 1987; Talor, 1974) differences in second language acquisition. Patkowsky (1980) hypothesised that, out of all of the characteristics that he investigated for his research, age was the one that had the single

most significant influence on a person's ability to acquire a second language successfully. The findings were regarded as giving support for the theory that there is an age-related constraint on the capacity to gain complete command of the grammar in a second language. Snow (2000) examined three common misunderstandings about the relationship between age and second language acquisition. These included the misreading of facts relating to the rate of acquisition, the misattribution of the distinct localization of the two languages in a person's brain, and a focus on individuals who obtained native-like levels. In regard to the third one, Snow (2000) made the observation that several studies have a tendency to disregard older learners who have reached native-like L2 competency because they misemphasise the importance of adult learners with inadequate language skills. Moreover, the argument that older learners cannot achieve native-like proficiency in a second language due to a biologically-based critical period has gained traction among both theorists and social policymakers (Bailey, et al., 2001).

In a 13-month study conducted in Holland, Snow and Hoefhagel-Hhle (1978) analysed the progress of 42 native English speakers learning Dutch for the first time. They were as young as three and as old as adults. Lastly, they discovered that those over the age of 18 and those between the ages of 12 and 15 had the most initial success learning Dutch. However, after a year of study, those between the ages of 8 and 10 and 12 and 15 showed the greatest mastery of the Dutch language, while preschoolers and young school-aged children performed the lowest.

Generally, for children, participating in activities that promote implicit learning, such as slow, massive exposure without requiring a stronger memory, but with high levels of L2 natural information, is one of the most effective learning strategies. But for adults, they depend more on learning that is specifically taught, such as advanced reasoning abilities, analytical abilities, the capacity for reflection, and stronger verbal abilities that enable the acquisition of grammatical rules.

Language acquisition motivation

The process of acquiring a second language and learning a foreign language is influenced by a great number of elements; nevertheless, these factors vary from

person to person due to differences in children's and adults' learning motivation, which are shown in the need to enter society and the need to communicate.

Children are most motivated to learn languages by their need to fit in with the people around them. According to their point of view, in order to be acknowledged by society, they need to speak the language in the same way that other members of society do, and they need to do it with the same idiosyncrasies. Personal elements, such as learner belief, anxiety, aptitude and so on, all play a part in the process of learning a foreign language, in addition to having the positive learning motivation.

In order to accomplish the goal of communication in a context where one is using a second language, the primary function of communicative skill is to make it possible for others to understand oneself and for oneself to comprehend others. Changes in pronunciation and word ends are the most noticeable forms of differentiation between adult and child communication in a second language setting (Singleton and Muñoz, 2011). When learning a second language as an adult, many people pay little attention to pronunciation. A message is deemed effective if it is understood by the intended audience. However, youngsters are particularly sensitive to these alterations, and they are able to successfully grasp the form changes at an extremely young age. Only very young children are capable of learning to speak with a standard native accent when they are raised in their natural context (Scovel, 2000). Their pronunciation can be imitated with great accuracy, and they can speak identically to those around them. The authentic and effective language environment maximises second language acquisition benefits for children (Krashen, 1982). It is clear that the primary distinction between the acquisition of a first language and that of a second language is not due to any significant differences in the brain mechanisms of children and adults, but rather to the primary distinction that exists between the levels of learning motivation at each stage. Various motivations may ultimately result in a variety of outcomes.

III. Different Teaching Approaches to L2 Children and L2 Adults

From the mentioned research, we can find out that children are born with the capacity to learn language and may naturally acquire linguistic ability when placed in

a natural environment where that language is spoken. The important basis and motivation for young Chinese children to learn English is to be interested in English. Children's sensitivity to language and highly imitative features give young children more advantages in English-learning. When it comes to children's successful English acquisition, the concept of interest is of the utmost importance. When children are learning English, instructors should recognise the English learning interests of the children and develop the children's love for English via a variety of instructional approaches. For example, when children are learning English, teachers can choose lively and interesting teaching methods in the formulation of teaching activities and teaching plans so that children can actively participate in learning. The environment in which educational activities are carried out needs to be organised in accordance with the physiological features of children; this will ensure that the educational activities are more in tune with the psychology of children. The majority of the instructional materials are drawn from the children's actual lives. Enhancing children's passion for English and enthusiasm for learning the language may be accomplished in the classroom via the use of activities such as singing English songs, playing English games, telling short English tales, and reciting English poetry. The Total Physical Response (TPR) is an approach that I think is readily applicable at this stage.

According to Asher (1977), children's English-language development is negatively impacted by stress and impatience. Teachers should foster an atmosphere where students are comfortable speaking and listening in English, taking appropriate actions, and making connections between theoretical concepts and concrete ones. Instead of having students sit in rows and listen to lectures, instructors using the TPR approach to teaching English encourage students to learn the language through active play. Only when the classroom environment and learning emotions are active can children's attention be sustained.

The TPR teaching approach does not utilise words but rather uses actions to explain language, which not only teaches students language but also increases their interest in learning. This not only helps students learn languages but also helps them

become more motivated to study. It is primarily a command for an activity that is given in English by an adult to a kid, such as “Stand up” and “Sit down”, and then the child will eventually execute the body motions that correspond to those commands. Children who are taught with the TPR approach will not be able to avoid feeling anxious or worried just because they cannot comprehend or talk. They often copy and actively engage in activities by using motions that are natural to them. After repeated instances of “command-action connections”, it is natural to comprehend and eventually learn to express in English. During the activity, the kid will have a greater interest in the activity, and the impact of language acquisition will be improved, if the action needed by the instruction is more unique and fascinating.

During the process of implementation, there are, of course, certain concerns that just can't be disregarded. It is observable that the majority of students depend only on conditioned reflexes in order to behave in accordance with the instructor's instructions. This is despite the fact that when the teacher utilises actions to educate students while talking, the students' listening skills are highly exercised. Even more challenging for the children is the task of issuing this password on their own. Therefore, after using TPR to help students comprehend the meaning of new content, teachers need to strengthen pronunciation exercises, let students practise the content repeatedly while speaking, and at the same time make full use of the content that students have learned to ensure that students comprehend the meaning of the new content completely.

As for adults, the teaching approaches would be more complex and combined. Based on my teaching experience, the psychological obstacles that adults face while attempting to learn a foreign language are rather significant and include things like the fear of making errors, the reluctance to speak out, and the eagerness for success. While Language learning is a process from language input to language processing to language output. Before it can be said that the entire learning process has been concluded, the encoded language information must undergo the output procedure. According to the characteristics of adult language acquisition, the following teaching approaches can be applied: the communicative approach, the audio-lingual approach,

and grammar-translated approach.

The communicative approach had an especially high level of use and acceptance in the 1980s. In order for students to be able to study language in a setting that encourages communication, it is important to promote the idea that in classroom teaching activities, instructors should direct students to carry out communicative activities, and the substance of activities should be carried out around the objective of teaching. However, what kind of communicative activities to include and how to design the whole syllabus are the critical problems when applying this approach. When we design the communicative activities, the “authentic” input should be used to describe the materials utilised in the classroom (William, 1979). Moreover, according to Savignon (2002), the communicative approach should have a task-based curriculum that is organised around the completion of tasks. The benefit of the communicative approach is that it caters to the specific needs of each individual student, making it particularly well-suited for adult learners, especially ESP students.

The audio-lingual approach considers the linguistic realm to be an integrated whole; thus, in addition to mastering grammatical conventions, we should also focus on perfecting students’ pronunciation and acquiring linguistic blocks like words and phrases. The establishment of a habit is the basis for language acquisition, and this language habit disregards linguistic analysis, explanation, and instruction. Adult students who have a weak foundation want assistance that is broken down into more manageable steps. But this approach is based on repetition which lead to the boredom of the students. And, it is possible that students will not be made aware of the distinctions between formal and informal language use, as well as between written and spoken language (Matamoros-González et al., 2017).

The grammar-translated approach has been the most popular teaching approach in China for the past 20 years. Learners might get a feeling of confidence from the process of translating. And, grammatical explanation in the L1 might be useful, particularly for students who are adults (Matamoros-González et al., 2017). Furthermore, it remains the most widely adopted approach in Chinese rural elementary and high schools. However, one of the apparent disadvantages of using this strategy is that both

instructors and students would concentrate on the explanation of the English grammatical rules by using Chinese, which is not very successful in processing or outputting “authentic” or “vivid” English in spoken language. This is one of the disadvantages of taking this approach.

In general, adults have certain distinctive qualities that are distinct from children in the learning process. These traits might originate from physiological or psychological factors, as well as internal or external environments. When it comes to the learning and teaching of a second language, it is important to pay attention to the variations between the two, as well as the causes and consequences that are associated with each cause, and to have an understanding of the features of children’s and adults’ second language acquisition. Then, make an effort to cultivate the learners’ interests so that their existing abilities may be used to their greatest potential in language acquisition for improved learning outcomes.

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