

A Critical Look at the Available Literature on the Appropriate Time to Start Approaching a Second/Foreign Language

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Abstract

Scholars believe that many factors can affect second language learning and teaching practices, among them age has been always regarded as a key factor. The starting age for learning a second/ foreign language is a debatable issue about which different ideas have been proposed by various stakeholders and scholars. Some scholars refer to the critical period hypothesis for L1 acquisition and believe that before puberty is the best time to start learning/ teaching a foreign language. From another point of view, scholars reject the appropriateness of this claim in second language learning/ teaching regarding the evidence that adult learners, in some aspects of language, are said to acquire a foreign language more easily. These researchers claim that concepts such as multiple critical period and the presence of motivation based on which any person can start learning a foreign language at any age can be good examples. In the final section of this paper, comments from 85 participants were shown regarding the best time to start learning a foreign language. The findings of the current paper are of significant implications for the field of ELT.

Key terms: critical period hypothesis, multiple critical period, motivation, second/foreign language teaching

Introduction

Learning a foreign/ second language has been regarded as a significant skill for many people all the way through the history. Many studies have been conducted to indicate the best possible conditions for leaning a foreign/ second language. There has been great controversy concerning when to start second language teaching and learning and different scholars have proposed a lot of suggestions in this regard. Second language learning is still a great challenge for learners. Some people learn languages more quickly than others. Not surprisingly, even in first language acquisition, the rate of learning varies widely (Verma & Bobby, 2012).

One of the most important factors influencing the entire process of foreign/ second language teaching/learning is expressed through literature to be the age factor. As a matter of fact, the age factor has been the most controversial and problematic issues. According to Singleton (1989), extensive research, professional debate, and theory have attempted for an unequivocal response to the question of the appropriate age to start learning a foreign/second language. Chavez (2006) asserts that the best time to start learning a foreign language varies from individual to individual and also with circumstances. However, we are to some extent likely to make some useful generalizations. The best time to start learning another language is as a child. According to Chavez (2006), if you learn a second or third language when you are young, and particularly before puberty, and you learn it from native speakers, you will learn to speak it naturally, with their own accent. Many scholars who have agreed on early childhood language learning pertain to the concepts like sensitive or critical period hypothesis. The authors in this paper discuss the ideas of different scholars and take into consideration the answers elicited from some Iranian ELT teachers and try to find an answer to the question of the best time to start learning/teaching a foreign language.

Sensitive or Critical Period

There is not a general consensus among scholars about the critical period, but they all agree upon a period in a child's life when L2 learning happens smoothly and almost inevitably, resulting in native-like or near-native-like proficiency. Knudsen (2004) differentiated between two types of developmentally decisive periods, namely sensitive periods and critical periods. As a matter of fact, those scholars who were skeptical about the application of the strong version of critical period in L2 learning developed a softer version and coined the term sensitive period. Knudsen (2004) believes that a sensitive period concerns any duration of time when the neuronal connections within the brain are particularly susceptible to environmental input. Knudsen (2004) further asserts that the critical period is a special case of sensitive periods when the brain must receive certain stimulation or input in order to continue to function normally. Approximately in accordance with the previous definition, Lenneberg (1967, as cited in Paradis, 2000) defines critical period as "a period of time with a specific onset and offset during which language can be more easily acquired than any other time" (p. 187). Based on Lenneberg, critical or sensitive period is related to a time when there is maximum brain plasticity during language development. Therefore, functional lateralization is thought to be mostly influenced by variations in the timing of exposure to language during this period.

For years whether there is a critical period for second language acquisition or not has been a matter of great importance for many language researchers. Most discussion about the critical period in language acquisition actually concerns learning that takes place in naturalistic L2 contexts rather than formal learning. As long as L2 competence is assessed without regard for the learning mechanisms that produced it, it may appear that there is merely an optimal age for language learning. According to Birdsong (2006), strict either/or categorization of a true CP as defined in biology is inappropriate to be used when it comes to second language learning. He prefers the term sensitive period, to solve this problem, as it allows for the existence of exceptions since it does not consider it critical to begin learning the second language in the specified bounded period. Some scholars even favor the term 'age effect' to the term critical.

Multiple Critical Periods

It has been suggested by several scholars that since the various components of language- phonology, lexicon, syntax, morphology, and pragmatics are acquired rather independently of each other, their development might come after different timetables, referring to the potential existence of multiple critical periods for a person. Knudsen (2004) believes that language depends on a wide range of specialized sensory motor and cognitive skills that involve many neural networks and structures, and they are formed differently by experience.

In the linguistic community, it is generally assumed that children learn second languages more easily and quickly than adults. This difference in ability has been traced back to the existence of sensitive or critical period, which ends approximately at around 8-10 years of age. It is assumed that the pre-mature brain has a higher degree of neural plasticity than the post-mature brain and that this directly relates to the neural bases of second language acquisition. Nevertheless, there seems to be a big discrepancy about the degree to which adult second language learners are inhibited due to these neural differences.

The strict version of CP, as Mayberry (2006) argues, would therefore mean that there is a specific cut-off point before which everybody inevitably attains native-like L2 abilities and after which nobody does. Nonetheless, most scholars are aware of this fact that SLA does not meet these strict criteria for a critical period on several grounds. As Harley (1986) maintains, research that compares younger and older learners of foreign languages suggests that older learners are in some ways more efficient language learners. Based on some short-term studies older learners are found to acquire certain aspects of language more quickly and resourcefully than do younger learners. As an example, they are reported to be more efficient in oral communication in comparison to young learners. Researchers credit this outcome with the greater world knowledge, cognitive maturity, and enhanced learning capabilities (knowing 'how to learn') of older children and adults.

On the other hand, Krashen, Scarcella, and Long (1982) assert that studies have eventually suggested that although older learners are quicker in the short run particularly in the area of oral communication, younger learners may be more proficient in the long run. Also, there appears to be general consensus that younger learners are far more likely to attain and retain native-like pronunciation than are older learners. Apparently, regarding the best possible age, the conflicting research evidence for language learning has centered on the ultimate level of

proficiency attained. In addition to the degree of proficiency learners attain, all the same, there are other important factors to begin language learning early, some of which are mentioned below:

Regarding bilingualism, Lee (1996) states that since there is much evidence suggesting that there are cognitive gains to early childhood bilingualism, an early start and continued progress toward bilingualism is suitable. As another reason, Wilburn Robinson (1998) asserts that those students who take a foreign language in the elementary grades may demonstrate academic gains in other areas of the curriculum. However, Hass (1998) believes that it takes a long time to attain proficiency in a foreign language, especially when it is learned in a school setting. Consequently, the sooner students start the higher the level they are likely to achieve.

As Pinker (1994) asserts, brain research shows that children are at a suitable age for language learning. Although language study is advantageous and effective at any nearly age, some researches suggest that the human brain is more open to language learning from birth to pre-adolescence. During this critical period, or put in another term, window of readiness, there seem to be greater synapses and plasticity that is highest before the age of six, and then step by step declines. In the next part of this paper, the authors have mentioned some of the shared comments taken out of the participants through an open-ended question regarding the optimal age for starting a foreign language in an EFL context.

Comments by Iranian Students and Instructors

As there's no accounting for tastes, it apparently seems fruitful to have a survey on different views towards the appropriate time to start a foreign language. The authors chose 85 participants including 73 M.A. students of TEFL and 12 university instructors of ELT from different universities of Iran. They were given the question of "when do you think is the best time to start learning English as a foreign language in Iran" to ponder. Different views and comments were observed and collected. Table 1 shows the different shared comments by the participants.

Table 1

Shared Answers Gathered From 73 M.A. Students and 12 University Instructors of TEFL in Iran

No	Answers
1	The sooner the better
2	It depends on the purpose of the language learner, the goal justifies the age
3	They should first learn they mother tongue then start a foreign/second language
4	Approximately 6-7 years of age is ok
5	Parents should talk to them in both languages from the moment of birth
6	From the moment they can distinguish the pictures they can start learning a language by use of flash-cards
7	Only when they are fully competent in L1 should they start their foreign language
8	It depends on the situation, condition and the atmosphere the language learner is in
9	The suitable time can be to some extent related to the literacy of the parents. If they have academic degree and are well educated, maybe they can start it sooner than others.
10	If parents start working with them, children can start the foreign language as soon as they start to talk in their L1.

Final Remarks

According to what has been mentioned in the paper, it can be concluded that age is an important factor which can have remarkable impact on the ease and speed of second/ foreign language learning, though there has been no general agreement on the specific age. Plentiful evidence shows the approval of L2 learning in early childhood regarding the critical period hypothesis for L1 acquisition. On the other hand, some other scholars have rejected this hypothesis in second language learning relying on the evidence that adult learners can acquire a second language more easily, grammar and vocabulary are some those aspects. Apparently, though the concept of critical period is applicable to L1 acquisition, its application in the domain of L2 learning is under question. Furthermore, concerning the general process of language learning one thing is certain, that is, with regard to motivation and opportunity almost anyone can attain a degree of proficiency in another language at any age. Chavez (2006) claims that the best time to learn a foreign language is not definite and that it differs from person to person and with circumstances.

Scholars generally agree upon the issue of age, however, opinions differ on the exact sources and consequences of the age factor as discussed above. In the process of language learning, we are dealing with a complex individual called "learner" which in fact goes through a very complicated developmental process called "learning". In this process, the learner with their individualistic characteristics interacts with a extremely complex linguistic and social environment. The presence of all these factors at work makes the process very irregular. Consequently, language learning is apparently not simply a linear process and the age factor cannot be simply taken as the criterion for appointing a suitable learning time.

According to what has mentioned above, we can come up with two suggestions that seem pretty credible with regard to language learning. In naturalistic SLA environments such as immigrant situations, the sooner seems to be the better; that is the younger age is clearly better for a diversity of reasons even if it does not guarantee native-like ultimate attainment. From another point of view, in formal educational contexts where the second language is learnt primarily as a school subject only a limited amount of direct contact with second language speakers, beginning before the age of about 11 would mainly have attitudinal rather than linguistic benefits.

Any findings in this regard can have significant implications in the field of language teaching. Primarily, regarding the age factor, teachers should pay attention mostly to the natural cognitive abilities of their learners and try to set their teaching practices at the level of their students. Secondly, teachers, course designers and material developers should observe that learners at different ages require different materials and are predisposed to learning specific language skills, so students have to be provided with materials most suitable for their age condition. Moreover, along with the age factor, teachers are suggested to take into account several other factors including feelings, emotions, affections, background, culture as well as a several number of environmental items which all pose some kind of impact on the teaching/learning process as a whole and the teachers' practices in particular in language classrooms.

Last but not least, this fact should be taken into account (regarding the answers collected from the participants) that as opinions about the optimal age to start the foreign/ second language vary, if anyone is asked about the best possible age, the most logical answer would be "it depends on the purpose of the language learner or the purpose which is set for language learners". This answer is to some extent acceptable because if the purpose is to become a good translator, there might not be that much hurry to start the foreign language comparing to when the purpose is to have a native like accent!

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