

EXPLORING THE CRITICAL PERIOD HYPOTHESIS: PERSPECTIVES, THEORIES, AND IMPLICATIONS FOR LANGUAGE ACQUISITION



Language Acquisition

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Abstract

The whole purpose of this research is to describe what exactly the Critical Period Hypothesis is. The researcher takes into account different opinions of various authors on what specifically they have emphasized regarding the Critical Period Hypothesis. The Critical Period Hypothesis states that language acquisition becomes significantly more challenging and ultimately less successful after the first few years of life, which is the period when language develops most easily. This typically occurs between the ages of five and puberty. However, this does not imply that every researcher agrees—or should agree—with this theory. Noam Chomsky, one of the most well-known linguists of the twentieth century, founded his linguistic theories on certain philosophical ideas. Transformational Generative Grammar, based on mentalist philosophy, represents his primary contribution to linguistics. According to his Innateness Hypothesis, developed in the context of language learning, children are born with an inherent knowledge of the basic rules of grammar. Despite the complexity of the process, this innate knowledge aids children in acquiring their native language naturally and methodically. During a child's developmental stage, language acquisition is considered one of the most challenging processes. From the first few weeks of life until the mastery of grammar, the process of first language acquisition is carefully examined. The question of whether children learn their native language naturally or through significant effort remains a topic of considerable debate. Despite not being universally accepted, the Innateness Hypothesis remains the most compelling theory to explain how children acquire language. What, then, is the relevance of the critical period concept for adult learners as opposed to children? This, along with other important questions related to the issue, is addressed in the following sections.

INTRODUCTION

Language is what we use on a daily basis to connect with one another. In light of this, it makes sense that language is a component of our society and changes along with it. According to Jan Vanhove (2013), he emphasizes that: *“In second language acquisition research, the critical period hypothesis (CPH) holds that the function between learners’ age and their susceptibility to second language input is non-linear”* (Vanhove, 2013: 3). Noam Chomsky – a renowned scholar and linguist, proposed that language is something we are born with rather than merely an evolution of our society. This is known as the Innateness Hypothesis or Chomsky Hypothesis. Noam Chomsky (2002), states that: *“The ability to speak is innate since the human brain is biologically predisposed to do so. Acquiring a language involves mental process. In a way, it is genetically programmed into us”* (Chomsky, 2002: 75). His theory is based on the concept of Universal Grammar, which governs out conceptions of *grammar, syntax, and semantics*, which manifests in a particular way in all people. The idea has generated a lot of discussion in the field of linguistics and social sciences due to its content, which presents a sort of nature versus nurture dilemma. Chomsky is the primary proponent of the intrinsic theory, which holds that language is an intrinsic ability, and that a child’s brain has a unique language-learning mechanisms from birth. As a result, numerous theories and arguments have been attempted to either confirm or disprove the hypothesis. Grammar and vocabulary are the foundation of all languages, and every typical human learns at least one language. There are many mysteries surrounding how children pick up their mother tongue. Noam Chomsky (1986), emphasizes that: *“Knowledge of language is*

knowledge without grounds” (Chomsky, 1986: 80). From what Chomsky has emphasized, it is understood that all children possess the capacity to acquire languages from birth, although it is argued to what extent that holds. If children are born into a typical linguistic environment, acquisition of language will come for sure naturally. It is difficult to pinpoint the exact cause of children’s effortless and natural language acquisition, because children seem to pick up language without any formal instruction. Frisca Siahaan (2022), states that: “*Second language learners who start studying early in life and continue to be exposed to knowledge over several years or decades, unquestionably perform better than later learners*” (Siahaan, 2022: 40).

The Critical Period Hypothesis – which has biological roots, was introduced into the field of language learning by Penfield and Roberts (1959). Eight years later, Lenneberg improved upon it. Lenneberg maintained that language development should take place between the ages of two and puberty, since he thought this is when the brain’s lateralization process occurs (Lenneberg, 1967). The age range for a proposed critical period for language acquisition has been characterized in a number of ways in the literature. Eric Lenneberg (1967), emphasizes that: “*The language acquirement is stretched from two years of age to puberty, till fourteen years of age*” (Lenneberg, 1967: 15). Other scholars have established the cut-off point at twelve, fifteen, sixteen, or eighteen.

There will always be different opinions from different authors, when it comes to language learning acquisition. However, some researchers oppose The Critical Period Hypothesis. William O’Grady (2005), mentions that: “*Children imitate only 5 – 40 % (depending on each child) of the time when they converse with adults*” (O’Grady, 2005:50). To O’Grady – a child’s language starts to develop a grammar, after the age of eighteen months. When that happens, the children quickly pick up the majority of grammatical rules and syntactic structure from the language they hear around them without any assistance. By the time they turn five, the majority of children have grammar of an adult colloquial language, and all typical kids are proficient in their mother tongue. Moreover, Chomsky argues that language learning is not really something that the child does, it is something that happens to the child placed in an appropriate environment much as the child’s body grows, matures in a predetermined way when provided with appropriate nutrition and environmental stimulation. To Chomsky, all children share the same innateness, all children share the same internal constraints which characterize narrowly the grammar they are going to construct. (Chomsky, 2002: 82)

SOME STATEMENTS FROM VARIOUS AUTHORS ON THE CPH

Many different studies that have been conducted regarding The Critical Period Hypothesis, exactly for the language learning acquisition, there have always been different opinions on this issue. Citing again Eric Lenneberg (1967) who was the first to propose The Critical Period Hypothesis for language learning acquisition, he emphasizes that: “*There is a specific window of time, up to the onset of puberty, when language acquisition occurs most naturally. Language acquisition outside of the time frame is more difficult, making native proficiency less likely*” (Lenneberg, 1967: 82). Another researcher Steven Pinker (1994) agrees with Chomsky that

language cannot be just a product of cultural learning. Each theory contains both positive and negative aspects, so it is very important to be sure in which theory we rely. Numerous studies have been conducted on the subject sparked by Chomsky's hypothesis, and most of them appear to support Chomsky. Consequently, several unique and supplementary arguments have been presented in support of the concept. This notion is fundamentally supported by the fact that all individuals acquire the ability to speak. Children with good mental health can always learn to speak within a few years of being exposed to a language, and language acquisition tends to slow down significantly as an individual ages.

Frisca Siahaan (2022), she states that: *“What is important in language learning acquisition which applies to adults or children who are native speakers of their first language, there is a lot of effort in learning a second language. The Critical Period Hypothesis key source of evidence for second language is comparing the capacity of older learners to acquire a second language to that of children and adolescents”* (Siahaan, 2022: 43). The main source of the critical period hypothesis is the comparison of older students learning a foreign language with children and adolescents. There are many different authors who reach different conclusions regarding language acquisition. There are authors who conclude that adult learners and older children proceed faster during the beginning stages of language learning acquisition, even if younger children achieve high proficiency. While on the other hand, there other authors who say the opposite. Language is a complex, specialized skill. Every individual has the ability to communicate with others through language, which helps them to learn, and succeed in a specific field of study. Since children have high abilities to acquire a language, it is a fact that if a child for example has emigrated to another country, he/she will still acquire a second language. The relationship of learning abilities with age that parallels a natural phenomenon, the stages of development, confirms the idea of a biological involvement in the process of learning a language. According to the poverty of stimulation, people can learn to speak a language even if they have not received a formal education. Although language is a complex entity, even if a person's vocabulary might be very rich, a person's vocabulary may be riddled with mistakes. This is a normal process, which requires communication experience!

LANGUAGE ACQUISITION

The idea that language is ingrained, or to say it is programmed genetically within us, does not appeal to everyone, although it is quite appropriate. There have been several arguments put out in an effort to disprove Chomsky's theory. The fundamental notion that contradicts Chomsky's theory is that language is merely a component of culture, something that is infused through interpersonal interaction. The theory of Chomsky has been criticized a lot and he had to defend it since he presented it. One of Chomsky's major critics was the constructivist Jean Piaget with whom Chomsky had a debate over the process of acquiring knowledge of language. Jean Piaget (1967), argues that: *“The Innateness Hypothesis lacks concrete truth. Knowledge is acquired that constitutes knowledge”* (Piaget, 1967: 64). Constructivism, in his opinion, is the only theory that can adequately explain how knowledge is acquired. According to him, constructivism explains

how new concepts are formed as well as the traits they acquire as they develop into logically required ideas. Both Chomsky and Piaget deal with the concept of uncertainty. Even though the Innateness Hypothesis has not been validated, this does not imply that it is untrue. The innateness theory is a good contender to explain first language acquisition, since it explains a number of intriguing features of a child's language learning process (Britannica, 2024).

Another worth mentioning academic is the behaviorist Burrhus Frederic Skinner (1957), who states that: *“Knowledge is learnt by the learner's closes environment and by reinforcement. That is – children learn language by rewards or punishments”* (Skinner, 1957: 102). Skinner divided the acquisition of knowledge into operant and classical conditioning where he put language acquisition into operant conditioning. According to him, language is acquired when careers instruct children to control their verbal operant in response to environmental cues. The philosopher Hilary Putnam (1967), argues the remarkableness of first language acquisition, where he states that: *“It is not easy at all for a child to learn language, in fact, it takes children around ten years to stop making mistakes, grammatical errors in their speech and becoming completely fluent.”* He also claims that it is very possible to learn a subject by observing for ten years which would make most people master in a particular subject. Otherwise, language would be no different (Putnam, 1967: 42).

DISCUSSION

The Critical Period Hypothesis remains a long-standing topic of discussion in the field of language acquisition, focusing on the extent to which the ability to acquire language is biologically linked to age. The hypothesis suggests that the first years of life constitute a period during which language develops rapidly, and after a certain point sometime between age five and puberty, language acquisition becomes significantly more difficult and less successful. This raises ongoing debates among researchers about whether younger children develop language acquisition skills more effectively than adolescents or older individuals. It also sparks questions about whether children learn language purely by nature or more easily through instruction from educators. Furthermore, it is important to reflect on the relevance of the critical period for language acquisition in relation to adult learners versus children. These issues continue to be of great interest in understanding how language is best learned and what role age and environment play in the process.

CONCLUSIONS

The question of when is the most appropriate and easiest time to acquire a language has not yet been resolved (Scovel, 1988: 8). However, what is important to emphasize is the idea that the role of an educator is to teach both children and adults language according to specific criteria, including correct grammatical forms. Many researchers emphasizes that students can learn a language simply from their natural environment, but if the school's task is to produce knowledge, then teachers must provide guidance and instruction in language learning. In our primary schools,

students from the first grade are introduced to a second language, and when this learning begins at an early age such as six years old, it is more likely that children will develop a positive feeling and attitude toward the second language. This positivity can lead to greater enthusiasm and love for learning a foreign language, supporting the notion that early exposure and instruction are beneficial in language acquisition.

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