

When to Start Second Language Teaching or Learning in an EFL Context

Shima Sharifi
Foreign Language Faculty, Ferdowsi University of Mashhad
Iran
shima_sharifi81@yahoo.com



ABSTRACT: *E-Learning is gaining momentum in many directions. One important focus is the learning of second language. In this paper we address this issue by codifying the determining the most effective period for learning. We have outlined the critical period of such learning. We also discuss the multiple critical periods in this paper.*

Keywords: E-Learning, Critical period, Vocabulary learning

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1. Introduction

Speaking a second language has been considered as an important skill for many people throughout the world. Many studies show the best possible conditions for leaning a second language. It is a controversial issue concerning when to start second language teaching and learning and a lot of suggestions have been put forward by different scholars.

One of the most significant factors affecting the process of second language teaching/learning is shown through literature to be the age factor. As Singleton (1989) states extensive research, theory, and professional debate have searched for a definitive answer to the question of the best age to begin learning a foreign language. According to [2] the best time to learn a foreign language differs from person to person and with circumstances. Still, it is possible to make some useful generalizations. The best time to learn another language is as a child. If you learn a second or third language when you are young, before puberty, and you learn it from native speakers, you will learn to speak it naturally, without an accent [2]. Many scholars who agreed on early child language learning refer to the concepts like critical or sensitive period hypothesis.

2. Sensitive or Critical Period

Different scholars have different ideas on the exact meaning of critical period, but they all agree on a period in a child's life when L2 learning happens smoothly and almost inevitably, resulting in native-like or near-native-like proficiency. [3] distinguished two types of developmentally decisive periods, sensitive periods and critical periods. In 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. As [3] defines: a sensitive period refers to any duration of time when the neuronal connections within the brain

are particularly susceptible to environmental input. The critical period is a special case of sensitive periods when the brain must receive certain input in order to continue to function normally. Of course there are other definitions of critical period provided by other scholars including Lenneberg (1967, cited in Paradis, 2000) that it is defined as “*a period of time with a specific onset and offset during which language can be acquired more easily than any other time*” (p. 187). According to Lenneberg critical or sensitive period refers to a time when there is maximum brain plasticity during language development. During this period functional lateralization is thought to be largely influenced by variations in the timing of exposure to language.

This question that if there is a critical period for second language acquisition or not has been of great importance for language researchers. Most discussion about the critical period in language acquisition actually concerns learning that happens in natural L2 contexts rather than formal learning. Birdsong (2006) states that strict either/or categorization of a true CP as defined in biology is inappropriate to be used when it comes to L2 learning. To solve this problem he prefers the term sensitive period as it allows for the existence of exceptions because it does not consider it critical to start learning the L2 in the specific period. Some scholars even prefer the term “*age effect*” to critical.

3. Multiple Critical Periods

Several scholars have suggested that since the different components of language- phonology, morphology, syntax, lexicon, and pragmatics are acquired relatively independently of each other, their development might follow different timetables, pointing to the existence of multiple critical periods for a person. [3] argues that language depends on a wide range of specialized sensory, motor, and cognitive skills that involve many neural networks and structures that they are shaped differently by experience.

It is generally assumed that children learn second languages more easily and quickly than adults. This difference in ability has been referred to the existence of “*sensitive (or critical) period*”, which ends at around 8-10 years of age. It is thought 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. However, there is great disagreement about the extent to which adult second language learners are inhibited because of these neural differences.

4. Final Remarks

Based on the studies, it is concluded that age is an important factor which can have significant impact on the ease and speed of second language learning. There are many documents which approve L2 learning in early childhood is derived from 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 at least in some aspects of language such as vocabulary and grammar. It seems that although the concept of critical period is applicable to L1 acquisition, its application in the domain of L2 learning is not very strong and thus questionable. Moreover, concerning the general process of language learning one thing is certain, that is, with regard to motivation and opportunity almost anyone can reach to a degree of proficiency in another language at any age.

Generally, scholars agree that age matters, but opinions differ on the exact sources and consequences of the age factor. In the process of language learning, we are dealing with a complex organism called learner which goes through a very complicated developmental process called learning. In this way, the learner with his/her individualistic characteristics interacts with a very complex linguistic and social environment. All these factors make the process unpredictable. So, it seems obvious that language learning is not simply a linear process and the age factor cannot be merely taken as the criterion for judging learning outcomes.

Taking these points into account, we can come up with two suggestions that seem most plausible with regard to language learning. In natural SLA environments such as immigrant situations, younger learner is definitely better for many reasons even if it does not guarantee native-like attainment. On the other hand, in formal educational contexts where the L2 is learnt primarily as a school subject with only a limited amount of direct contact with L2 speakers, starting before the age of about 11 will mainly have attitudinal rather than linguistic benefits.

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