

CRITICAL PERIOD HYPOTHESIS TRUE FOR ESL LEARNERS

*Abdurakhmonov Mirshod
Vokhidov Anvar
Pardayev Utkir
Musurmonov Tilovmurod
Abdimurodov Doston*

INTRODUCTION

Different studies of the second language acquisition hold various theories as well as ideas. The fact is that, learning them step by step one can be sure that acquiring the second language is a complex process, which is associated with different hypotheses and related to the usage of distinct methods. Teaching English as a second language is just pleasure for me, especially to the students of different ages. The reason is that, they can have various difficulties in different aspects, as identifying these problems as well as trying to solve them by using variety types of methods and skills is the job, which can not only improve the knowledge of the students, but also it can help the teacher to be more professional. As my task was to research some data and provide conclusions on one of the theories of language acquisition, I decided to investigate the learner's second language acquisition according to Critical Period Hypothesis, the theory raised by Lenneberg, the linguist who supported two other scientists Wilder Penfield and Lamar Roberts having the idea of that youngsters need to learn the language before puberty and after this critical period the acquisition of the language can be impossible. Lenneberg also provided the idea of the work of both hemispheres of brain during this period thanks to neurological developments in person. I strongly agree with this hypothesis, as in my opinion, language learning is better performed in the childhood rather than acquiring it after puberty. As the hypothesis claims "The earlier, the better"

LITERATURE REVIEW

By conducting extensive research on Critical Period Hypothesis (CPH) I strongly felt that this theory is a crucial one, which requires more attention to pay while learning the language. As it holds the idea that at the early ages of people's life the language can be improved easily till the puberty (13 years old). However, after the critical age period the learning process can have some Is Critical Period Hypothesis true for ESL learners?

barriers against the development of the language, as the person cannot be able to acquire it in a rapid pace as before puberty. The reason is that, the age is connected with the variety of educational, social, effective as well as experimental factors. However, the role of biological

development is the main factor in the language learning (Andy Shouten, 2009). This theory was initially hold by the top neurologist Wilder Penfield and his co-author in his book called “Speech and Brain Mechanisms” as they claim that if a child learns a number of languages at the same time, it can give them an opportunity to switch between languages and they can understand it without the translation into their own language.

During some years the scholars of linguistics managed to conduct a range of experiments on CPH and according to them each of them could provide their own viewpoint about the role of age factor in the language learning. Nevertheless, it is still in a long-standing debate, as a lot more researches are being conducted and if the results of some of them can prove the idea of the existence of critical period in language learning, while the results of other organized surveys illustrated that the age is not the main factor in language learning, as the improvement of learning depends on the environment of the learner. But there is the third type of ideas that both younger and older language learners can achieve proficient results in LA according to their desire and trying.

To begin with the findings of Eric Lenneberg, who is considered as the father of CPH, as he strongly hypothesized that the acquisition of the language can only be performed during critical period, which includes itself the period from early infancy till puberty. He worked at identifying the age which shows that it is too late to learn the language. He held the idea of that any kind of skills connected with language learning can remain undeveloped, if they are not acquired before the mentioned critical age and stated that the knowledge acquired after puberty cannot be normal

or sufficient. In his book about Critical Period Hypothesis, he claimed that desired language acquisition can occur only within the childhood, as during this period both hemispheres of child Is Critical Period Hypothesis true for ESL learners?

are active and he argued that there is a mechanism of maturational change in people’s learning abilities (Johnson and Newport, 1989). However, as the research of Lenneberg was focused on L1, there were some doubts about the effect of CPH on the learning of the second language.

After Lenneberg’s finding came out, some linguists wanted to test it on real people and the cases conducting the survey of Genie and Isabelle were the most successful ones in this sphere. Genie (1970) was found by social workers at the age of 13 (Curtiss, 1977), it means at the age of puberty, being isolated from society by her parents, which lead to non-development in her .

speech as well as behavior, as she not only could not speak, but also could not walk and eat. But after seven years of rehabilitation in children’s hospital and being taught by some experts, she could only use some words, however she could not acquire the language properly as it was too late to learn even the first language after the puberty.

In the case of Isabelle (1930) as she was found at the age of seven, it means before puberty, after having some lessons of teaching the language to her, the results of training her were more successful, as she had not reached the critical age period yet and she had some time to improve her abilities in language learning.

As the CPH was proved to be eligible for L1, some more studies were put in practice to prove its connection to L2 acquisition. The most successful representatives were Johnson and Newport (1989-1991) as they decided to provide some evidence to this issue by conducting a research on Chinese and Korean L2 learners arrived in the U.S. They picked up 46 natives of these nations from ages 3 to 39 and organized their work by using grammatically judgement test. The results showed that the subjects came to the U.S before puberty showed better performance of the SLA than the participants who arrived later.

There was another experiment conducted by them in 1991 among only Chinese people with different ages of arrival by using the syntactic judgment test. Both of their researches were Is Critical Period Hypothesis true for ESL learners?

successful in proving the idea of the existence of CPH in language learning. A research different from Newport and Johnson's was conducted by Thompson (1991) to examine the influence of maturation on pronunciation involving 39 Russian born people immigrated to the U.S at the ages from 4 to 42. While organizing this research, the participants were given three types of tests as reading a list of 20 sentences with English sounds, 160 word passage to read and speaking for one minute about their activities of the day of research without any preparation. The results of the research could also be the evidence of Critical Period.

existence, as the participants of early age of arrival showed better results while conducting the test. Although there was a strong proof of CPH according to conducted researches, some skeptical ideas about the existence of CPH still remain, as a number of studies provided by language scientists proved that along with age factor, it is significant to mention that sociological, psychological and physiological factors are also pivotal in SLA (Andy Shouten)

PARTICIPANT PROFILE

To put in research this case study, I decided to choose the class which contains an adult member who had some difficulties in language learning as he began it after the critical age, which is proper to learn the language. One of my groups of extra-curricular lessons includes itself 8 students, that is 6 males and 2 females, who are learning English for a period of 3 months, so they have just finished elementary level and are just about to begin pre-intermediate level. Almost all of them are the people, who are from 12 to 15 years of age, however the learner, whom I would like to focus on is 25 yearold man having a job and family already.

Is Critical Period Hypothesis true for ESL learners?

chosen participant is a person who needs English for his job. His occupation is an economist and he works at one of the most famous organizations in his country. He has strong knowledge of his own sphere of work, however his language skills are not so improved. The only problem is that, he was not so keen on learning the English language before the puberty, for this reason he feels some difficulties in acquiring English, especially in learning the vocabulary. He says to me that when he learns new words, it seems to him he can remember them, but when it comes to

using them he can never remember appropriate words to use them and make up correct and coherent sentences. Despite of this, he is the student who always tries to work hard at his deficit of vocabulary as he strongly feels that the vocabulary is the part of speech that can improve the other skills of the English language. It is obvious that, he as a learner meets the requirements of SLA, however as he has missed the critical age period of learning a second language, he cannot feel confident in having a progress in LA. After identifying the subject, I decided to be focused on his weak points in learning the vocabulary, as they put a barrier for him to speak fluent English. Primarily, he got education in kindergarten specialized in learning the English language and continued his studies at a special school, where only math was a compulsory subject. For this reason, he is now proficient in math,

however as he did not continue language learning his English is in somehow lower level. Actually, his mother and sister are the teachers of English, at the same time his father is a person who is far from language learning, more precisely the person, whose work is focused on science subjects, it means he is good at math. From early childhood, S was directed to acquiring math and languages, however as his interest in math overweighed LA, he was mostly focused on gaining the knowledge of math.

As an individual, he is a good office-worker, supportive colleague, progressive learner of the secrets of his work and studious and intelligent in solving the problems at work. He is very Is Critical Period hypothesis true for ESL learners?

respected by his co-workers, as he is always eager to help them in any kind of situation. Besides that, people also appreciate him for being responsible towards his duties at work and out-of-work. Whatever he wants to learn to do, he does it with special attention and responsibility. Moreover, he is married and has a child, who is a son and in terms of family issues, he is good at controlling and supporting the family and handling with any kind of problems concerning family issues. Taking all his personal abilities and self-confidence into consideration, at the beginning of the research , I was sure that he could also manage to improve his language learning skills and coming to the end of it , I realized that it was not so easy to deal with LA having so many responsibilities at a time as well as learning the language after the puberty. For this reason, at the beginning I was a little bit specious about his improvement of vocabulary level according to this kind of barriers.

RESEARCH DESIGN

At the beginning of the research the subject was informed that the researcher was only interested in identifying the existence of CPH in SLA, more precisely the rate of knowledge improvement in children and the people after puberty. Besides that, the participant was introduced with Contest form and he signed it by realizing its importance in conducting the research himself. During period of a month of researching the subject, a number of tests and other methods of determining the knowledge and the development of the person's education were used to develop

the vocabulary and to check the level of improvement of his knowledge on vocabulary. Initially, the test on simple vocabulary was conducted to check the background knowledge of the participant of knowing some words of everyday use. As his results were not so bad with simple vocabulary and as he wanted to gain more knowledge of the used words in his sphere of work, a further test focused on the vocabulary of words on economics was given to him after some time. Is Critical Period Hypothesis true for ESL learners passed, as he worked as an economist at a big company. After having poor results of this kind of test, we with the subject agreed to divide the activities, which can help to improve his knowledge into two parts as:

1. In-class activities
2. Out-of-class activities

For fulfilling the in-class activities to improve the level of vocabulary, I used some pictures showing the words which are connected to economics in clusters and the task of the subject was to determine the words meaning according to picture and to try to make up some sentences related to his job by using this kind of vocabulary appropriately. By this way it would be easier to remember the words for him as he feels the importance of these words in his workplace. Moreover, I put in practice another activity in class, which helped him a lot. Some words were given to him in the pieces of paper and at the same time in other pieces the definitions of these

given words were provided to him. And his task here was to match the words to their definitions. The subject found this kind of exercises very interesting and attractive, as there was the feeling of confidence in doing them with the help of the teacher. He thought that if there is somebody to instruct him how to do the task as well as to check for his mistakes, it makes the him more confident in understanding the mistakes done by him and correcting them immediately. And for realizing out-of-class activities to develop vocabulary skills, I recommended him to write the words which should be learnt on some stickers and stick them in different objects,

which can always be visible to him at home or at work and it can give him an opportunity to read and try to remember them as often as possible. But it should not distract him from other responsibilities at that time. For example, he is not allowed to stick them on the inner parts of the car, as while driving a car, it is not allowed to look

at them and break the rules of traffic. Furthermore, recording the words on his telephone and listening to them as well as repeating Is Critical Period Hypothesis true for ESL learners

them too often even when driving a car or relaxing in bed could provide him with the development of his vocabulary base. The participant was clearly explained the rules of doing the kind of activities which were suggested to do to expand his vocabulary. At the same time, he admitted that the research was getting more and more interesting to complete for him also and that he was very eager to participate in it himself, as the results of the study were not only beneficial, but also interesting to know for him.

DATA COLLECTION AND FINDINGS

Before the start of my study on the subject, I decided to keep a checklist of every activity done with the participant to write down the results of the tests solved by him, the improvements of identifying definitions of words as well as the rate of the reduction of mistakes made by him

while making up the sentences to see the improvements due to in-class activities. At the same time, I also recommended my chosen subject to note down his findings while doing the out-of-class activities recommended by me to do individually without my help. And at the end of research we both reviewed our notes, compared them to each other's and tried to draw some conclusions according to their results. At first, the results of his tests on simple vocabulary of everyday use were not so negative, the reason is that, as a child he could acquire some words, which are often used in the English language. In case of more difficult vocabulary related to special category of words, which was not learned by him before puberty, he had certainly some variations in results. In case of in-class activities, he could gain more improvements as the support of teacher in classroom was crucial for him. The usage of picture vocabulary as well as sentence production and the usage of words connected to his working sphere helped him to develop his vocabulary.

learning skills as he was keen on learning this kind of vocabulary himself. But still he had Is Critical Period Hypothesis true for ESL learners?
10

somehow lower level of improvement in comparison to his younger groupmates, as he was only succeeded in remembering the words of his working sphere. However, when it comes to other type of vocabulary, he could not remember almost the half number of the provided words. Talking about his out-of-class improvements, the experiment with stickers with written words was only successful at home atmosphere, as only at home he was not disturbed by work

responsibilities and could read them in silence while relaxing in bed. But in case of driving a car and working at the office, to fulfil this task was absolutely impossible,

as while driving it is not allowed to be distracted by other activities and while working his mind is concentrated only on his work and responsibilities of his job. However, he stated that even if he could read and learn the words while having a rest in bed, he could not remember them the next day while using the language at work being overloaded with the responsibilities at his office. He added that the

method of listening to recorded words in the car and repeating them as many times as possible was more beneficial for his 5 year-old son, who is always taken to the kinder-garden by him in the car, as they had listened and repeated the recorded vocabulary together in the car. He stated by smiling that his son is more successful in catching and remembering the words than his father is, as they are both (father and son) experiencing different stages of development, that is before and after puberty. As his son's mind is fresh and both hemispheres of his brain are ready to

acquire the language, at the same time his critical period passed out. Nonetheless, after a the period of a month, when the subject was tested by the same level test of vocabulary, as conducted at the beginning of the research, the results illustrated that he could achieve some improvements only in the vocabulary of his work nature, as from the beginning he felt that it was easier to learn the words related to his work as he uses them in practice at his workplace every day.

CONCLUSION

From overall perspective, after having studied the person, who has already achieved his puberty stage and being far from understanding some classroom instructions because of having a job and family life, even after conducting a number of in-class and out-of-class activities to acquire the second language after critical age period, the studies showed that SLA is more possible from an early age until the puberty. According to data collected, one can strongly agree that, the hypothesis of Lenneberg and Newport and Johnson about the existence of CPH can be supported and proved by the individuals. As it can really be very sophisticated to a person to acquire a new language after puberty, as Lenneberg claims according to some neurobiological changes, only one hemisphere will be responsible for language acquisition during this period. Nevertheless, the research also depicted that not only age factor, but also some other factors as the environment, home culture, work as well as the interest to the LA and feeling the responsibility can be in the list of significant factors of SLA. It can strongly prove that CPH directly depends on sociological, psychological as well as physiological factors of people's

lifestyles. However, after the research I understood that CPH is not the only factor which affects the language acquisition and the scientists who doubted this hypothesis were partly right as even the individuals who began learning the SL after puberty could achieve if not perfect, but good results in gaining the knowledge of SLA, as both younger and older learners have an ability to achieve positive results in LL according

to the levels of proficiency of any kind of programs. All in all, the research done by me with help of my participant taught me the advantages and

disadvantages of some strategies of language teaching as well as made a contribution to the improvement of my teaching skills. After all, I understood more properly that, learning a foreign language before puberty when the mind is fresh is far more beneficial for the learners who have a desire of being proficient in acquiring it as learning the second language after critical period can Is critical Period Hypothesis true for ESL learners?

be only successful in some special cases, even in this case it cannot always be in a high level. To sum up, the message is that I strongly support the idea of Lenneberg “The earlier, the better” as it can also be suitable for SLA.

References:

Andy Shouten. (2009). The Critical Period Hypothesis: Support, Challenge and Reconceptualization. *TESOL & Applied Linguistics*, Vol. 9, No. 1, 1-16

Curtiss, S (1977). *Genie: A psycholinguistic study of a modern day “wild child”*. New York:

Academic press.

Johnson, J.S & Newport, E.L (1989). Critical period effects in language learning: the influence

of maturational state on the acquisition of English as a second language. *Cognitive Psychology*,

21, 60-99.

Lenneberg, E (1967). *Biological foundations of language*. New York: Wiley

Thompson, I (1991). Foreign accents revisited: The English pronunciation of Russian immigrants. *Language Learning*, 41, 177-204