

Self-Reflection on Second Language Learning

Critical Period Hypothesis

Introduction

Is there really an age that is considered ideal at which a person should start learning a second language? Is there just a slim chance for any adult learner to get himself into the process of learning, mastering a second language? These questions arise out of a Critical Period Hypothesis, including an interesting phenomena which relates to the hypothesis which occurred during my personal career as a teacher, making it as a focus of this capstone paper.

Critical Period Hypothesis – A Debatable Issue

A prominent person involved in the Critical Period Hypothesis (CPH) was Mr. Eric Lenneberg (1969), who focused his hypothesis on the development of the neurological system. He highlighted that there is a process on maturation which is referred to as cerebral lateralization, with which the brain loses plasticity as it matures gradually. This process begins at around age two, and is supposed to finish at puberty. After this period, it is already difficult, almost impossible for any learner to acquire a different language successfully.

The Critical Period Hypothesis is also associated with the use acquisition of language's phonological system. Scovel (1990), explained that it is not possible for language learners beyond 12 years old to achieve a pronunciation like that of a native, even though they may still be able to master the vocabulary and syntax of the second language. A similar perspective involving phonological attainment was introduced by Flach and Base (1994). They explained out of their studies that a foreign accent among second-language learners between the ages 5 and .This potentially implies that in the aspect of phonology, the "critical period" stops earlier than what was proposed by Lenneberg.

Insights Gained from the Hypothesis

Taking into consideration what I have discovered out of this paper, I believe that the evidences supporting CPH is mixed up, particularly when I focused on the second-language learners whom I have encountered in a secondary school in Asia. Throughout my entire career as a teacher, I have had the opportunity to teach a lot of second-language learners coming from a diverse group of backgrounds in terms of gender, age, financial status, etc.

One thing that is common among them is that not all of them began learning English as their second language at the same age. As a matter of fact, there are certain cases which were pretty impressive. For example, I taught two girls aged 17 in my class. Both girls began learning English at 12 years old. What makes the scenario remarkable was that both girls could write extremely fluently with exquisite accuracy in terms of grammars and the use of different sentence patterns. Their performance in terms of reading and writing have even gone way beyond their local counterparts who started learning English in kindergarten.

I view this as a counter-evidence against CPH. Both of the girls have revealed that they were strongly motivated to enhance their English skills, catching up with their classmates. These factors played a role in their success in second-language learning. As mentioned by Brown (2008), a factor that is important in second-language acquisition is motivation. This means that learners who started learning another language at primary school may not necessarily be ahead of adolescent learners in achieving higher proficiency in the long run.

Conclusion

As a sensible and experienced teacher, I believe that we should not limit ourselves too much in any model or theories in language acquisition. If a teacher believes in CPH, it may affect their expectations of their students who are already past their puberty period. This may lead to having lower expectations of the students, even though they may not be

aware of the fact that their professors assume that they have already gone way beyond the actual optimal period involved in learning a second language.

Rather, as educators, we need to be reflective and flexible enough to deal with the individual learner's needs, facilitating their learning style, regardless of their age. Even though I am convinced that age is still a very important factor, I am more concerned on how I can potentially adjust my teaching styles in order to better suit the needs of learners from different age groups.

References

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