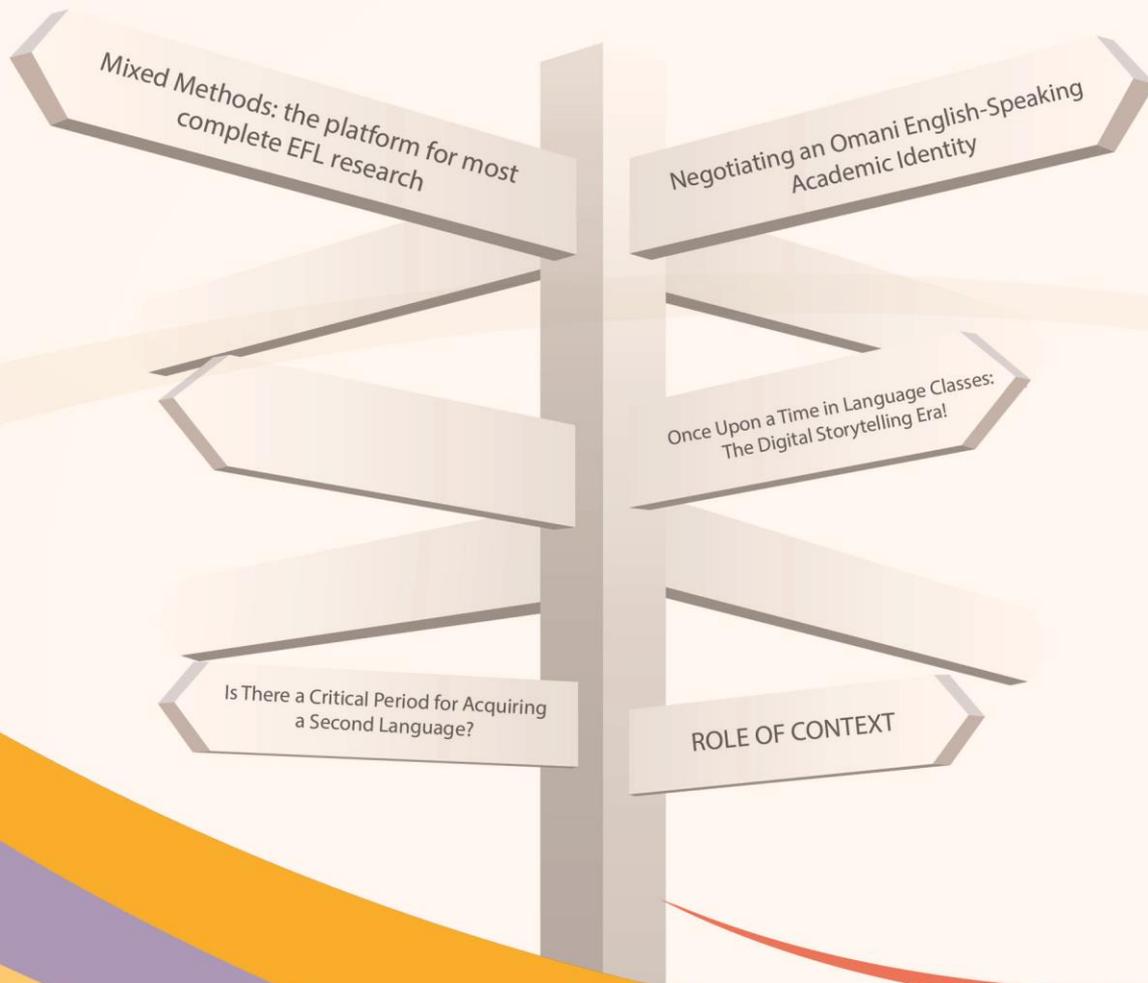


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Is There a Critical Period for Acquiring a Second Language?

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Abstract

The Critical Period Hypothesis (CPH) predicts that native-like proficiency is unattainable in adult L2 learning due to gradual (with age) loss of neuroplasticity. This essay reviews a number of studies that examined ultimate attainment by late (after puberty) L2 learners. These learners were able to overcome the CPH predictions because of some linguistic factors, like the influence of the L2 learners' mother tongue, and the access to Universal Grammar (UG), as well as non-linguistic ones, like the age of arrival and the length of residence in the L2 environment, aptitude (verbal and analytical abilities), and motivation (need for communication and integration). Given these findings, we conclude that maturational constraints may be counteracted by various mental and psychological resources.

Key words: Critical Period Hypothesis; Second Language Acquisition; ultimate attainment; non-linguistic factors.

Lenneberg's (1967) Critical Period Hypothesis (CPH), which states that "primary language acquisition must occur during a critical period which ends at about the age of puberty with the establishment of cerebral lateralization of function" (Snow & Hoefnagel-Höhle, 1978:1114), has been a source of stimulation for many studies that were conducted to test its validity. The studies aimed to investigate the possibility of native-like performance in late first language acquisition (L1A) as well as in late second language acquisition (L2A). The CPH predicts that late (after puberty) language acquirers will not be able to achieve native-like proficiency in the respective languages. The discussion in this article will be limited to the predictions of the CPH in L2A. As a matter of fact, the CPH can be interpreted as either the Exercise

Hypothesis which states that “the language learning faculty atrophies with lack of use over time” (Birdsong, 1999:6), or the Maturational State Hypothesis which states that the language learning “capacity disappears or declines with maturation” (Johnson & Newport, 1989:64).

There are several arguments for a critical period in L2A. To illustrate, the plasticity of the neural substrate of the brain is believed to decrease with age (Lenneberg, 1967, as cited in Long, 1990). Moreover, the closure of the biological window of opportunity is marked by loss of the Universal Grammar (UG) or at least loss of access to it (Bley-Vroman, 1989, as cited in Birdsong, 1999). Nonetheless, I believe that unless we know when (age seven or 12 or 16) and why (since many adult L2 acquirers can achieve native-like proficiency in the L2) this window of opportunity is closed, the CPH need remain bound to investigation. Moreover, since many non-linguistic factors can (at least partially) account for native-like performance in L2A, the biological or neurological cause for this closure should be made clear. Therefore, I think that such non-linguistic factors as “attitude, motivation, empathy, self-esteem, ego-permeability, and perceived social distance” (Long, 1990:275) as well as input and aptitude can account for the varying achievement of the late L2 learners. Thus, I will cite some studies that report on adult L2 learners who could achieve native-like proficiency on a variety of Grammaticality Judgment Tests (GJT) on (some of) which the participants’ ability to switch to the target parametric values of different principles was measured.

For example, White and Genesee (1996) tested 19 native, 44 near-native and 45 non-native speakers of English on their knowledge of certain aspects of wh-movement constraints, which are UG-bound. The near-natives’ performance was indistinguishable from that of the native speakers. The authors interpreted this result as evidence that, at least, some UG aspects are not subject to critical period constraints. However, since many of the participants had a Germanic or a Romance language as their L1, the authors acknowledged that the participants’ L1s might have influenced their performance. Thus, the choice of the participants in this study indicates that there are at least two types of L2 learners, near-natives and non-natives.

Furthermore, Birdsong (1992, as cited in Birdsong, 1999) administered a GJT on various subtle elements of French morpho-syntax to 20 natives and 20 advanced adult acquirers of French with English as their L1. The author found that 15 of the non-native speakers of French fell within the range of native speaker performance, and that their performance was predicted by their Age of Arrival (AOA) in France. Moreover, Birdsong (1997, as cited in Birdsong, 1999) found that four (20 percent) of the non-native participants performed at 100 percent accuracy in an examination of the acquisition of constraints on the realization of liaison consonants in French. In addition, Birdsong, Molis and Johnson (1997, as cited in Birdsong, 1999) replicated Johnson and Newport’s (1989) study with 62 native speakers of Spanish. They found

that three out of the 32 late acquirers scored above 95 percent, and 13 of them performed at or above 92 percent accuracy. Obviously, these findings support the assumption that the CPH is not really applicable to all adult L2 learners.

Moreover, Flynn (1983, as cited in Flynn, 1996) investigated the acquisition of the L2 English head direction parameter by 21 adult speakers of Japanese. As English and Japanese have different directions for the heads of their Complementizer Phrases (CP), the hypothesis was that if these L2 learners can access UG, then they will show command of the English value of the principle. The findings suggested that the participants were aware of the difference between their L1 and L2, and that “at the highest proficiency level tested, the Japanese speakers showed a significant preference for postposed clauses” (Flynn, 1996:136). This study, together with the three studies conducted by Birdsong, draws our attention to the kind of sample that should be approached in such studies; that is, the motivated people who have learnt the L2 for a long time as opposed to ones who had a course or two in the L2.

Furthermore, Epstein, Flynn and Martohardjono (1996, as cited in Slabakova, 2001) investigated the acquisition of English L2 functional categories by adult native speakers of Japanese who were students at the MIT. Their results, which showed full competence with regard to functional categories, are interpreted against the predictions of the CPH in L2A. These results also support full access to UG without the involvement of L1 parameters in L2A.

Moreover, DeKeyser (2000) investigated the relationship between the performance on a GJT, language aptitude and age of arrival (AOA) in the L2 community. He hypothesized that only those adults who have high verbal and analytical abilities (aptitude) will be able to achieve within the range of early acquirers. He found that AOA for the after-17 acquirers correlated negatively with their performance on the GJT; and that all, but one, of the adult acquirers who achieved within the child acquirers’ range had high analytical abilities as revealed by their aptitude test scores. This finding shows the key role that language aptitude plays in L2A.

In addition, Ioup, Boustagui, El Tigi and Moselle (1994) report on a successful acquisition of the Egyptian dialect of Arabic by a British woman who was not exposed to Arabic through formal instruction, rather she picked it up from the people with whom she had to communicate (as her Egyptian husband left her and went to do the military service). This study also reports on a similar command of Standard Arabic by another woman who acquired Arabic in a school setting as she stayed in Egypt for 26 years and did a Ph.D. in Arabic. Both women showed native-like command of Arabic on a GJT, and their pronunciation (accent) was indistinguishable from that of native speakers on a variety of the sentences that they were asked to read. Again, this reveals the role of motivation (a non-linguistic factor) in L2A as well as

that of Length of Residence (LOR), as the second woman stayed in Egypt for a long time.

Furthermore, Dekydtspotter, Sprouse and Thyre (1998) investigated the acquisition of the *Quantification at a Distance* (QUAD) structure in French L2 among intermediate English speaking university students. The QUAD structure refers to placing the quantity expression, e.g. *beaucoup*, in a preverbal position rather than in a determiner position; the latter refers to a non-QUAD structure. As a matter of fact, the QUAD structure is true only in multiple event contexts, whereas the non-QUAD structure can co-occur in multiple as well as single event contexts. What is special about this study is that it examines the acquisition of a structure that is not provided by the input nor does the L1 have it. It is noteworthy that the semantic functions of the QUAD structure can be carried out with an acceptable degree of similarity by the corresponding non-QUAD structures. However, the syntactic difference between the QUAD, an Event-related structure, and the non-QUAD, an Event- and Object-related structure points out to the subtle interpretive distinction. Two experiments were conducted to measure the acquisition of this structure. 160 English-speaking learners of French as an L2 and 11 French native speakers were employed as participants. The first experiment addressed the occurrence of the QUAD structure in multiple event contexts only. The second experiment compared the QUAD structure with sentences containing frequency adverbs to find out whether the participants can treat the QUAD structures differently from the corresponding frequency adverb structures that contain, for example, the adverb *beaucoup de fois* 'many times'. The overall results suggest that the participants were sensitive to the syntactic as well as the semantic properties of the QUAD structure, which provides insurmountable evidence for the full involvement of UG in the L2 learning task. This study supports the claim that UG is still accessible for L2 learners in its full provisions when it comes to acquiring L2 elements that may or may not have L1 counterparts. This finding salvages Flynn's (1983) results in that acquiring the L2 forms was not a result of learning any complex cognitive skill; rather it was a result of accessing the target language parametric value of the tested principle.

The findings of these studies point out to the key role played by different non-linguistic factors. To illustrate, they indicate that participant selection matters in L2A studies; that is, there are at least two types of L2 learners, near-natives and non-natives. Moreover, they stress the role of aptitude in the L2A process, in line with Bley-Vroman's (1988) Fundamental Difference Hypothesis (FDH), which states that while child language learners rely on their mental plasticity (necessary for rule formulation and testing), adult languages learners rely on their mental, verbal, and analytical abilities to achieve native-like competence in language acquisition. In addition, the findings emphasize the important role played by motivation or the communicative need on the part of the L2 learner. Furthermore, the LOR (apart from

the AOA) seems to determine, to some extent, how proficient the L2 learner would be. In addition, these studies provide further evidence that UG, with its parametric values, remains accessible to the L2 learners, as Dekydtspotter et al.'s (1998) study shows. Despite the fact that the findings of these studies and many others stress the role of age in L2A, this aspect of the Second Language Acquisition (SLA) theory remains controversial, as we still do not have a perfect test for the CPH in LA. My goal has been to show that the maturational constraints imposed by age can be avoided provided that several non-linguistic factors are involved in the L2A process.

In interpreting the findings of many studies and in stating claims on the role of age in L2A, I think that many people seem to confuse UG with the Language Acquisition Device (LAD). I believe that if we treat both constructs as two different entities or faculties, we will have a clearer idea about the role of age in language acquisition. To illustrate, I think that UG refers to the innate grammatical knowledge without which it is difficult (if not impossible) to learn a language; that is, its access should not be bound to age constraints. However, the LAD refers to the mechanisms that language learners employ when they learn language, and without which language learning is impossible, and which could be different for different learners.

Moreover, if we admit that all L1 and L2 learners have access to UG, we will be able to explain why both parties can acquire an L2 (even to varying degrees of proficiency). Also, if we make the distinction between the different mechanisms or LADs exploited by children (domain-specific) and adults (general) L2 learners, we will be able to explain the relative ease with which children acquire language. To conclude, the children are favored according to the less is more hypothesis (since they do not have the ability to think of and reflect on the language structures), whereas adults are favored according to the FDH in availing themselves of their sophisticated cognitive abilities. Therefore, the children's LAD might be the faculty the access to which is bound to age constraints.

This indicates that adult L2 learners (like university students) should be able to achieve native-like proficiency in their L2 if they are willing to use their abundant mental, analytical, verbal, social, and personality resources. This, in turn, means that language instructors should take all three domains (cognitive, affective, and psychomotor) seriously when delivering the L2 in the classroom setting. Individual differences like motivation (intrinsic or extrinsic), empathy, attitude, aptitude, learning style, and sociability play an important role in L2 learning.

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