

PROVIDING EARLY FOREIGN LANGUAGE EDUCATION IN VIETNAMESE CONTEXT

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ABSTRACT

There is a common belief that providing early language education facilitates learners' language acquisition. This belief is supported by critical period hypothesis defined as a biological period that humans are set to acquire a language. However, much research has found the opposite. This paper critically discusses the evidence supporting 'the younger the better' viewpoint and counter-evidence against this belief. More importantly, it brings into concern the constraints of introducing early language education in the context of Vietnam

Keywords: foreign language, critical period hypothesis, early language education.

1 INTRODUCTION

Approximately 1.5 billion people speak English as second or foreign language while there are nearly 400 million native speakers of English [9]. This figure has made English qualified to be given the status of a 'global language' or an 'international language' [36]. To gain this standing requires the language not only to have a large number of native speakers but also to be largely used as a second and foreign language in other countries. Having the status of 'a global language' or 'an international language' is one of the explanations for English to be introduced as a foreign language to the early age in many countries. Vietnam has acknowledged the status of English and made it to be the official compulsory subject in primary levels at grade 3 to 5[38]. There has been an increasing concern among parents and policy makers on introducing English to grade 1 and 2 or even earlier. However, introducing English to earlier age needs further research and serious considerations. The common belief 'the younger the better' cannot be relied on to make such an important decision as research has found the opposite. In this paper, I would argue that introducing English to young age does not guarantee success in English teaching and learning context in Vietnam. This paper will firstly review the research findings supporting 'the younger the better' belief, then discuss the opposite view and finally present issues related to introducing English to young age in Vietnamese context.

2 RESEACH FINDINGS SUPPORTING 'THE YOUNGER THE BETTER' AND THEIR LIMITATIONS

The assumption that the younger learners learn a language, the better they learn has received support from cognitive, neuropsychological and affective perspective[16]. According to cognitive point of view, learners benefit from starting learning languages early in life as they possess an innate ability to acquire languages. Brown, Cazden and Bellugi (1969) and Cazden (1972)

supported this point of view by claiming that nearly all children learn a minimum of one language effortlessly without apparent guidance from parents or others[5]. This perspective received theoretical support from Chomsky (1972) and McNeill (1970) suggesting that there is an innate language mechanism[7][24], and also from Penfield and Roberts (1959) with critical period hypothesis[32]. Critical period hypothesis shared the idea that humans are biologically set to acquire language at a specific period. After this critical period, they are less likely to successfully acquire languages [22]. The strong version of critical period hypothesis suggests that native-like accent is not likely to be acquired after a particular period or a critical period[35]. Critical period hypothesis received some support from Johnson and Newport (1989), DeKeyser and Larson-Hall (2005), and Scovel (1988)[19][12][34]. Among those proponents, Johnson and Newport (1989) seems to give decisive and strong support for a critical period. Their studies revealed that those starting at age 7 reached the level of proficiency of native speakers whereas those starting between 7 and 15 years old show lower performance levels. Of those starting after 15 years old, their distribution of performance is varied. Their study seems to be in favor of a critical period which is 7 years old. However, Johnson and Newport study was criticized for not making age factor independent of social and linguistic background of participants. In order to make the existence of a critical period for language acquisition convinced, there should be evidence that is independent of social and linguistic factors. Bialystok (1997) claimed that three factors raising question (the participants involved, structures in the test and the task used to assess competence) did not support the conclusion that outcomes of the study are the result of age factor[3]. The data gained from Johnson and Newport study have also been re-analysed by Bialystok (1997). The re-analysis reveals that the age of 20, instead of 17 as Johnson and Newport (1989) claimed showed strong correlation between age of arrival and performance levels. 'The tendency for proficiency to decline with age projects well into adulthood and does not mark some defined change in learning potential at around puberty' [3]. Another study in support of critical hypothesis period was conducted by Patkowski (1980). The study involved 67 immigrants in the US, 33 of whom arrived before they were 15 while 34 immigrants arrived after the age of 15. The study found that there was "an age related limitation on the ability to acquire full command of a second language"[31]. However, the participants were tested in the environment that English was spoken as a first language, which differs substantially from the foreign environment in which Vietnamese students are learning English. Therefore, this finding cannot be generalized and applied into foreign language environments. One of the theoretical explanations for the critical period hypothesis comes from neurological cognitive. Penfield and Roberts (1959) suggested that after maturation, the brain experiences the loss of plasticity, and therefore, the potential for development is mitigated[32]. Lenneberg (1967) suggested that the optimum period coincides with the lateralization process of language function to the brain left side[13]. This neurological basis for the critical period hypothesis has been doubted by Krashen (1973) as the exact age at which lateralization occurs was challenged[20]. Young learners' attitudes, motivation and anxiety have been brought into concern to justify an early start. Children's attitudes are considered to be more positive; they are also considered to be more motivated and are less affected by anxiety than older students[27]. However, some argue that although adult and adolescent learners are less open to the target language, they can be highly motivated and committed toward second language acquisition[16].

3 OLDER LEARNERS ALSO ACHIEVE SUCCESS

In recent years, early foreign language education has attracted much concern as counter-evidence against 'the younger the better' has presented (García Mayo & García Lecumberri, 2003; Muñoz, 2006; Nikolov & Djigunović, 2006, 2011, for example). One of the most famous among these studies

is the study of Asher and Price (1967), which showed that adults surpassed children and adolescents at all aspects of language complexity. The participants involved 96 learners from grade 2, 4 and 8, and 37 undergraduate students who had not had any previous experience with the examined language. Asher and Price recognized that the chosen samples included undergraduate students who may possess high mental ability compared to the children. However, they cited Pimsleur (1966) that 'general mental ability is a lightweight factor in L2 learning accounting for less than 20% of the variance' [1]. Another study by Politzer & Weiss (1969) on phonology also found that the older the participants are, the higher the test scores are. The participants of this study included those from grade 1,3, 5, 7 and 9. Concern can be raised as many children after grade 3 had had some experience with the target language and many of those at grade 7 and 9 have received regular training in this language. Politzer and Weiss, however, suggested that such instruction can only directly affect performance of a small part of the test items.

One of the studies of FLES (Foreign Language in Elementary School) programmes reported in Singleton & Ryan (2004) investigated the English teaching in grades 1 to 4 (learners at the age from 8 to 11) in primary schools in Swede[37]. In pronunciation test, results increased consistently with age in all aspects of assessment (entire utterances, individual speech sounds and overall impressions). Similarly, in the listening comprehension test, older children gained higher scores than younger ones. Two projects carried out at University of the Basque Country and the University of Barcelona in Spain provide significant evidence for the viewpoint 'the older, the better'. The project by University of the Basque Country includes participants who learn English as a third language (after Basque and Spanish). English was traditionally first taught to learners at their age of 11, however, it has lately been introduced when the learners are at the age of 8. The project aims at comparing performance of those starting at 11 and those starting at 8 and also investigating children who are exposed to English at the age of 4. The finding of the project is that in all examined categories (listening comprehension, written comprehension, grammaticality judgement, oral proficiency, written production, sound perception and pronunciation), the later starters surpass the earlier beginners with the same exposure time[15]. The project of University of Barcelona produces similar result. This project involves subjects who start learning English between the age of two and six, at the age of 8, 11, 14 and after age 18. The project also reveals that with equal exposure time, the later starters do better than the earlier ones in all examined tasks (written tests, oral story-telling, oral interaction and listening comprehension test)[37]. Two studies carried out by Nikolov (2000) provide counter-evidence against the strong version of the critical period hypothesis. Study 1 involved 20 adult-onset Hungarian learners; in study 2, participants were 13 Hungarians starting to learn English at the age of 15. Six out of 20 participants were thought to be native speakers by native judges. The second study revealed that five out of 13 participants were often mistaken for native speakers. Thus, it cannot be the case that native-like accent is not possible to be acquired after a critical period as suggested by the strong version of the critical period hypothesis.

4 STARTING A FOREIGN LANGUAGE EARLY IS NOT NECESSARY TO HAVE NATIVE – LIKE PROFICIENCY

The proficiency level of native speakers has been set as a criterion to assess the ability of second language learners, as Cenoz & Genesee (1998, p18) claimed, 'bilinguals, in and outside the school, are usually evaluated against 'monolingual' competence in their non-native languages'[6]. Though it may be reasonable to compare the competence levels of second language learners to those of native speakers, it is also necessary to recognize that the concept of native speakers is

restricted by culture as remarked by Hill (1970). Moreover, as Cook (2002, p.6) suggested while ‘ultimate attainment is a monolingual standard rather than an L2 standard’[8], the standard for a second language learners’ achievement should not be the same as that of monolingual speaker. Davies (2003) brought into concern how difficult defining native speaker is. ‘The distinction native speaker – non-native speaker is at bottom one of confidence and identity’ [10].

Taking native-like proficiency standard into account, it is hard to draw into conclusion whether young starters or older starts are likely to have native-like proficiency. On the one hand, there is research that has drawn on the conclusion that starting to learn a foreign language at an early age is crucial to have native-like proficiency. To name one of the most famous studies, the study carried out by Asher and Garcia (1969)[2] showed a connection between age of arrival into a host country and its language learning. The study involved 71 Cuban immigrants to California whose ages are from 7 to 10 years and most of them have been in the United States for five years. Although none of them gained native-like pronunciation, many of them were considered to have near-native pronunciation. The highest proportion of those who were regarded to have near-native pronunciation was the group of children arriving in the United States between the age of one and six. The study also found the relationship between the age of entry and the native-like accent. It was found that the younger the children entered the United States, the more native-like accent they had. On the other hand, it is undeniable that there has also been much research finding that starting a foreign language as adults can also enable learners to have native-like proficiency. For example, Birdsong (1992)[4] found that a majority of his late learner participants were able to achieve as high proficiency as early starting learners and native speakers in grammaticality judgement task although the late starting group generally performed worse than the early starting group. Loup et al. (1994)[23] reported two adult-onset learners who were able to achieve native level of competence in Arabic. Other studies (Bongaerts, 1999; Bongaerts et al., 2000; Bongaerts et al., 1995; Bongaerts et al., 1997; Palmen et al., 1997, for example) found some starting their second language after the age of 12 were able to gain the same pronunciation levels as native speakers. Similarly, Van Boxtel et al. (2003) claimed that some late starters of Dutch successfully achieved native-like levels on a grammaticality judgement task. Thus, these above mentioned evidences contradict the view of critical period hypothesis that those starting a second language after a certain period in life are not able to achieve native-like competence [34]. Hyltenstam and Abrahamsson (2000, p. 155) realized that there has not been any case of late L2 starter who achieve native-like proficiency in all linguistic details[18]. They also claimed that even those starting a second language early do not reach the proficiency level of native speakers in every subtle detail. Research done by Hyltenstam & Abrahamsson (2000) showed that very young L2 starters fail to achieve level identical to native speakers in lexico-grammatical aspects[18]. Similarly, other studies (Flege, Frieda & Nozwa, 1997; Guion, Flege & Loftin, 2000; Piske, Mackay & Flege, 2001) found that many experienced a second language exposure very early in life could not speak L2 with the same accent as native speakers[14][17][33].

5 INTRODUCING ENGLISH IN VIETNAMESE CONTEXT ‘MINIMAL INPUT SITUATION

Foreign language learning environment differs from second language learning environment in that the former does not provide sufficient exposure to the target input. Moreover, foreign language learning environment is not able to generate and strengthen motivation for learners to use English as they hardly have chance to use English for their practical purposes. Hence, evidence for ‘the younger the better’ belief which comes from research involving immigrants immersed in the English speaking environment cannot be applied to foreign language environment where the primary

source of input comes from classroom settings as Larson – Hall (2008) called it ‘a minimal input situation’[21]. Supposing that critical period hypothesis is true and an ‘innate language mechanism’ exists, with such insufficient amount of input, ‘the formation of a morphological, syntactic and phonological system’ cannot be created [21]. As suggested by Larson-Hall (2008, p. 37), in order for learners to take advantage of implicit learning, there must be sufficient amount of input provided to them. This may explain why early starters are outperformed by later starters as older learners can take advantage of explicit learning [11].

Constraints in introducing English early

Assuming that introducing English early provides benefits to students, introducing early language learning in Vietnam has faced some challenges, including the lack of qualified teachers and the lack of continuity. Vietnamese English teachers at primary schools, especially in rural areas have been reported to be in shortage and not qualified enough. Three quarters of primary schools examined employ permanent English teachers while the others have their English teachers hired from other schools. Teachers without university qualification have also been employed [26]. Besides, the low salary of English teachers at primary school (at around 3 million VND, equivalent to 150 USD) [26] has indirectly discouraged qualified English teachers from teaching at primary schools as they are able to look for jobs that provide higher pay at other sectors. The lack of teachers may result in the increase in workload for each teacher, hence taking them out of their time to improve their professional skills and English competence.

Another constraint that may devalue ELL is the discontinuity, that is, “the lack of coordination between the elementary and the secondary programs” [30]. The lack of continuity and transfer has been a major challenge in ELL in many educational contexts. The discontinuity may result from different issues such as that students are not placed at an appropriate level or that learners may stop learning the language learnt in ELL years or that learners may find themselves short of expectation, resulting from problems in classroom methodology. The discontinuity may result in the loss of motivation, which is widely recognized as an unexpected challenge. The typical classroom activities and topics may make young learners bored as they have been exposed to them very early.

Age factor is not the main issue

Many scholars suggest that age should not be given much emphasis in foreign language contexts. From their perspective, the age factor is not the primary issue. Besides age factor, there are other factors that also contribute to success in second language acquisition. Some of them which are considered more important are the quality and quantity of early provision, teachers, programs, and continuity [28]. Moyer (2004), in the study on how ultimate attainment is affected by opportunities and intentions, found weak ‘directness and independence of age effects’ [29]. Besides age of arrival and length of residence, psychological factors make up nearly three quarters of the degree of attainment. Moyer (2004, p.144) found that there are other factors that affect quality of access to the target language, including duration, quality of experience, consistency over time and intensity or extent of orientations[25].

6 CONCLUSIONS

The critical period hypothesis and its effect on second language acquisition remains a controversial issue. This paper critically discusses both supporting evidence and counter-evidence against critical period hypothesis. I finally draw on the conclusion that the strong version of the critical period hypothesis is less associated with foreign language learning, suggesting that there is much possibility that later beginners acquire native-like proficiency as discussed evidence in this essay

shown. There are other factors that contribute to the success of language teaching and learning other than the optimal age. More importantly, providing early language education in Vietnamese context would not bring much effectiveness. Instead of considering to introduce English to younger students, there should be more focus on improving English teachers' quality and strengthen the continuity of English curriculum.

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