

Controversy over the nature of age-related effects on second language acquisition

Chihiro Sampei

Graduate school of education, Chiba University

chirosamp@gmail.com

Abstract

The national strategy of implementing early English education in EFL countries is indicative of the generally-held belief that “earlier is better” for children’s successful acquisition of a second language (L2). In studies of second language acquisition (SLA), such a consensus has been theoretically investigated in terms of the “critical period” after which “individuals (...) are worse at learning a language than younger individuals” (DeKeyser, 2000, p. 500). Despite the popularity and influence of this concept, the research community has not yet agreed on validity of the critical period hypothesis (CPH) for L2 acquisition, which eventually remains controversial.

In order to explore the nature of the critical period for L2 acquisition and to consider its pedagogical implication for EFL teaching, this study discusses the essence of controversy in current CPH studies through a narrative review of the literature, focusing mainly on the following three perspectives: conceptual misunderstandings, the complex nature of L2 acquisition, and methodological difficulties.

Taking the view that “earlier is better” does not necessarily indicate the simple pedagogical implication of “earlier teaching is better” (DeKeyser, 2012, p. 455), the study examines how the critical period effect should be considered in EFL instruction.

Keywords

critical period hypothesis (CPH), age-related effects, ultimate attainment, nativelikeness, second language acquisition (SLA), age of acquisition (AOA), early English education

Introduction

With increased importance of English as an international language in a globalized world, the urgent requirement of improving population’s English competence has led EFL countries to focus on English learning in school education. This trend has motivated the implementation of early English instruction in primary school, which is indicative of a vague belief that early start predicts success in L2 acquisition.

This study explores the theoretical foundation of this idea in terms of age-related effect, often invoking the idea of the “critical period” for L2 acquisition. The discussion begins with presenting the general criteria for the critical period as an ethological concept and how it was applied to the study of language acquisition. Considering the fact that the existence and nature of the critical period for L2 acquisition have been highly controversial among research community, this study aims to investigate the essence of controversy and to figure out the exact nature of this phenomenon. The controversy is discussed from three perspectives of: conceptual misunderstandings, complexity of L2 acquisition, and methodological difficulties of CPH study. Lastly, based on the discussion of the exact nature of the critical period effects, this study indicates whether or not/how it can be applied to EFL instructional contexts.

1 Overview of the historical discussion and the development of the CPH

1.1 Applying the CPH to language acquisition

The maturational constraints in language acquisition have long attracted considerable research interests in the study of linguistics. One attempt to explain the phenomenon is applying the ethological concept of critical period to language acquisition. The biologically-based age related effects on language acquisition has been one of the most significant and controversial research areas of SLA ever since.

1.2 Critical period for L1/L2 acquisition

Although the existence and nature of the critical period for language acquisition has been controversial regarding both first language (L1) and L2, there exists well-cited evidence that lack of linguistic stimuli in early childhood entails loss or incomplete mastery of L1. Extending the concept of critical period to L2 acquisition, however, has been a controversial problem, regardless of the conceptual and methodological sophistication of the CPH studies.

2 Controversy over the nature of the critical period for L2 acquisition

2.1 Conceptual misunderstandings

Conceptual misunderstandings of “critical period” among empirical studies is one remarkable problem, as Singleton (2005: 269) metaphorically puts diverse views of this concept as “a coat of many colours”. The issue is discussed focusing on multiple terms for the age-related effects, the criteria for nativelikeness as a standard to measure participants’ linguistic ability, confusion of rate of acquisition with ultimate attainment and explicit learning with implicit learning, and multiple critical periods.

2.2 Complexity of L2 acquisition

The complex nature of L2 acquisition as well often confuses the nature of critical period effects. Therefore, it is difficult to examine how the effects take place and to what extent they are significant predictor of ultimate L2 attainment. Also, it should be noted that various factors affect the process of L2 acquisition and that age of acquisition (AOA) is not an absolute predictor. This section particularly focuses on the role of interindividual variations such as language aptitude and cognitive ability and of environmental variables.

2.3 Methodological difficulties

With the effects of all such interwoven factors previously presented, it is quite difficult to design empirical study to purely investigate how/to what extent AOA itself is significant in L2 acquisition. This is the fact that has led to controversial findings of the nature of critical period for L2 acquisition. This section briefly overviews methodological problems with the current CPH studies focusing on research standard, sampling, and instrumentation.

3 Implications and conclusions

Based on the analysis of the essence of controversy over the CPH of L2 acquisition, this study concludes that the concept of “earlier is better” does not indicate a simple pedagogical implication that “earlier teaching is better” (DeKeyser, 2012, p. 455) in any contexts of language acquisition. Exploring the exact nature of age related effects on L2 acquisition, it is clear that this is not the case particularly for instructional contexts in EFL countries. On the other hand, the idea of biologically-based critical period should be taken into account as one important learner factor of L2 learning and applied to EFL instruction by carefully considering its nature. Also, considering the lack of CPH empirical studies in EFL countries, the expansion of the study to EFL contexts is necessary.

4 Reference

- DeKeyser, R. M. (2000). The robustness of critical period effects in second language acquisition. *Studies in Second Language Acquisition*, 22, 499-533.
- DeKeyser, R. (2012). Age effects in second language learning. In S. M. Gass & A. Mackey (Eds.), *The Routledge handbook of second language acquisition* (pp. 442-460). London: Routledge.
- Singleton, D. (2005). The Critical Period Hypothesis: A coat of many colours. *IRAL - International Review of Applied Linguistics in Language Teaching*, 43, 269-285.