

INTRODUCING ENGLISH AS A FOREIGN LANGUAGE AT A PRIMARY LEVEL*Iroda Ilhomjonqizi Sodiqova**PhD - Associate professor, Alfraganus University, Tashkent, Uzbekistan*

Annotation: This article explores the importance of introducing foreign language education to children during their preschool and primary school years, emphasizing its role as a foundational element in their ongoing educational development. It cites various data and theories to underscore the significance of early language training. The article points out that the early years of life are crucial for language acquisition (LA), as neuroplasticity during this period enables optimal outcomes, especially in mastering pronunciation. Beyond this critical window, achieving similar proficiency becomes more challenging. The article supports the hypothesis that "younger learners tend to achieve better long-term results."

Key words: EFL/ESL instructor, the Grammar-Translation Method (GTM), neuroplasticity, language acquisition, Critical Period Hypothesis (CPH), psychological, and physiological factors.

Introduction

Over the past ten years, the demand for learning foreign languages, especially English, has grown significantly. In this context, the role of an EFL/ESL instructor has evolved. Teaching English now requires more than just a solid grasp of grammar and vocabulary; it also involves a deep understanding of the cultural context of English-speaking communities. Effective English teachers must possess strong methodological skills to help students develop their awareness and competence in the language.

Having observed numerous language classes in various primary schools, I noticed a common teaching approach: lessons were well-structured but predominantly teacher-centered, leaving students in a passive role. Teachers often combined direct instruction and the Grammar-Translation Method (GTM), presenting content in the target language while simultaneously providing translations. This traditional approach, though organized, limited student engagement and active participation in the learning process.

Numerous theories and concepts about second language acquisition have emerged from various studies, highlighting that learning a second language is a lengthy and intricate process. This process often involves critical period assumptions and the application of diverse teaching methods. During my teaching experience, I have observed age-related challenges among students and have sought to address these issues by employing different strategies and techniques to enhance their comprehension.

Main part: This research focuses on second language acquisition through the lens of the Critical Period Hypothesis (CPH), initially proposed by Lenneberg and further developed by other scholars. Wilder Penfield and Lamar Roberts also contributed to this theory, suggesting that language acquisition is most effective when begun before puberty, as learning a new language becomes more difficult and less efficient after this critical period. Lenneberg emphasized that achieving native-like pronunciation becomes challenging post-puberty due to

reduced brain plasticity, which is fully developed by that stage. I strongly agree with this hypothesis, as I believe the early years of life are crucial for language acquisition. Beyond this period, individuals are unlikely to attain high proficiency, particularly in pronunciation, due to the decline in neuroplasticity. As the hypothesis states, "younger learners tend to achieve better long-term outcomes."

Through extensive research on this topic, I have concluded that the Critical Period Hypothesis (CPH) warrants further exploration. The hypothesis suggests that optimal language acquisition occurs when linguistic input is provided consistently until puberty, typically around the age of thirteen. After this critical age range, the process of learning a new language becomes significantly more challenging and demanding due to a combination of educational, social, and biological factors tied to the learner's age. Among these, biological factors play the most pivotal role in language learning. As Andy Shouten (2009) highlights, neurological mechanisms underlie the maturational changes in language acquisition abilities. This view is supported by renowned neurologist Wilder Penfield and his coauthor, who argue that these changes are driven by neurological developments.

Over the years, numerous linguistic experts have conducted extensive studies on CPH, yet their perspectives on the role of age in language acquisition remain divided. The debate continues: some researchers assert that a critical period exists and significantly influences language learning, particularly in achieving native-like proficiency. Others, however, argue that age is not a decisive factor; instead, a learner's motivation and cognitive capacity are the primary determinants of success in language acquisition. This divergence in opinions underscores the complexity of the topic and the need for further investigation.

The Critical Period Hypothesis (CPH) was first introduced by two neurologists, Wilder Penfield and Lamar Roberts, in their book "Speech and Brain Mechanisms". This theory was later popularized by Eric Lenneberg in 1967, who proposed a stronger version of the hypothesis, arguing that language acquisition is only possible during a critical period, which spans from early infancy to puberty. Lenneberg emphasized that the ability to learn a second language is constrained by biological maturation and that neuroplasticity plays a crucial role in native language acquisition. He suggested that if language learning does not occur within this critical window, learners may achieve partial proficiency in areas like grammar but will struggle to attain full mastery, particularly in pronunciation, after puberty.

In his work on CPH, Lenneberg asserted that optimal language acquisition can only occur during childhood, as both hemispheres of the brain are highly active during this period. He also highlighted the existence of a maturational mechanism that influences people's learning abilities (Johnson and Newport, 1989). Following Lenneberg's findings, several studies were conducted to test this hypothesis, with the cases of Genie and Isabelle being among the most notable.

Genie, discovered by social workers in 1970 at the age of 13 (around puberty), had suffered severe neglect, abuse, and social isolation, which stunted her speech and behavioral development. She could not speak, walk, or eat properly when found. Despite receiving intensive language training from experts over seven years in a children's hospital, Genie only managed to learn a few words and failed to acquire language fully. This case supported Lenneberg's theory, as it demonstrated the challenges of learning a first language after the critical period had passed (Curtiss, 1977). These findings underscore the importance of early language exposure and the limitations imposed by neurobiological development, reinforcing the idea that "younger learners tend to achieve better long-term outcomes" in language acquisition.

The case of Isabelle (1930), who was discovered at the age of seven—before reaching puberty—provides a contrasting example to Genie’s situation. Unlike Genie, Isabelle had some prior exposure to language and was still within the critical period for language acquisition when she began receiving formal instruction. As a result, her progress in language learning was significantly more successful. This supports the Critical Period Hypothesis (CPH), as Isabelle’s younger age and earlier intervention allowed her to develop language skills more effectively.

Despite compelling evidence in favor of CPH, some researchers remain skeptical about its universality. Critics argue that while age is an important factor in second language acquisition (SLA), it is not the sole determinant. Sociological, psychological, and physiological factors also play significant roles in shaping language learning outcomes. For instance, motivation, social environment, and cognitive abilities can greatly influence a learner’s success in acquiring a new language. As Andy Shouten and other scholars have pointed out, these additional factors complicate the narrative that age alone dictates language acquisition potential. While cases like Isabelle and Genie provide strong support for CPH, the debate continues due to the multifaceted nature of language learning. The interplay of age with sociological, psychological, and physiological factors suggests that SLA is a complex process influenced by a variety of variables, not just biological maturation.

Based on the evidence I gathered, it seems reasonable to support the existence of the Critical Period Hypothesis (CPH), as proposed by Lenneberg, Newport, and Johnson. According to Lenneberg, learning a new language becomes significantly more challenging after puberty due to neurological changes, such as reduced brain plasticity and the lateralization of language functions to one hemisphere of the brain. This makes it difficult for learners to achieve native-like proficiency, particularly in pronunciation, after this critical period.

However, further research revealed that while CPH plays a significant role, it is not the only factor influencing second language acquisition (SLA). Learners who begin studying a second language after puberty may struggle with pronunciation but can still achieve strong results in understanding grammar and other structural aspects of the language. This is because older learners often possess advanced cognitive abilities, such as critical thinking and problem-solving skills, which aid in grasping complex grammatical rules. Nevertheless, even in these areas, achieving a high level of proficiency is not guaranteed and depends on various factors, including motivation, learning environment, and individual aptitude.

In conclusion, while learning a foreign language before puberty offers distinct advantages, particularly in achieving native-like pronunciation and fluency, post-puberty learners can still succeed in certain areas, such as grammar. However, the overall outcomes may not reach the same level of mastery as those who start earlier. This highlights the importance of early language exposure but also acknowledges the potential for success in specific domains of language learning beyond the critical period.

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