

## AGE AND CRITICAL PERIOD HYPOTHESIS

Tryfonova Yrina  
Language training department  
Dnipro State Medical University  
languages@dma.dp.ua

There is a common belief that the earlier foreign language acquisition begins, the more successful results it will bring. In other words, it is foremost age that determines how quickly and efficiently the learner will proceed. This assumption has been scrutinised under the critical age or critical period hypothesis (CPH) which was first proposed by Penfield and Roberts (1959) and further promoted by Lenneberg in his seminal book *Biological Foundations of Language* (1967). According to the hypothesis, the period between age two and puberty is critical for first language acquisition since this is the span when brain plasticity is at its peak and both hemispheres are allegedly engaged in language processing. In early adolescence, however, the brain attains maturity and becomes less sensitive to stimuli. At the same time, cerebral lateralisation occurs and language functions start to take place predominantly in the left hemisphere. For Lenneberg (1967: 176), the ability to learn foreign languages after puberty remains, yet it tends to decline: 'Also automatic acquisition from mere exposure to a given language seems to disappear after this age, and foreign languages have to be taught and learnt through a conscious and labored effort'. Therefore, a corollary that may be drawn from the CPH is that second language (L2) learning commenced after puberty is likely to be slower and less successful (Snow & Hoefnagel-Höhle 1978: 1114).

Along these lines, Singleton (1989: 120) adopts four divergent viewpoints concerning the relevance of a critical period to SLA, and only one of them is in favour of older learners, particularly their ability to acquire lexical competence. Thus, it seems pertinent to emphasise a central role of vocabulary in regard to adult teaching English as a foreign language (TEFL). Furthermore, the implication arises that metaphors as symbolically charged images may prove remarkably fruitful in vocabulary instruction.

'Although older learners are indeed less likely than young children to master an L2' (Marinova-Todd *et al.* 2000: 9), many researchers have rather positive attitudes towards age. For instance, Krashen *et al.* (1979) assert that at the initial stage of learning, older beginners are apt to outperform their younger counterparts. However,

after about a year of exposure to a foreign language, the latter usually catch up with the former and start to surpass them (Snow & Hoefnagel-Höhle 1978). With regard to native-like fluency, Bialystok (1997) challenges Oyama's (1976) view that after a certain period a possibility to acquire it in L2 ceases to exist, and suggests that under favourable conditions older learners are well capable of attaining native-like foreign language mastery.

That being said, ELT teachers should be aware of fossilisation – a process adult learners are, unfortunately, prone to. Introduced into the field of SLA by Selinker in 1972, fossilisation is an umbrella term to refer to deficient language learning and is foremost associated with the theory of Interlanguage (IL)<sup>1</sup>. The phenomenon defines the point when the learner's progress halts and the learning process stops. As previous studies indicate, fossilisation can take different forms, for example fossilised accent or syntax (Daniels 2001: 218). But why and when does it occur? For Selinker and Lamendella (1978), there are both internal and external factors that may elicit fossilisation, namely the learner's age and one's lack of desire to acculturate (internal) as well as communicative pressure, lack of learning opportunity, and the nature of feedback on learner's use of L2 (external). According to Selinker (1972), fossilisation takes place at the point at which one reaches a level of linguistic proficiency that allows him or her to adequately interact in L2. Hence, it could conceivably be hypothesised that fossilisation may occur once the learner masters between 800 and 1,000 of the most frequently used foreign lemmas<sup>2</sup> needed for understanding 75% of everyday language (Sagar-Fenton & McNeill 2018). In view of this premise, it is reasonable to assume that vocabulary fossilisation might be an adverse process characteristic of adult learners who, unlike children, are more likely to be influenced by both internal and external factors leading to incomplete language learning. Here, it is worth pointing out that some linguists consider the term 'fossilisation' to be not particularly apt in terms of vocabulary reactivation finding 'dormancy' a more accurate description. Contrary to fossilisation whose metaphorical name implies the permanence of the process, vocabulary dormancy is seen as a temporary feature of foreign language learning. As has been previously reported by Daniels (2001: 219), a change in linguistic environment or increased motivation may well lead to the reactivation of 'dormant' words acquired earlier.

### Books:

1. Crystal, David. 2008. *A Dictionary of Linguistics and Phonetics*. Malden, Mass.: Blackwell.
2. Daniels, John. 2000. Fossilisation. In: M. Byram (ed.), *Routledge Encyclopedia of Language Teaching and Learning*. London: Routledge, 218-220.
3. Lenneberg, Eric H. 1967. *Biological Foundations of Language*. New York: Wiley.
4. Singleton, David. 1989. *Language acquisition: The Age Factor*. Clevedon: Multilingual Matters.

---

<sup>1</sup> The theory proposed by Selinker (1972, 1992) according to which L2 learners create a linguistic system, different both from their L1 and the target language being acquired (Crystal 2008: 249).

<sup>2</sup> In lexicology, the item which occurs at the beginning of a dictionary entry; more generally referred to as a headword (Crystal 2008: 273).

**Journal Articles:**

1. Bialystok, Ellen. 1997. 'The Structure of Age: in Search of Barriers to Second Language Acquisition'. In: *Second Language Research* 13(2): 116-137.
2. Krashen, Stephen D. et al. 1979. 'Age, Rate and Eventual Attainment in Second Language Acquisition'. In: *TESOL Quarterly* 13(4): 573-582.
3. Marinova-Todd, Stefka H. et al. 2000. 'Three Misconceptions about Age and L2 Learning'. In: *TESOL Quarterly* 34(1): 9-34.
4. Oyama, Susan. 1976. 'A Sensitive Period for the Acquisition of a Nonnative Phonological System'. In: *Journal of Psycholinguistic Research* 5(3): 261-283.
5. Selinker, Larry. 1972. 'Interlanguage'. In: *IRAL: International Review of Applied Linguistics in Language Teaching* 10(3): 209-231.
6. Selinker, Larry & John T. Lamendella. 1978. 'Two Perspectives on Fossilization in Interlanguage Learning'. In: *Interlanguage Studies Bulletin* 3(2): 143-191.
7. Snow, Catherine E. & Marian Hoefnagel-Höhle. 1978. 'The Critical Period for Language Acquisition: Evidence from Second Language Learning'. In: *Child Development* 49(4): 1114-1128.

**Internet Sources:**

8. Sagar-Fenton, Beth & Lizzy McNeill. 2018. How Many Words Do You Need to Speak a Language?
9. [<https://www.bbc.com/news/world-44569277> accessed 06/09/2019]