Anne Billington

**Language Acquisition Paper**

**LEADING QUESTION:**

How old were you when you began studying your L2? What do you think of starting L2 instruction in elementary vs. middle or high school?

**INTERVIED:**

Jennifer B (first language English, studied French in college, proficient in Italian)

Bernie E (First language English, studied Spanish, proficient in Spanish)

Shaoferg L (First language Chinese, studied English and French, proficient in English)

**Introduction**

When considering how best to ask these three professors such a debatable topic I decided that it would best be answered in an open interview between all three of them so they had room to discuss and respond to one another. So I sat them down and asked them a series of questions that I believed would best result in their opinion about SLA and the CPH. As Alene Moyer says in the introduction of her study, “Within both first and second language acquisition research, a critical or sensitive period for complete attainment has largely been substantiated in phonological studies,” (Moyer, 1999) but does that mean that they are right? And even more than that, what about the outliers that every CPH study has managed to so continently write off as ‘unimportant’? “The critical period hypothesis rests on the assumption that the age-related effects seen in L2 studies are the result of maturational changes in brain structures that are used to learn and/or to process language. For example, it has been hypothesized that as the brain matures, it becomes less “plastic” and that lost neural plasticity impedes L2 learning “(e.g., Scovel, 1988; Patkowski, 1980, 1990) But if this all really true, than what does this mean for education? Are all mandatory college language courses a waste of money? If so, then why are they still required by so many departments?

**Data**

|  |  |  |
| --- | --- | --- |
| Jenn | Bernie | ShaoFerg |
| Started French in high school | Started in Middle School-8th grade | Started at age 11 |
| Really learnt L2 naturalistically in Italy when spontaneously moved there. | Sophomore year of college did a study aboard to Spain | Used to listen to “the voice of America” to get authentic feedback to improve |
| Challenges as an adult learner have been-pouncing, “I always have an accent” | “Study into practice, fluent talking” | “Speaking, I can’t say a lot of things that I can write” |
| Things I still can’t do even though I am ‘proficient’ are: “when my emotions get in the way, nervous, upset, tired, angry at my husband, ha ha, then I can’t communicate” | “When I get would get nervous around a new professor or try to retell an elaborate story in my L2 then get stuck and switch back to my L1” | “Talking over the phone is very frustrating, I can’t understand a single word so I just agree with everything they said” |
| Error correction – “I insist that my husband correct me, I get upset when he doesn’t and I notice that it’s wrong!” | “I always had it from my friends, teachers, not so much during my study abroad” | “I received a lot during my schooling but I wish I had received more from colleges” |
| Strategies that you were taught with- “I try to use strategies I have read are good” | “A professor told me once to read a Spanish newspaper online, it really helped. It was relevant and interesting” | “Shakespeare! Shall I compare thee to a summers day? Mark Twain, old stuff, that’s how we learnt vocabulary. Not useful, we didn’t get any current slang like “cool”. It didn’t take long to figure out what it meant once I got here, but I still don’t use it” |
| Do you consider yourself proficient? “I feel like it’s a battle not to loose what I gained” | “Still learning, ha ha” | ‘Oh no, no no, my writing but I am not a good speaker” |

**Analysis**

As the above data demonstrates all three interviewees had different langue learning experience and different answers to all the questions. The overall consensus, however, was similar to that of Felge and Moyer in that the CPH doesn’t seem to be proven. First it is important to note that even researchers who agree on the CPH can’t quite pin it down, “there is disagreement as to when the critical period for L2 acquisition ends. According to some, it ends at twelve years of age (Scovel, 1988). But according to others (e.g., Patkowski, 1990), it ends at fifteen years.” (Felge, 1999). A good reason for this discrepancy is likely the same thing that one sees above, outliers in the data. If researchers agreed that the CPH was at fifteen and then there were a good handful of fluent L2 speakers who first started learning at sixteen, they would be wrong. There is no ‘grey area’ with the CPH. The fact that Jennifer exists and speaks fluently, though with an accent, means there is no CPH.

When ShaoFerg says that he cannot say some things that he write in English (his L2) Bernie agreed but Jennifer did not. This was interesting because Jennifer was the only one to have not taken formal classes in her L2 (Italian) and to have started learning her L2 after the ‘critical period’ (though she did have language instruction in French). Though not sated, they all said that their L2 became more challenging when ID’s got involved, like, emotions, anxiety and motivation. This is a common theme in SLA research and not surprising that it affects older learners who would be more cognitively aware and able to met-analyze their learning environment.

**Conclusions and Implications**

Since CPH is either right or wrong, based upon these interview it is wrong. Considering that CPH is wrong one must then determine that language schooling in pre-school to middle is unnecessary and a waste of the State budget. However, Flege concludes, “The ﬁnal hypothesis was that “age” effects on phonology, but not morphosyntax would remain signiﬁcant after variables confounded with AOA were controlled.” (Flege, 1999) meaning that phonology would fall under the umbrella of the CPH but a student starting after fifteen or sixteen years could still grasp syntax. Yet according to Moyer, “In sum, overt phonological instruction appears necessary for some learners to acquire native-level phonological production, and more authentic input and feedback, emphasizing sentence- and discourse-level features, should be developed for foreign language curricula” (Moyer, 1999). Saying essentially that there is no CPH but agreeing that there needs to be more classroom time devoted to phonological reproduction to gain fluency for SLA. Perhaps this is what Jennifer needed, a class devoted to phonological reproduction.

**REFREENCES**

Moyer, A. (1999) Ultimate Attainment in L2 Phonology: The Critical Factors of Age, Motivation, and Instruction, Georgetown University, USA.

Flege, J. (1999) Age Constraints on Second-Language Acquisition, Journal of Memory and Language 41, 78 –104 (1999) Article ID jmla.1999.2638, available online at http://www.idealibrary.com on

Scovel, T. (1988). A time to speak: A psycholinguistic inquiry into the critical period for human speech. Cambridge, MA: Newbury House.

Patkowski, M. (1980). The sensitive period for the acquisition of syntax in a second language. Language Learning, 30, 449 – 472.

Patkowski, M. (1990). Age and accent in a second language: A reply to James Emil Flege. Applied Linguistics, 11, 73– 89.