# Unit 6 Lecture.mp3

**Speaker1:** [00:00:00] Page 47. Listening for Main ideas. A close your book. Listen to the lecture and take notes.

**Speaker2:** [00:00:10] Okay, everybody, let's get started. Today, we're going to talk about the critical period in language learning. But first, I'd like to ask you a question. How many of you have tried to learn a new language as a teenager or as an adult? I see quite a few of you. Well, then I'm sure you agree that it's much more difficult to learn a new language when we're grown than it was to learn your first language as a child. Right. But do you know why it's so much harder? No idea. Well, linguists believe it's because of the critical period of language development. The critical period is a theory that explains why it is easier for children to learn languages than for adults. That's what I'd like to discuss today. But first, I'd like to start by defining the critical period, and I'll give you some examples of a critical period in animals, in songbirds and cats. Then I'll talk about evidence for a critical period for language learning in humans. So what exactly is a critical period? The idea of a critical period comes from the study of animals. We say that there's a critical period. The only time when the animal can learn a new skill. Now the critical period starts in the first weeks or months of an animal's life. During this time, its brain is ready to learn new things. However, when the animal gets older, the critical period ends. It cannot learn any more. So there are skills that must be learned when the animal is young. If not, they can't learn them as adults.

**Speaker2:** [00:02:11] Now I'm going to move on to some examples. First, let's take songbirds. A songbird learns to sing the first few months after it's born by listening to its parents song and repeating it. The bird can only learn to do this when it's a baby. An adult bird cannot learn to sing. So if you remove the baby bird from its parents so that it doesn't hear the song, the bird just won't learn to sing when it's older. So there is a perfect example of a critical period. Take another example. Cats. A kitten must learn to use its eyes in the first few weeks of its life. At first the cat can't see very well, but over time it begins to use its eyes. However, if you remove all the light in the room so the cat grows up in the dark, it won't be able to use its eyes. When the cat is an adult, it won't be able to see well. So there is another critical period when a cat must learn to see. Now let's look at the critical period for learning languages in humans. As you've probably noticed, children learn new languages much more easily and quickly than adults. But we don't really know why. One theory is that there is a critical period for language learning. The theory is that people's brains change when they're adolescents and that these changes make it more difficult for adults to learn a new language than for children. Of course, adults can learn.

**Speaker2:** [00:04:04] Many adults learn to speak a new language. They may not speak it perfectly, but they speak it very well, well enough to use the new language for daily life. So we are not like adult songbirds who can't ever learn a new song we can learn. That said, however, there is evidence for a critical period for learning to speak with a native accent. Somehow children can hear the different sounds better and their mouth muscles can make the new sounds. In many cases, a child will speak a new language with no foreign accent at all. But generally, adults who learn a new language after adolescence speak with a foreign accent. They never learn to speak with a native accent. No matter how hard they try, it can be very frustrating. We may be able to hear the correct accent, but our mouths just can't pronounce the sounds correctly. Have you ever felt this way? So unfortunately, this shows that there may be a critical period when humans must learn to speak with a native accent. So we can conclude that there is a critical period when both animals and humans can learn certain things. For animals like birds and cats, they must learn to do things when they are still very young. Humans, on the other hand, can still learn some new things as adults, like languages. But it's more difficult. Adult humans have a critical period for learning new accents. So that's all for now. Let's get into our discussion groups. Does everyone have a copy of the handout?

**Speaker1:** [00:06:08] Page 48. Listening for details. A close your book. Listen to the lecture again. Add details to your notes and correct any mistakes.