

Lecture 9

Theories of Second Language Acquisition - IV

Age and L2 acquisition

- Critical Period Hypothesis in L1 acquisition
- What about L2 acquisition?
- Generally, children tend to be more successful than adults
- But there are many cases of adults successful L2 learning
- E.g. Joseph Conrad – native speaker of Polish; but later a novelist in English
- Some research studies indicate that adults get higher scores on most tests of second language learning; mainly on syntax and morphology test items

- CPH in L2 acquisition
- Younger learners – use innate ability to learn language; successful
- Adults – use general cognitive abilities, no flexibility
- Critical period vs sensitive period
- Different sensitive periods for different components

- Ability to acquire native-like pronunciation ends very early-on
- Syntax at around 15 yrs (Patkowski 1980)
- Age alone not deciding factor
- Learner characteristics and learning environments also crucial

Differences between children and adults

- Children learn implicitly
- Children initially slow
- Children cannot use such shortcuts
- Long term children reach native speaker competence.
- Effect of age most obvious in pronunciation, but also in grammar.
- Adults learn largely explicitly
- Adults initially faster learning
- Adults use shortcuts provided by the explicit structure.
- Long term adults may not reach native speaker competence.
- Adults fail in those areas in which explicit learning is ineffective (e.g. rules are too complex).

(DeKeyser and Larson-Hall 2005: p. 103)

Reasons why adults less successful

- Social psychological reasons
- Adults do not want to give up the sense of identity their accent provides.
- Adults are unwilling to surrender their ego to the extent required to adopt a new language,
- Cognitive factors - Adults have greater cognitive abilities than children.
- Neurological changes that prevent adults from using their brains in the same way children do on language-learning tasks. This is usually presented as a loss of plasticity, or flexibility, in the brain.
- Exposure/ input: Children are exposed to better input for language learning.

Final take on the effect of age

1 Fallacy: Children are fast and efficient.

Reality: Children learn languages slowly and effortfully.

2 Fallacy: Language proficiency is tied to brain functioning.

Reality: This may in fact turn out to be the case, but data currently in evidence cannot completely support this.

3 Fallacy: Because there is frequent failure by adults to learn an L2 does not mean that it is impossible to do so.

Reality: Most adults do end up short of native-like levels of proficiency, there is often a lack of motivation, a lack of commitment of time or energy, and a lack of environmental support.

(Gass & Selinker 2008, 416)