Critical Period Hypothesis and Motivation:

How does CHP and motivation affect acquisition of second language learners?

Ayano Kawagoe

SLS 380

**Introduction**

What is the Critical Period Hypothesis? CPH is one of the most important terms that second language learners should know, and also what people have difficulty with. Most of the second language learners are familiar with this concept, even though they have never heard of this term. There is particular age level, which people can acquire the second language, just like the babies learn to speak or understand their native languages. However, the motivation could affect the learning style of second language learners. Even though babies or young children are known to learn the second language faster and more accurate than the adults do, motivation might be the great function of changing that hypothesis. There are lots of researches and how-to’s of language acquisitions due to the influence of the globalization out there in these years, yet many people are struggling with acquiring and actually using the second language. There are many obstacles that drag people from language acquisition like the backgrounds and cultures, but knowing more tips of second language would benefit in both teaching and learning the second language.

As it is mentioned above, the background will be one of the most important functions as to talk about the motivation. People who voluntary go to foreign countries to study abroad have higher motivation, compared to the people who involuntary go there due to the parent’s job. Therefore, in this research paper, it will conduct some of the interview to research how the background would affect their motivations towards the second language acquisition, and also how would the age affect their motivation and language acquisition. The interview will be based on two Japanese groups who are voluntary here to learn, or are involuntary here due to the family.

**Introduction to Critical Period Hypothesis**

Firstly, what is Critical Period Hypothesis? Critical Period Hypothesis is the hypothesis that animals, including humans, are genetically programmed to acquire certain kinds of knowledge and skill at specific times in life according to *How Languages are Learned* by Lightbrown and Spada (2006, p.17). Although adults would perform well since adults have better understanding of language and background knowledge, children are superior in terms of acquiring second language ([Scovel, 2000](http://eltj.oxfordjournals.org/content/63/2/170.full#ref-15)).

On the other hand, Critical Period Hypothesis is very controversial topic, so that some researchers assume that the CPH does not exist at all. According to Birdsong (2002), the CPH does not exist, and if the people older than 21, is doing the sustained phonetic training under the immersion program, 10% of the people can actually acquire the native like pronunciation. However according to my experiment, which will be discussed next, I assume that the Critical Period Hypothesis does exist.

**Observation**

To discover if the Critical Period Hypothesis exists, I have conducted the research of two different groups.

1. 20 year-old girl from Japan (voluntary)
2. 12 year-old boy from Japan (involuntary)  
   14 year-old girl from Japan

Group1 is person who came to Hawaii about one and half year ago, and she also had been to New Zealand for 1 month too. Even though she never went to the immersion school in Japan, and she has a Japanese accent, she already speaks fluently enough to be understood. According to my research, people who voluntary do study abroad would acquire the language better, because they have motivation to do so.

On the other hand, group2 people came to Hawaii almost year ago due to the parent’s job. A boy has never studied English at school, but older sister had studied very basic English at middle school. Since they came here involuntary, they did not have enough time to prepare to live here, they did not have motivation to learn second language. Therefore they are not speaking fluently as well as what group1 person used to be at that point.

What I have concluded from this interview was that background would affect their way of learning the second language. This observation gives the hope that CPH might not exist according to 20 year-old girl, but even though she acquire to speak fluently, she has heavy accent and that would not be easily changed after the CPH. I have know those 2 groups of people since they came here, but younger ones are definitely getting better as the time passes. I assume that motivation toward learning English affect a lot, but younger ones are getting their English faster and with more accurate pronunciation. As the time passes, the difference of development between those 2 groups would be bigger, because younger ones have more spaces for the second language acquisition according to the Critical Period Hypothesis.

**Critical Period Hypothesis**

How does the background affect the second language acquisition of children and adult? Where second language learners actually study their first foreign or second language change their learning style later. For example, adults tend to start learning grammars and other structural things first in their educations, because most of the foreign languages are taught content based in any place (Lightbrown, 2006). On the other hand, children who are raised in another country than where they were born, they tend to accommodate quickly, because they actually get to interact with native people and have more opportunities to communicate than the adults do. In Japan, there are only few native English tongue people who teach English in the class, therefore adults had less opportunity to interact with real English. As we can see from this, the background could be one of the biggest factors in learning second language, because how children were raised would affect their perspective and how the environments around them would change their way of learning.

Within the term Critical Period Hypothesis, there are two functions that are relatively connected with this idea, which are psychological factors and brain systematic factors. Another topic that is coming up with the Critical Period Hypothesis is the brain system of language acquisition. According to Piehl (2011), “an optimal period for language acquisition, ending at puberty”, and which means that best age for acquiring second language is usually before the puberty. And this is what many people have experienced. For example, I moved to Hawaii about six years ago with my family. At this time, I was 13 and my younger brother was 8 years old. Therefore my brother never had studied English in his life at school, while I had studied the very basic part of the English at middle school. Also my mom was a graduate of English major at university in Japan. At this point, my mom was best English speaking person in my family. However as we spent the time in Hawaii, the younger ones caught up and we speak even better after. Moreover, my brother speaks more fluent than I do, and he even gets straight A at middle school. According to this experience, observation is made that there are more advantages in learning second language in the childhood.

**Brain System and CPH**

Normally, the Critical Period Hypothesis is said to be before the puberty, therefore it is about the age of 12 or 13 according to Penfield and Roberts (1959), because the human brain system sets up the default language in their brain before becoming the puberty, so that blocks the second language to come in as the input. Therefore people older than 12 or 13 years old tend to have hard time in learning the second language, because they have limit how much they can learn once they turn to the adults. Based on this idea, Lenneberg assumed that there are differences in neurological base between the children and adults (Takahashi, 2010).

As the brain system differs between the children and adults, there is also the difference in the advantage depend on the age. For the children of second language learner, they tend to be advanced in pronouncing the words like native people, and speaking fluently than the adults do, if they start learning the second language around the age of 6. However after the age of 7, they start having an accent of their native language. At least by the age of 12, they need to start learning how to speak or they will not be able to sound like natives (Takahashi, 2010). Larsen-Freeman and Long (1991) also states “As revealed by long-term studies, younger is better in the most crucial area, ultimate attainment, with only quite young (child) starter being able to achieve accent-free, native-like performance in a SL”.

However, there is an advantage for the adults too. Even though the adults do not have the better ears to listen or ability to speak like a native, they perform better on the grammatical structures and vocabularies. Since their cognitive ability is better than the children, adults may make the connections between the ideas and also are able to produce their thoughts effectively in the writing. It seems that learning second language in the early ages have more advantages rather than learning it in the adulthood, but in terms of the motivation, it may work differently, since adults have better understanding of themselves.

**Motivation**

Although the adults have hard time on acquiring second languages, there is a way that they could possibly perform better than the children do. Motivation has many different forms that stimulate to develop. Moreover, there are particular motivations depend on people’s age, because each age level of people are in different situations, and along with those environments, people try their bests to achieve their goals, and those motivations could even overcome their disadvantages.

Firstly, there are many adults try to learn second language nowadays. Since the world is globalized recent years, companies tend to look for the people with advantages like bilinguals or qualifications such as TOEFL. Therefore people learning the second language is increasing dramatically. There are always shy people who really like to learn the second language, but they are scared of getting corrected in front of the other people feels. So that would block them from opportunities of learning second language. However, the motivation called integrative motivation would overcome those conflicts. Integrative motivation is for the language learning for personal growth and cultural enrichment (Gardner, 1972). For having this kind of motivation can lead adults and teen improve and sometimes perform even better than the children who speak fluently. Since adults and teens have better knowledge of language itself, and they are highly motivated than the babies who do not know the advantages of speaking foreign language, older people could perform better, because motivations of those adults tend to have long-term goal. Also expectancy theory, which is the person’s belief that more effort will result in improvement performance, is found most likely in adults with long-term goal. More patient adults and teens would overcome the children with short-term goal just like the story of turtle and rabbit in Japan.

Despite the children tend to perform better in second language acquisition, they do poorly in terms of motivation. Children are most likely to have instrumental motivation, which is for language learning for more immediate or practical goals (Gardner, 1972). Even though children do not need the long-term goal yet, because they can quickly achieve their goals in second language acquisition, adults might eventually do better than the children do, because children cannot keep up with high motivation. However, children do not hesitate or afraid of being corrected in front of the people, so that they would have more opportunity to get the correct input from the surrounding (Wood, 2011).

The motivation is the hardest thing to determine in the experiment compared to the Critical Hypothesis Period, because the Critical Hypothesis Period has solid definition for it, but the definition of motivation can really depend on what the person is aiming for. Therefore there are not many researches that connect both the Critical Hypothesis Period and motivation out there. However, “using the goal setting to increase performance involves establishing specific, difficult goals, which leads to higher level of performance than simply telling to do their best in the absence of assigned goal” is really important thing for the instructors who teach not only the second language but any classes (Wood, 2011, p.341). Although there is only little information about the combination of two ideas, all the instructors should learn how to control the motivation of students to help older people learn how to speak fluently.

Motivation and the Critical Hypothesis Period are related each other but complicatedly. Adults tend to do poorly in listening and speaking, because the Critical Hypothesis Period limits the ability of their learning possibility in the early age. However on the other hand, if the adults are highly motivated to learn, then the adults have possibility of doing better than children, because adults are more patients and more likely to achieve their long-term goals. Yet, overall the children perform better in the second language acquisition. Some rare case like, an adult started to learn after 20 years old, speak fluently without any dialect could happen, but the Critical Hypothesis Period cannot be avoided since this is set innately. Also children’s biological functions are suitable for language acquisition. Even though this seems very complicated to change, there are some ways that can change it if you look at the advantages and develop those sequences.

**Conclusion**

What the instructors could do is not to correct every single mistake that they make, but to improve their strength even more. Finding mistakes and give them the explicit feedback is easy, but finding their strength and motivate them to do better in their advanced field would improve them better and that is how everyone could be developed with motivation. For example, for adults, since they tend to have advantage to perform better on reading and writing, they should study more vocabularies to aid their word tank, so that could help them get more input to produce the output. For the children, teachers could set more short-term goals for them, so that children do not get distracted, but at the end, pile of those short-term goals would make up the huge project. Of course that the students have to put the great amount of effort to actually learn brand new thing, what the students would become, might depend on what kind of teachers they met in the learning path.

As an adult, who learns second language, should set the long-term goal and do what is suitable for them. For older people, who tend to have disadvantages than the children do, not to make the correction on what is missing, but fulfill the missing part by something you are suitable with. It is hard to make the changes in habit, but learning new things to fill in the blanks.

As children, the important part is to have the best instructor, but since they are already advantaged with learning second language, they should be learning the correct form of language, because once it becomes habit, it is not easy to get corrected.

What makes the perfect teaching style is to understand the relationship between the Critical Period Hypothesis and the motivation, because to understand the needs of the student would lead them to improve better. The instructors cannot base on one student to make the perfect class, and it seems impossible to make the perfect class for everyone of student in the class, but thinking of the students and always looking for the better solution, would convey how much effort that the instructor puts in, can motivates students.

Having class like ESL, where there is big range of age level people, different culture people are in, makes the class difficult to set the standard of perfect learning. Also the language teacher is one of the hardest jobs in terms of giving the fair feedback, but researching more about the Critical Period Hypothesis and motivation in depth would be the shortcut to become the great language teacher.

As the conclusion, what can be changed to improve the second language learning is not the Critical Hypothesis Period, because it is almost set before the children turn to puberty, but motivation can be changed. Instructor who can motivate children with great teaching method might be able to slightly affect the Critical Hypothesis Period, but motivation could sometimes overcome the problem of the age. As everyone has different advantages, each age level has a different stimulus that motivates them. Knowing those stimuli would make the best teaching style and also giving the best teaching style would increase the bilingual students more in the future.

Gardner, R. C. and W. E. Labvert. (1972). *Attitudes and Motivation in Second Language Learning*. Rowley, MA: Newbury House.

Huang, B. H., & Jun, S. (2011). The Effect of Age on the Acquisition of Second Language Prosody. *Language & Speech*, *54*(3), 387-414. doi:10.1177/0023830911402599

Larsen-Freeman, D. and Long, M. H. (1991).  *an introduction to second language acquisition research.* London: Longman

Lenneberg, E. (1967) *Biological foundation of language.* New York: John Wiley.

Piehl, K. (2011). Can Adults Learn a Second Language? Research Findings and Personal Experience. *Delta Kappa Gamma Bulletin*, *78*(1), 33-37.

 Scovel T. (2000)  “The younger, the better” myth and bilingual education’. In: González RD,Melis I, editors. Language Ideologies. Critical Perspectives on the Official English Movement. Mahwah, NJ: Lawrence Erlbaum Associates;

Takahashi, M. (2010). *第二言語習得研究からみた発音習得とその可能性についての一考察.*<http://ci.nii.ac.jp/els/110008665460.pdf?id=ART0009744338&type=pdf&lang=jp&host=cinii&order_no=&ppv_type=0&lang_sw=&no=1335937973&cp=>

Wood, E. Samuel, Wood G. W., and Boyd, D. (2011). *The world of psychology*(7th ed.). (pp. 337-342). Boston: MA: PEARSON.