

WHAT IS THE BEST AGE FOR ACQUIRING A SECOND LANGUAGE?

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RESUMO[®]

Este artigo analisa qual a idade ideal para aprender uma segunda língua, com base em algumas teorias que fornecem suporte ao assunto. Na discussão, são considerados fatores biológicos e sociais que contribuem para identificar as várias etapas do processo de aprendizagem/aquisição.¹

PALAVRAS-CHAVE: Aquisição de segunda língua, fatores aquisicionais, processo de aprendizagem

INTRODUCTION

Many scientific studies have been done to know what the best age for acquiring a second language is. To accomplish it, some researchers have tried to understand the complexity of our cognitive abilities and mainly the capacity to learn languages. Thus a series of hypotheses have arisen to explain this exclusive ability of human beings. However, these studies did not explain only our cognitive performance but also the differences between children and adults in second language acquisition.

There are evidences that acquisition of two or more languages brings positive consequences for metalinguistic development. It has also been noticed that children who had acquired literacy in two languages, learn significantly better a third language than did children from monolingual backgrounds. And it exists interdependence between the development of both – first and second language. If a child has a good proficiency in first language, probably she will get high level in the second. But why do specialists think that it is better to acquire a second language in childhood? And what are the theories that support this idea?

DISCUSSION

The critical period hypothesis is one of the hypothesis about language acquisition, supported by Lenneberg (1967 apud BROWN, 1989). The author assures that language acquisition must occur before the onset of puberty in order to develop language fully. He (apud SCARPA, 2001)

was based on biological aspects to argue in favor of it:

Entre dois e três anos de idade, a linguagem emerge através da interação entre maturação e aprendizado pré-programado. Entre os três anos de idade e a adolescência, a possibilidade de aquisição primária da linguagem continua a ser boa; o indivíduo parece ser mais sensível a estímulos durante este período e preservar uma certa flexibilidade inata para a organização de funções cerebrais para levar a cabo a complexa integração de subprocessos necessários à adequada elaboração da fala e da linguagem. Depois da puberdade, a capacidade de auto-organização e ajuste às demandas psicológicas do comportamento verbal declinam rapidamente. O cérebro comporta-se como se tivesse se fixado daquela maneira e as habilidades primárias e básicas não adquiridas até então geralmente permanecem deficientes até o fim da vida. (p. 221)

However, second language researchers as Walsh and Deller (1981 apud BROWN, 1989), Flege (1981 apud BROWN, 1989) among others, have outlined the possibilities of extrapolating the critical period hypothesis to second language context. Their argument is that a critical point for second language acquisition also occurs around puberty, beyond which people seem to be relatively incapable of acquiring a nativelike accent of the second language.

This argument becomes clearer through an explanation by Rod Ellis (1997), who claims that there is a considerable evidence that second language learners who begin learning as adults are unable to achieve native-speaker competence in either grammar or pronunciation. Studies have shown that if immigrants arrive before puberty in countries that speak a different language from theirs, probably, they will achieve much higher levels of grammatical proficiency than if they arrive after puberty.

On account of these studies some second language researchers have suggested that a critical period theory predicts that children are better than adults at learning a second language. According to them, children may acquire and assimilate two cultures and two social identities or

construct a culture and an identity which contains elements of both.

That has happened due to diverse processes, biological and psychological, that can affect an individual in the second language acquisition as the lateralization of the brain, the fossilization of the speech muscles, the inhibition, among others.

Thus studies which are done in neurological area have shown that the two hemispheres of the brain perform different functions. The left side is the intellectual and logical part while the right side is responsible for emotions. Language functions, therefore, are controlled mainly in the left hemisphere. So, Lenneberg (1967 apud BROWN) suggested that the brain, through the lateralization process, having reached its adult values by puberty, loses the plasticity and reorganization capacities that are necessary for acquiring language. However, this does not occur in the brain of children because, according to him, the lateralization is a slow process that begins around the age of 2 and is completed around the age of 12 and 14 (puberty). Furthermore, in the brain of a child the two hemispheres are more connected than in the brain of an adult and this connection corresponds to a highest learning period. Then children have the best performance on account of this bigger connection between the hemispheres of the brain.

Following the same idea, Thomas Scovel (1969 apud BROWN, 1989) proposed a relation between the lateralization and second language acquisition. In this way, the plasticity of the brain in puberty enables children to acquire not only their first language but also a second language and possibly it is the lateralization process that makes it difficult for people to be able ever again to easily acquire fluent control of second language.

Another process that can also affect second language acquisition is the fossilization of the speech muscles. This phenomenon, according to Selinker (1972 apud VROMAN, 1989), is often observed in adults who have achieved a level of competence that ensures communicative success, even though grammar may be very unlike that of the native speaker. However, it does not occur in children because this fossilization process is still in the beginning of their cognitive development and consequently they have higher capacity to acquire a nativelike pronunciation of the second language. When a child begins to babble her first

words - *babbling stage* - she is able to produce all the sounds that exist in every languages. At that stage she can easily learn Greek or English. There are no phonological barriers. That does not happen with the adults because their phonological matrix is already developed and segmented. On the other hand, children are still unable to understand language as a system of rules that can be learned and applied, even though they are applying intuitively many of those rules.

In the past, it was thought that what had been established in learning a first language could interfere in learning a second one. More recent researches, however, support the view that where two languages are being acquired together, there will be parallel development. Where one language is established before acquiring a second, then strategies developed in learning the first language will be transferred to the learning of subsequent languages and it will be a positive aid in this process.

Other studies have concluded that there are some universal processing strategies that are used in learning to use a second language. They suggested that children gradually reconstruct rules for a second language that is becoming familiar, that is closer to them, imposing rules from their first language on what they hear, and, after, try to talk in the second language guided by those rules. The answers they receive from adults help them to recognize that the rules are different and help to recognize different regularities.

The fact of children construct rules for language is an evidence of their natural language learning ability, an ability that is present in the acquisition of both, first and second languages. Many of the errors made by children acquiring English as a second language are exactly the same errors made by young monolingual speakers of the language. Beginning students are going to say *goed* (in spite of "went") and *foots* (in spite of "feet") as first language learners of English. They are using a process described as "creative construction" (GENESEE, p. 17).

In the process of acquiring any second language, factors of affective order are also important. Children's experiences during the period before they begin to acquire their first language that happens from 18 months to two years old, have been considered crucial in preparing for the development of language.

During this period, the necessary relationships are developing between parents and their babies, and the interaction is established through gestures, facial expressions, actions and vocalizations. These interactions give clues to the meaning of what they hear, called their attention to and help children to become familiar with the sounds, rhythms and stress of the second language, which are different from those of their first language.

It's really important parents talk to young children, even though what is said mean for them only through tone of voice and gestures and facial expressions: "It's essential, then to consider whether such conditions will also be needed in an environment created to give optimum support to children when they are learning a second language" (BRUMFIT *et alli*, 1999, p. 220).

Stephen Krashen (1982) with his *Affective filter hypothesis* also considers relevant factors like anxiety and inhibition, which occur in adolescents and mainly in adults, but not evidenced in children. Anxiety can be defined as an emotional state of apprehending "a vague fear that is only indirectly associated with an object" (SCOVEL, 1978 apud BAILEY, 1994, p.164) and it is caused for excessive expectation to get results. Already, inhibition is very often in adults because "they build sets of defenses to protect the ego" (BROWN, 1989, p.103). In consequence, they worry more about what the other people will think about them and for this reason they do not take risks.

A child acts by instinct. The kid reacts naturally and spontaneously to stimulus. There is no place for fear, doubt, prejudice and preconceptions to interfere her learning process. There is no analysis or rationalization to confuse her. Allen (1965) observed:

He (child) doesn't want to know *why* "Buenos dias", which literally says "Good days", actually means "Good morning", or *why* a feminine noun has a masculine adjective, or *why* the expression is plural in Spanish and singular in English. He goes through no long process of mental translation or interrogation. He immediately perceives that the expression is a greeting and answers "Buenos dias", without complications. (p.196)

The child accepts the second language with trust. She usually believes in her teacher. She doesn't question her ability or the validity of what she offers to her. She also trusts in herself.

Nothing is impossible for her; she doesn't have reasons to doubt in her own ability because she doesn't have the experience in failing.

Then, "the best acquisition will occur in environments where anxiety is low and defensiveness absent" (KRASHEN, 1982, p.31). Therefore it is noticed that children achieve a better fluency because they do not have these "interferences" which difficult the acquisition of a second language.

When a child is learning a second language, it is clear that it will be some time before the second language becomes adequate for expressing ideas and before it promotes children's intellectual development. The importance of children continuing to have appropriate experiences of using the first language during this period will contribute to their competence in using the other language.

Studies of young children becoming bilingual suggested that the contexts in which each language is used should be clearly differentiated, either by association with particular adults or with particular situations, so that children build up expectations about when each language will be used.

Krashen (1982) asserts in his *Input Hypothesis* that the condition for language acquisition to occur is that the acquirer understands (via hearing or reading) input language that contains structure "a bit beyond" his or her current level of competence. So the environment where children live is more propitious for language acquisition than adults environment because when adults talk to a child they use an easier language in a level of her/his comprehension. On the contrary, adults do not receive the same kind of treatment because their thought and their language is wider, due to this, their environment tend to be more complex, easily situated beyond their level of competence. Considering the second language acquisition, it is important that parents maintain their child in contact with her/his home language, so they can develop world knowledge, vocabulary and discourse strategies in their first language at home, while developing their ability in the new language at school with her/his educators.

For Krashen (1982), second language acquisition must develop functional abilities through natural, intuitive, unconscious assimilation in real and concrete situations of

environments of human interaction. Therefore, he affirms that there are two distinct ways to an individual for developing competence in a second language: language acquisition and language learning. He points out that the first way is above the second one in the proficiency of languages because, according to him, acquisition is a subconscious process because the acquirers are not aware of the fact that they are acquiring a language. But, they are only aware of the fact they are using language for communication. Otherwise, learning is a conscious process where the learner knows the rules (grammar), is aware of them and is able to talk about them. So if linguistic proficiency is not fully dependent on the stored knowledge but on the acquired ability from concrete experiences, this explains children's facility to acquire a second language.

CONCLUSION

By the hypotheses presented here, it is possible to comprehend why people are starting to learn a second language earlier. Despite everybody has capacity to learn a second language, these theories support that children assimilate languages more easily than adults and achieve a good fluency without accent of their mother tongue. In addition to this, children who are exposed to two linguistic systems from a very early age demonstrated a capacity to keep their two languages separated and they manifest an early understanding of the different situations when one or the other of their language is appropriate. The process of acquiring two languages by a child is now seen to have cognitive as well as social benefits.

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NOTA

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