

Is Early English Education in China Applicable?

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Abstract

Since the critical period hypothesis (CPH) was proposed by Lenneberg, the past two decades have seen a trend of early English education for young children in China. In our daily life, however, we often hear some negative voice of early English education too. Analyzing the research findings of the effect of age on second language acquisition (SLA) and foreign language acquisition, this paper aims at answering the question whether early English education in China is applicable, and suggests that consistent exposure time and language learning environment should be taken into consideration when we decide when to give children early English education.

Key words: critical period hypothesis; second language; foreign language; exposure time; starting age; language learning environment

1. Introduction

Nowadays, it has been agreed that children are better at learning second/foreign language than adults. In China, a case in point is the early English education in elementary schools and kindergartens, and the willingness or plans of parents to send their young children to all kinds of English training classes. Since September 2001, English has been introduced at Grade 3 in almost all elementary schools, lowering the age of compulsory instruction of English as a school subject from eleven (Grade 5) to nine (Grade 3) by the Chinese Ministry of Education. In cities, kindergartens, in increasing numbers, begin to give children English lessons, which

have been considered as a symbol of good quality education and an attraction to parents. In addition, early children English training has become a big market in the past two decades. Some parents send their children as young as three years old to those training classes, hoping to lay a solid foundation for their school English learning career.

In fact, this tendency to favor early English education in China is based on the belief in the critical period hypothesis (CPH), the belief in the superiority of young learner in second/foreign language acquisition. In recent years, however, we often hear some negative voice of early English education too. Parents complain the loss of their money and their children's interest in English leaning. Some children blame English for losing their precious leisure time to English training classes. Some education authorities criticize English education for its waste of time and low efficiency. This paper aims at answering this question whether early English education in China is applicable by analyzing the research findings of the effect of age on second language acquisition (SLA) and foreign language acquisition.

2. Optimal Age for SLA?

CPH for language acquisition refers to “a period of time when learning a language is relatively easy and typically meets with a high degree of success. Once this period is over, at or before the onset of puberty, the average learner is less likely to achieve native-like ability in the target language” (cited in Jun Liu, 2005:14). CPH, the claim that human beings are only capable of learning their first language between the age of two years and the early teens (Cook, 2011: 147). In fact, initially the notion of critical period was proposed by Lenneberg (1967) and was only connected to first language acquisition. Later, second language researchers have outlined the possibilities of extrapolating the critical period hypothesis to second language learning, too (Lifei Wang, 2000: 185). Now, it has been agreed that teachers should take advantage of this easy stage of learning by teaching children a second language at as early age as possible.

While linguists generally agree that there is a critical period for first language acquisition, it has long been debated whether there is a critical period in SLA (Jun Liu , 2005:14). It is controversial that at what age is the optimal timing for beginning learning a second language, and theoretical explanations are not adequate for the critical period for SLA, since many adults have been found to achieve high-level proficiency in SLA. Stern (2005) explained that language learning may occur at different maturity levels from the early years into adult life, no age or stage stands out as optimal or critical for all aspects of second language learning. From the “multi-critical period” hypothesis of some psycholinguists, Lifei Wang (2000) argued that certain kind of critical period in a learner may disappear after puberty, while other kind of critical period may last for a lifetime, and that different people may have different timetable for experiencing the critical period. Accordingly, it shouldn't be concluded that there exists an optimal age for SLA, or a definite critical period for SLA.

3. Effect of Age on the Rate of Second Language Acquisition

According to CPH, the success of SLA appears to be strongly influenced by the age of learners. In fact, children and adults have both their own advantages and disadvantages in SLA. Snow and Hoefinagel-ho have shown that the learners who make progress most rapidly may be adolescents. In their study of Dutch second language learners, they found that although the adults (15 years and older) outperformed the children (6 to 10 years), the teenagers (12 to 15 years) learned more rapidly than both (Ellis 1999:105). After investigating the findings of child-adult differences in second language learning, Krashen et al. (1979) proposed the following findings: 1) Adults proceed through early stages of syntactic and morphological development faster than children (where time and exposure are held constant); 2) Older children acquire faster than younger children (again in early stages of morphological and syntactic development where time and exposure are held constant) (Larsen-Freeman & Long, 2000:156-157). This may help explain why we often hear some younger children's parents complaining of their children's slow rate and low efficiency in English learning. It is also quite common for parents and teachers alike to face the fact that preschoolers (under-sevens) and most schoolchildren (under-twelves) can only remember limited number of words or communicative expressions after years of English learning in kindergartens and elementary schools.

Where rate is concerned, there is evidence to suggest that older learners are better. That is, if learners at different ages are matched according to the amount of time they have been exposed to the second language, it is the older learners who reach higher levels of proficiency (Ellis:1999, 105). In China, the situation is the same, with the older children, the middle school and high school students (grades 7-12) outperforming both young children, the elementary school students (kindergarten to 6th grade) and adults. On average, older children spend more time and energy on English learning both at school and home, having at least 6 English classes and at least 2 or more self-study classes each week at school, while young children only have, on average, 2 classes in kindergarten and 2 to 4 classes in elementary schools. For adults, few of them have both fixed time and formal English education to learn English. So, it is the more exposure time of English that makes older children's achievement remarkable. We shouldn't attribute their better and easier language learning solely to critical period, at or before the onset of puberty.

4. Effect of Age on the Acquisition of Native Speaker Proficiency

There are some evidence showing that learners who start as young children achieve a more native-like accent than those who start as adolescents or adults. The findings by Oyama, Asher, Garcia and Major, together with those of Payne (1980) for the acquisition of phonology in a second dialect, suggest that second language phonological attainment is strongly conditioned by learner age; specifically that attainment is inversely related to AO

(age of arrival), and a native-like accent is impossible unless first exposure is quite early, probably around six (Larsen-Freeman & Long, 2000:158). Other studies which have investigated the effects of age on pronunciation (for example, Asher and Garcia 1969; Taha Wood, and Loewentha, 1981) support the younger-is-better position (Ellis, 2004: 489). So, it is generally believed that, in the case of pronunciation, especially accent, younger starters do better than late ones like adolescents and adults.

However, the controversy is rather fierce concerning the effect of age on the attainment of native-speaker levels of proficiency for the reason that other experimental studies have produced opposite results. As Thompson's (1991) study shows, starting early is no guarantee that native-speaker abilities will be achieved, even in the most favorable learning situations (Ellis: 2004, 488). It is possible that under ideal circumstances learners who start after puberty can learn to produce speech and writing that cannot easily be distinguished from that of native speakers (Ellis 2004: 488). Besides, the findings of Oyama et al. was based on the study of immigrants in the USA who had lived in the UAS for different periods. These subjects had the opportunity of learning English in a natural second language environment, which is crucial for second language/ foreign language learning, especially for pronunciation, and which few English learners, including early starters, can enjoy. On the other hand, as we all know, without constant efforts, even the most favorable learning situations cannot enable learners to have native-speaker accent. In China, most Chinese young English learners (preschoolers and schoolchildren), except those who study at international schools, don't have the opportunity of achieving native-like accent even though they start learning English at an early age, around six. For one thing, they don't have English teachers with native-like accent. For another, the quality of the teaching staff for elementary schools and kindergartens in some areas, especially rural and the west areas in China is bad. Some even don't have standard pronunciation, resulting in student's mispronunciation, which is a big obstacle in their school English learning career. Besides, for most Chinese English learners today, native-like is not the focus of their language achievement. As long as they can use English to communicate with others orally, they have achieved their goals of English learning. Therefore, it is extremely difficult for a majority of second language learners to acquire native-like accent, not to mention foreign language learners, like Chinese English learners, who don't have natural language learning environment and few of them may exert constant efforts to achieve native speaker proficiency.

5. Effect of Age on Learners' Second Language Acquisition Ultimate Achievement

Children generally reach higher levels of ultimate achievement in SLA. Lifei Wang (2000,184) concluded that adults and older children initially acquire the second language faster than young children, but child second language acquisition will usually be superior in terms of ultimate attainment. Ultimate achievement does not focus on the learning rate but the final result of English abilities. In the long run, young starters consistently outperform

older ones, and only young children seem to be capable of native-like attainment in pronunciation and intonation.

The number of years of exposure to English also has an effect on the final attainment. Both number of years of exposure and starting age affect the level of success. The number of years' exposure contributes greatly to the overall communicative fluency of learners, but starting age determines the levels of accuracy achieved, particularly in pronunciation (cited in Nunan, 2001: 41). Where success of SLA is concerned, the general finding is, not surprisingly, that the longer the exposure to the second language, the more native-like second language proficiency becomes (Ellis 1999:105). Obviously, it is early start that enables young children to have more time, especially formal instructional time acquiring second language, ensuring their higher ultimate achievement than that of older ones, who spend less time on SLA and have less formal instructional education of second language. As long as learners spend as much time as early starters do, they are likely to reach high levels of ultimate achievement. The data of present study suggests that the primary factors in attainment of proficiency in French (and presumably, any foreign language) is the amount of instructional time provided (cited in Stern, 2005: 365). Actually, it is the amount of exposure time, especially instructional time for foreign language learners, not the starting time plays an key role in learners' language ultimate achievements.

In China, the number of years and starting age don't necessarily guarantee Chinese early starters' ultimate achievement, because early start in a foreign language environment doesn't ensure the number of years of exposure and the time spent on English. For second language early starters, the second language is used in their daily life, which forcing them to learn or pick it up probably in their life time, ensuring them to have consistent exposure time. In contrast, young children in China learn English as a foreign language. They don't have the opportunity of incidental learning due to the lack of learning environment, the exposure to natural English, and their daily urge to learn English mostly comes from parents, teachers and probably the up-coming English tests, not the need of daily communication. These early starters spend limited classroom time (2 to 4 classes, less than 2 hours each week) on English learning, having no constant exposure time to English. Consequently, early start in a foreign language learning environment, like China, doesn't necessarily enable children to spend more time in learning English, making their ultimate achievement uncertain.

6. Implications for the Timing of English Education in China

Studies of CPH do show that age have effects on SLA in many aspects such as ultimate achievement, rate of learning and native-like language proficiency, which can help us to have a better understanding of the timing for starting SLA and teaching. However, evidence for the effects of CPH on foreign language is inadequate. Chinese English learners learn English as a foreign language, having no communication need in their daily life and favorable language

learning environment, for example, natural language environment, as immigrants do. Two factors should be taken into consideration when we are deciding the timing for our children to start learning English in China.

It is learners' degree of constant exposure to English, which is usually the instructional time in China, and the time spent on English, not the starting time that affects the success of Chinese learners' English learning. When we choose the time for starting English learning and teaching, how long the learners are going to be studying should be reckoned with. If they are intending to spend many years learning the second language, they might as well start as children rather than as adults since they will probably end up better speakers. If they are going to learn the second language for a few years and then drop it, like the majority learners perhaps, there is an advantage for adults, who would reach a higher standard during the same period (Cook, 2000: 149). In China, a majority of English learners are unlikely to use English in their life time. They just want to score high in English in their College Entrance Examination (English accounts for 150 points in the total score of 750), which may make a difference in the success of the test. Most of them tend to exert less efforts in or give up English learning, especially after they enter college or take a job which don't related to English. On the other hand, being a developing country, China's education still has a long way to go to realize full equality, with good and high quality education in the east and big cities, poor and low quality education in the west and the countries. It is unrealistic to give English education to all the children at grade 3, not to mention children in kindergartens. Actually, even some elementary schools in cities, especially those in the west, cannot give students the required 4 English classes each week, decreasing the inadequate exposure and instructional time. In fact, the data suggest that students who start the study of a foreign language at relatively older age make somewhat faster progress than those start early. ... If necessary, the start of instruction can be delayed more than normally if more intensive instruction is given (cited in Stern, 2005: 365). In a foreign language learning environment like China, when should we give children English education, in fact, is up to children themselves or their parents, who may decide the constant exposure to English and instructional time.

Learning environment is also crucial to the timing for English learning in China. It is a common belief that early starters have advantages over late ones in achieving native-like accent and they can attain overall communicative foreign language fluency. At present in China, it is impractical for learners to acquire native-like proficiency in pronunciation because they don't have natural language learning environment and few native-speaker teachers. How can they achieve native-like accent? Pronunciation or accent is not the only criterion of successful second language learning in term of success or rate of acquisition (Lifei Wang, 2000:186). Other research shows that, when the teaching situation is the same, older children are better than younger children even at pronunciation. An experiment with the learning of Dutch by English children and adults found imitation was more successful with

older learners (Snow and Hoefnagel-hole, 1977) (cited in cook, 2000: 110). Therefore, it would be better to give English education to older children in China, since, under regular education in China, older children, teenagers, learn better than younger children, for they have better learning environment, more formal and consistent intensive instruction than younger ones do. For learners who have native-speaker teachers and favorable language learning environment, for example, those who study at foreign language schools, it would be better for them to start learning English at an early age to achieve native-like language proficiency.

7. Conclusion

Age issue is one of the important factors which affect SLA, and the research findings about age and SLA are worth using for guidance in second language learning and teaching. At the same time, it must be realized that these findings are not definite and cannot be totally applied to English learning and teaching in China, without considering learning conditions, like learning environment, consistent exposure time, and English education quality in China. In conclusion, when early English education is given to preschoolers and young children in China, exposure time to English and learning environment should be reckoned with.

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