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Age Factor in Second Language Acquisition

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The notion that there is a biologically determined period set for language acquisition is referred to as the Critical Period Hypothesis. This critical period which is thought to be sometime between age five and puberty has been the subject of long term debate. This study examines the impact of age on learners' second language acquisition with a focus on non-native speakers of English at undergraduate level. The sample consists of eighty students studying in the first academic year at the University of Sri Jayewardenepura and both qualitative and quantitative data have been collected from the sample. The first phase of the study involves a questionnaire administered to the selected subjects and in order to validate answers of the questionnaire, a structured interview is carried out. The second phase involves the assessment of their reading, listening, speaking and writing skills and the final phase involves a comparison between the age and amount of exposure to English during these students' pre-puberty period and the level of proficiency which they have shown when their second language skills are tested. The findings promote age as affective in second language acquisition. This study provides strong empirical evidence to support the assumption that learners can learn a language with no difficulty up to a certain age after which the language learning abilities decline because the plasticity of a child's brain is lost at puberty. Precisely, cognitive immaturity is the best for second language learning not maturity. This research challenges the argument which some researchers hold that similarities between children and adults mastering a second language are greater than differences. Therefore, it is highly recommended that a target language is introduced to children at a very early stage of their life. It is hoped that this research will spur more in depth studies in the area of second language acquisition. Further, it is strongly believed that extensive use and exposure to the language being learnt can make a positive impact on learning. It is also recommended that similar studies are conducted with a large number of students in order to draw generalisations regarding the said subject matter. Further, substantial future research can focus on other factors identified as affective in second language acquisition.

Key words: critical period, Critical Period Hypothesis, puberty, second language, second language acquisition