

Investigating EFL Iraqi Student's Attitude toward Critical Period and Its Factors for Acquisition of Second Language

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Abstract

This study deals with the critical period of Second language Acquisition and the factors that may affect it. As we know there is a critical period for first language acquisition in which people acquire their first language. And this period is affected by some factors. So, it is assumed that there is a critical period for the second language acquisition in which people acquire the second language easily. This study discusses the critical period for the second language acquisition and show the factors that may affect it. It also shows the relationship between second language learning and the critical period. The participants in this study are 35 EFL students from English Department, College of Education. The second part of this research deals with the data collecting. The data was collected by a questionnaire sent to the 35EFL students. The study ends up with the result and the conclusions.

key words: Critical period, Acquisition of Second language

1.The Problem and its Significance

People can acquire a second language under many different circumstances. You may have learned a second language when you began middle school, or high school, or college. Moving to a new country often means acquiring a new language. Other people live in communities or homes

in which more than one language is spoken and may acquire two (or more) languages simultaneously. The term second language acquisition (henceforth, SLA), or L2 acquisition, generally refers to the acquisition of a second language by someone (adult or child) who has already acquired a first language. This is also referred to as sequential bilingualism. Bilingual language acquisition refers to the (more or less) simultaneous acquisition of two languages beginning in infancy (or before the age of three years), also referred to as simultaneous bilingualism (Fromkin et al, 2014 :357).

SLA refers to any language learned in addition to a person 's first language although the concept is named as second language while it could be third, fourth or subsequent language. SLA refers to what learners do; it does not refer to practices in language teacher, although teaching can affect acquisition. The term acquisition was originally used to emphasize the non-conscious nature of the learning process, but in recent years learning and acquisition have become largely synonymous. SLA can incorporate heritage language learning, but it does not usually incorporate bilingualism. Most SLA researchers see bilingualism as being the end result of learning a language, not the process itself, and see the term as referring to native-like fluency. Writers in fields such as education and psychology, however, often use bilingualism loosely to refer to all forms of multilingualism. SLA is also not to be contrasted with the acquisition of a foreign language rather , the learning of second languages and the learning of foreign languages involve the same fundamental processes (Ellis , 1997 : 3).

1.2. Hypotheses

In an attempt to achieve the main aim of the current research, the following hypotheses have been postulated.

1. There is no statistically significant difference between the mean scores of the development of a critical period for acquiring second language and this critical period is affected by some factors.
2. There is no statistically significant difference between the mean scores of critical period for second language acquisition and difference of people age that can acquire second language.

1.3. Aims of the Study

This study aims at Investigating EFL Iraqi Student's Attitude toward Critical period and Its Factors for Acquisition of Second Language.

1.3. The Limit of the study

The study is limited to:

1. The Critical period of the second language Acquisition and the factors that affect it.
2. Fourth year students of English Department, College of Education in academic study 2018-2019

1.4. The Significance of the Study

This study is important to show if there is a critical period for acquiring second language and it also deals with the factors that may affect it. So, investigating the factors that may affect it helps us to improve the acquisition of the second language.

2.Literature Review

2.1. The Critical period of Second Language

The idea that there may be an optimal, maybe even critical, age period for the acquisition of language entered SLA research through the work in neurolinguistics of **Penfield and Roberts (1959:787)** and **Lenneberg (1967)**. Their ideas quickly became influential in a time when the new field called SLA was emerging. These authors contributed neurolinguistics data supporting a natural predisposition in the child's brain for learning the first language, together with anecdotal observations that children were also adept foreign language learners, when compared to adults. The possible causes tentatively identified at the time were the loss of plasticity undergone by human brains by year nine of life (**Penfield and Roberts, 1959: 92**) or perhaps the completion by the onset of puberty of the process of lateralization, the specialization in all right-handed individuals of the left brain hemisphere for language functions (**Lenneberg, 1967 ; Ortega , 2009 : 12-13**).

The Acquisition-Learning Hypothesis involves that there are two independent systems of second language performance; acquisition is the result of a subconscious process similar to children's mother language acquisition and requires life-like second language interaction, which concentrates on communication rather than accuracy. On the other hand, learning occurs through formal instruction and includes a conscious process, which results in knowledge of the target language. Learned knowledge permits learners to read and listen more so that the acquisition is effectual. The Natural Order Hypothesis; suggests that just as first language learners, second language learners seem to acquire the characteristics of the target language in an obvious

order. Contrary to intuition, the rules which are easier to state and to learn are not necessarily the first to acquire. It is observed that the natural order is independent of the order in which rules have been learned in class.

2.2. Factors That affect the Critical Period of Second Language Acquisition

Harley (2014: 77) states that there are some factors that could affect the critical period of SLA:

1. Age

Age is a significant factor in L2 acquisition. The younger a person is when exposed to a second language, the more likely she is to achieve native-like competence. The people who arrived as children (between the age of three and eight) did as well on the test as American native speakers. Those who arrived between the ages of eight and fifteen did not perform like native speakers. Moreover, every year seemed to make a difference for this group. The person who arrived at age nine did better than the one who arrived at age ten; those who arrived at age eleven did better than those who arrived at age twelve, and so on. The group that arrived between the ages of seventeen and thirty-one had the lowest scores. Does this mean that there is a critical period for L2 acquisition, an age beyond which it is impossible to acquire the grammar of a new language? Most researchers would hesitate to make such a strong claim (Fromkin, 2014 :366). The study also shows a positive relationship between brain density and second language proficiency. The researchers conclude that the structure of the human brain is altered by the experience of acquiring a second language.

2. Gender

Psycholinguistic studies looking at frequency effects suggest that males and females process language differently, with females using (and having an advantage in) some types of memory and males using others. Gender can also influence classroom dynamics and potentially affect the second language learning process. For example, research on interactions between non-native speakers shows that both males and females work harder to achieve mutual comprehension in mixed-gender pairings than in matched-gender pairings; •males indicate non understanding more often than females; males, when interacting with females, tend to talk more and dominate the conversation .Since gender is expressed differently across cultural groups, identifying gender effects in second language learning is a complex task. However, because interaction is a crucial aspect of second language learning, evidence of unequal distribution of talk may have ramifications for language development (Fasold & Linton, 2014 :457).

3. Working Memory

Working memory is another important way in which learners differ is in their working memory capacities – that is, in their ability to store and process information at the same time. Research suggests that working memory plays a role in first language acquisition, language processing (e.g. disambiguating sentences), and language loss (e.g. in Alzheimer's patients). In light of these findings, researchers have begun to investigate the relationship between working memory and second language acquisition. For example, researchers have found that learners' working memory capacities affect their ability to learn L2 vocabulary and grammatical rules, as well as their L2 reading ability and listening proficiency. Studies such as these have provided evidence that

working memory may help predict differences in the rate of L2 learning (Fernandez, et al., 2018).

4. Motivation

Motivation is another characteristic that varies considerably across L2 learners. The commonsense view is that motivated language learners, who are willing to devote more time and energy to achieving fluency in the target language, are more successful. Some researchers have even claimed that motivation is the single most important individual difference impacting on SLA. Motivation is not monolithic, however; it is a complex, multidimensional construct. Studies making use of Robert Gardner's socio-educational model of motivation have focused not only on integrative aspects of motivation (involving the learner's attitudes towards the target language group and the desire to integrate into the target language community), but also on instrumental orientations, which refer to more practical reasons for language learning, such as gaining some social or economic reward through L2 achievement. Distinctions have also been made between extrinsic and intrinsic bases of motivation. Although SLA researchers are still debating whether motivation causes language learning (e.g. by putting learners in contact with more input) or whether success in language learning gives rise to motivation, some recent studies do suggest that motivation helps to predict the level of proficiency that an L2 learner ultimately attains. Studies also show that motivation can change during the learning process, varying from day to day and even from task to task.

3. Methodology

3.1. The participants

The participants in this study are group of Iraqi students. They are the students of fourth stage in English Department, Misan University who are learning English as a second language since their first language is Arabic. They are both males and females. They are divided as the following; While students age according to their answers are divided into four groups as the following
 ما الفائدة من تقسيم الطلاب الى مجاميع ؟ المذكور اربع مجاميع لكن الحقيقي ثلاثة !:(21/22/23,?)

3.2. Data Collecting

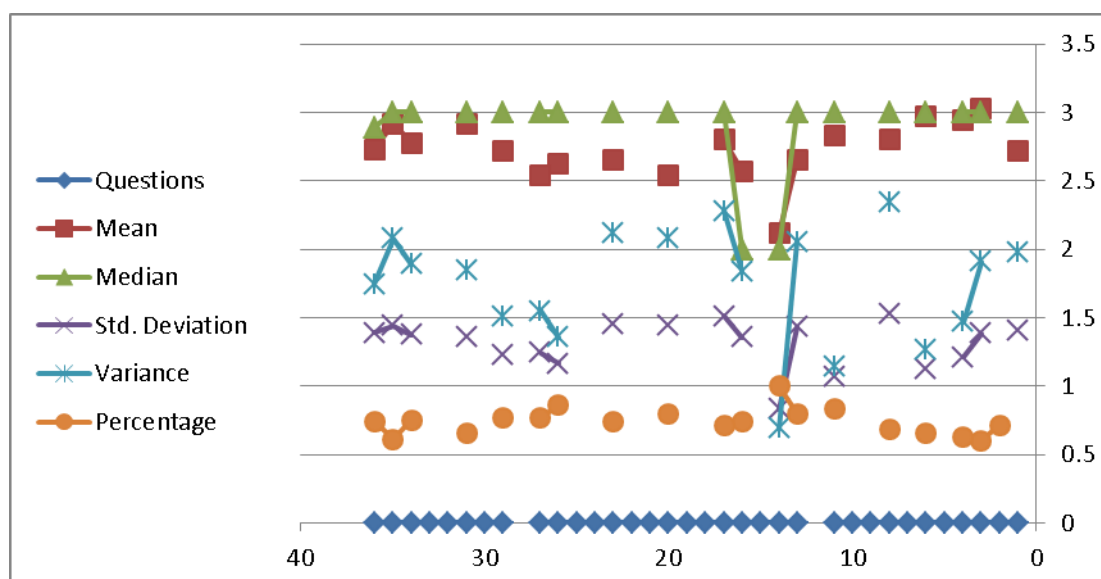
The data is collected by a questionnaire. The questionnaire aimed to show if there any critical period and also designed to measure the factors that effect on the critical period as the following according to the sex and age. The questionnaire that sent to 35 students of English Department , Misan University .The questionnaire depends on five main criteria that may have an effect on the critical period of second language .These criteria are the age , personality , affective factors , motivation and the context of learning second language (social situation , formal situation and linguistics environment).So each one of the eighteenth questions in the questionnaire deals one of the criteria . See table (1).

Table (1) Questionnaire of the Critical Period and the Factors that affect the Critical Period

Questions	Mean	Median	Std. Deviation	Variance	Percentage
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1-I find learning English easy at the age of a-Primary b-secondary c-college a-17 b- 9 c-6	2.7143	3	1.405	1.975	71.4%
2- you are motivated to learn English	3.0286	3	1.382	1.911	60%
3-Who motivates you more? A- Family B- friends c- Teachers a-6 b-18 c-10	2.9429	3	1.211	1.467	62.9%
4-you Often practice English in your surroundings	2.9714	3	1.124	1.264	65.7%
5-You find learning English easy as a-child b-Teenager c-younger a-16 b-9 c- 10	2.8000	3	1.530	2.341	68.6%
6-I would like to learn English as individual	2.8286	3	1.070	1.146	82.9%
7-I would like to learn English as group	2.6571	3	1.433	2.055	80.0%
8-you like learning English at the age of years old a-10 b- 13 c-16	2.1143	2	0.832	.692	100%
9-you use some kinds of media to help you learning	2.5714	2	1.356	1.840	74.3%
10-you have difficulties in learning a-Grammar b- Vocabulary c- Pronunciation	2.8000	3	1.510	2.282	71.4%

a- 11 b-8 c-16					
11-what do you need to improve more? a-Listening b-Reading c-Speaking a-14 b-7 c-14	2.5429	3	1.441	2.079	80%
12-which skill do you find more difficult? a-Listening b-Reading c- speaking a-15 b-5 c-15	2.6571	3	1.454	2.114	74.3%
13- your local accent effects on your learning	2.6286	3	1.165	1.358	85.7%
14- working with other students give you confident to learn	2.5429	3	1.244	1.550	77.1%
15-At which age do you acquire vocabulary more easily a -10 b-13 c-16	2.7143	3	1.226	1.504	77.1%
16- you start to communicate in English at a-primary b-secondary c-college a-10 b- 12 c-13	2.9143	3	1.358	1.845	65.7%
17-You like to speak English	2.7778	3	1.375	1.892	75%
18-Sharing information about different things helps you to learn English	2.9167	3	1.441	2.079	61.1%
Total	2.729	2.888	1.390	1.744	74.06%



Graphic (1): The Critical Period and the Factors that affect the Critical Period

4.1.

Results

The results reveal that the overall mean score for students is **2.729**, Median is **2.888**, Standard Deviation is **1.390**, Variance is **1.744** and the **Percentage** is **74.06%**. The descriptive statistics shows that development of a critical period for acquiring second language and this critical period is affected by some factors.



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4.2. Conclusion

On the basis of the analysis of data given above, the following conclusions can be drawn:

1. Items (8,13) which refer to (you like learning English at the age of ...10,13,16..... years old) and (your local accent effects on your learning) the high weighted mean is 100% and 85%.
2. Items (2) which refer to (you are motivated to learn English) the low weighted mean is 100% and 60%.

Language acquisition is a complex and somewhat abstract subject. Most people cannot remember a time when they did not know a language, so therefore it is difficult to study the steps in the language learning process. One important aspect of the language acquisition process that has been frequently studied is the age at which a person best acquires either his first or second language. Generally, it is believed that the younger a person is when exposed to a language, the more quickly the person will acquire it.

Many psychologists do believe that there is a limited span of time in which a person is able to acquire language (Bernstein, Stewart, and Wickens, 1997). This span of time is referred to as the critical period for language learning. The critical period spans from early childhood to puberty. It is

believed that after the span of the critical period, language acquisition is slower and more incomplete. The concept of the critical period has led to the formation of the critical period hypothesis, which states that there is a critical period in which language is best acquired.

The critical period hypothesis can be tested on both first and second language acquisitions. There have been many studies done on this hypothesis and not all the results have been in favor of the existence of a critical period. These studies have shown that second language acquisition is the same regardless of the age of a person. However, many other studies have supported the critical period hypothesis and the general assumption that there is an optimum period to acquire a second language. Age is a significant factor in L2 acquisition, but there are also other factors that have an important role in the critical period according to this study such as gender, personality, motivation, the linguistics environment, and the role of the first language.

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