

Critical Period Hypothesis - teaching foreign language to children at an early age

With reference to the psychological and evolutionary view many psychologists, pediatricists, educationalists and even linguists believe that at the age from 1.5 to 3.5 years children go through a critical period of their development. The Critical Period Hypothesis is described as a period of brain plasticity at an early age within which children are able to learn subconsciously and develop their innate brain capacity.

Czech psychologist Václav Příhoda (1963, p. 183) indicates this period is cardinal in human development as it is not repeated in any other life period. Critical period is also frequently highlighted by Dr. Glenn Doman (1994, p. 198) and American psychologist and neurologist who is certain that Critical Period Hypothesis derives from the growth of human brain. The size of the brain is 35cm in diameter at birth. When children are 2.5 years old, the brain reaches the size of approximately 50cm in diameter. The biggest growth finishes up to 6. After six, when it has grown into 53cm, the size of the brain does not change remarkably. This is confirmed by the fact that at the age of 21 the size of the brain is approximately 55cm. (ibid. p. 198)

Other remarkable representatives of the Critical Period Hypothesis are Swiss philosopher, natural scientist and psychologist Jean Piaget well known for his theory of cognitive development (2000) and an Italian educationalist, physician, philosopher and humanitarian Maria Montessori. Montessori (Wikipedia) introduced so called Sensitive Phases. These are crucial stages of the child's development. During individual phases lasting a limited period particular sensitivity to perceive certain ability, skill or competence appears. Once the period concludes it is irretrievably lost whether its potential was used or not.

Příhoda (1963, p. 183) further underlines the importance of this period with explanations referring to the fact that during this period children learn to distinguish shapes, animals and colours and beside this they become more confident in walking. As concerns speech, children are able to recognise subtle differences between vowels (ə vs. æ) and consonants (p vs. p^h). They are even able to imitate them. This is a considerable aspect, in my opinion, that must be remembered in connection with a young child's ability to acquire pronunciation. This aspect should be taken into account when teaching foreign language to children at an early age.

Furthermore, Příhoda (1963, p. 184) identically with Čáp (2001) adds that at this age children realise that each thing has its own name and thus a word symbolizes a thing. Although they are not yet able to express or define it, children feel it. At the beginning of the second year a child learns rhymes and poems quite easily; usually just by hearing them. As opposed to listening hearing is unintentional. It is established on method of immersion. While playing, eating, getting dressed etc. children hear and effortlessly absorb sounds, rhythm and melody of the language. At the period after the exposure to the language children acquire the meaning and only later the production comes. Never later in their life would people show such remarkable growth of their intellectual abilities, skills and manifestations as in this life period. (Příhoda 1963, Čáp 2001). Příhoda (ibid, p. 184) additionally advances children whose parents devote their time to reading and playing with them. As children have mastered their mother tongue at the age of three, Příhoda is certain about the high influence parents have on the development of their child's speech before the age of three. Approvingly Doleželová (2005), an educationalist and methodologist, presents that even though we recognise some children as more or less bright, we should be aware of the fact that all children have started learning from their birth and besides genetically given potentials their development is more or less in the hands of their parents. Speaking about the development after the birth Doleželová probably refers to the Critical Period Hypothesis, already discussed above. Furthermore, Doleželová (2005) says that family background significantly influences the development of every individual and creates relationships between a child and his/her parents. Through a variety of games and activities, parents can develop their child in the areas of speech, thinking, sense perception, physical and motor skills. What is more, she is sure that within the process of teaching/learning, parents strengthen their and their child's relationship. Doleželová (2005) as well as Příhoda (1963) declares that whether the development is supported or not every child has practically mastered his/her mother tongue by the age of three. After this age or sometimes even earlier we can notice that the vocabulary of some children is more developed than that of others. This proves the fact that if children were exposed to listening to fairy-tales read by their parents regularly or if parents talked to their children more often, the vocabulary of such children would be more extensive than of the ones who did not have this opportunity. Craig Ramey, a child development specialist from the University of Alabama, in addition approves that "if a child has been raised in a disadvantaged home, intervention at the kindergarten level produces only minuscule" (Ramey as quoted in Toner), which proves the importance of the parents' role.

When aiming to make foreign language learning process as natural as in acquiring the mother tongue, I recognise hearing is absolutely essential. The Critical Period Hypothesis approves that

when activated, the brain allows children to learn more effectively and learning process appears natural. I believe children can benefit from acquiring a foreign language at an early age as not only can they acquire the structure of the language, the melody, intonation and rhythm but they can also enlarge their brain capacity and ability for learning their whole life. Thus, I am convinced that children should have an opportunity to use their potential of the Critical Period Hypothesis and further develop themselves.

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