Chapter 3: Individual differences in second language learning

Content adapted from Lightbown and Spada (2006)
Who is a 'good language learner'?

* Neil Naiman and his colleagues (1995) have tried to identify the personal characteristics that make one learner more successful than another.

* Table 3.1 shows a list of some of the characteristics that have been thought to contribute to successful language learning.

* In your experience,

  * Which characteristics seem to you most likely to be associated with success in SLA in the classroom?

  * Which ones do you think are less important?
Who is a 'good language learner'?

The characteristics listed in Table 3.1 can be classified into several categories:

* motivation
* intellectual abilities
* personality
* learning preferences
How is research on the influence of individual differences on SLA done?

* When researchers are interested in finding out whether a **VARIABLE** (e.g. motivation) affects second language learning, they usually select a group of learners and give them
  * a questionnaire to measure the type and degree of their **motivation**.
  * a test to assess their second **language proficiency**

* The test and the questionnaire are both scored, and the researcher uses a statistical procedure called a **CORRELATION**.

* The correlation shows how likely it is that learners with high scores on the motivation questionnaire will also have high scores on the language test.
Research on learner characteristics

There are difficulties in assessing the relationship between individual learner characteristics and SLA.

What are they?
1. Unlike variables such as *age*, it is not possible to directly observe and measure variables such as motivation, extroversion, or intelligence.

These are just labels for an entire range of behaviours and characteristics.
2. Such characteristics are not independent of each other, and researchers have sometimes used the same label to describe different sets of behavioural traits.
Research on learner characteristics

For example,

In motivation questionnaires, learners may be asked how often they have opportunities to use their L2 with native speakers.

* The assumption behind the question is that, if the learner usually speaks to native speakers, then this might be an indication that he is highly motivated to learn and develop his language ability.

* This seems reasonable, but it is not so simple.
Research on learner characteristics

• It may not be because he or she is more motivated to learn.

• It might be that this individual lives where there are more opportunities for language practice in informal contexts than those who report a low frequency of interaction.

* Because it is usually impossible to separate these two variables (i.e. willingness to interact and opportunities to interact), we cannot conclude whether it is motivation or opportunity that is most closely associated with success.
3. Perhaps the most serious error in interpreting correlations is the conclusion that one of the variables causes the other.

* The fact that two things tend to occur together or increase and decrease together does not necessarily mean that one caused the other.

* While it may be that one variable influences the other, it may also be that both are influenced by something else entirely.
Research on learner characteristics

For example,

- Learners who are successful may indeed be highly motivated.
- But can we conclude that they became successful because of their motivation?
- It is also possible:
  that early success heightened their motivation,
  or that both success and motivation are due to their special aptitude for language learning or the favourable context in which they are learning.
4. Another difficulty is how language proficiency is defined and measured.
For example,

- Some studies report that learners with a higher IQ are more successful language learners than those with a lower IQ.

- Other studies report no such correlation.

- One explanation for these conflicting findings is that the language proficiency tests used in different studies do not measure the same kind of knowledge.

- That is, IQ may be less closely correlated to measures of conversational fluency than to tests that measure metalinguistic knowledge.
Research on learner characteristics

5. Research on individual differences must also take into account the social and educational settings in which learners find themselves.
Bonny Norton and Kelleen Toohey (2001) argue, even when individuals possess some of the characteristics that have been associated with the 'good language learner', their language acquisition may not be successful if they are not able to gain access to social relationships in situations where they are perceived as valued partners in communication.
Members of some immigrant and minority groups are often marginalized by social and educational practices that limit their opportunities to engage in communication with peers, colleagues, and even teachers.

In these social conditions, individuals who approach a new language with the cognitive and motivational characteristics typical of the 'good language learner' may not achieve the proficiency that these characteristics would predict.
The term 'intelligence' has traditionally been used to refer to performance on certain kinds of tests.

These tests are often associated with success in school.

A link between intelligence and SLA has been reported.

Some research has shown that IQ scores were a good means of predicting success in SLA.

However, IQ tests may be more strongly related to metalinguistic knowledge than to communicative ability.
Fred Genesee's (1976) Study

* He studied students in French IMMERSION PROGRAMMES in Canada
Finding:

1. Intelligence was related to the development of French second language reading, grammar, and vocabulary.

2. However, it was unrelated to oral production skills.
This suggests that:

- The kind of intelligence measured by traditional IQ tests may be a strong predictor when it comes to learning that involves language analysis and rule learning.

- This kind of intelligence may play a less important role in classrooms where the instruction focuses more on communication and interaction.

This explains why many students whose general academic performance is weak experience considerable success in second language learning if they are given the right opportunities (opportunities for communication for example)
In recent years, many educators have been influenced by 

**Howard Gardner's (1993) proposal that:**

- individuals have *'multiple intelligences'*
- traditional IQ tests have assessed only a limited range of abilities.
Among the 'multiple intelligences' Gardner includes abilities in the areas of music, interpersonal relations, and athletics, as well as the verbal intelligence that is most often associated with success in school.
Aptitude

• Specific abilities thought to predict success in language learning have been studied under the title of *language learning 'aptitude'.*

• **John Carroll (1991)** characterized aptitude in terms of the ability to learn quickly.

• Thus, we may hypothesize that a learner with high aptitude may learn with greater ease and speed but that other learners may also be successful if they continue.
Aptitude

Marjorie Wesche's (1981) Study

• In a Canadian language programme for adult learners of French, Wesche studied the progress of students who were placed in instructional programmes that were either compatible or incompatible with their aptitude profile and information about their learning experiences.

• In the compatible groupings,
  • students who were high on analytic ability, but average on memory, were assigned to teaching that focused on grammatical structures,
  • and learners with good memory but average analytic skills were placed in a class where the teaching was organized around the functional use of the second language in specific situations.

• In the incompatible groupings,
  • students were placed in classes that did not correspond to their aptitude profiles.
Aptitude

Findings:

1. There was a high level of student and teacher satisfaction when students were matched with compatible teaching environments.

2. Matched students were able to attain significantly higher levels of achievement than those who were mismatched.
Few schools could offer such choices to their students. What can teachers do in this case?

Teachers should ensure that their teaching activities are sufficiently varied to accommodate learners with different aptitude profiles.
Learning styles

• The term 'learning style' has been used to describe an individual's natural, habitual, and preferred way of absorbing, processing, and retaining new information and skills (Reid 1995).
Learning styles

Perceptually-based learning styles

- Visual learners
- Aural learners
- Kinesthetic learners
Learning styles

Visual: See it.
Auditory: Hear it. Say it.
Kinesthetic: Do it.
Learning styles

Cognitive learning styles

Field Independent - tend to separate details from the general background

Field Dependent - tend to see things more holistically
Learning styles

This distinction has been used to describe people who differ in their tendency to see the forest or the trees.

That is, some people are very quick to pick out the hidden figures in a complicated drawing.

Others are more inclined to see the whole drawing and have difficulty separating it into parts.
Are you an FI or an FD?
Learning styles

• For a number of years, it was widely reported that there was a strong relationship between field independence and success in second language learning.

• However, a review of the research leads Zoltan Dornyei and Peter Skehan (2003) to conclude that more research will be needed to identify the nature of the relationship.
Learning styles

Are learning styles stable or dynamic?

It is difficult to determine whether learning styles reflect unchangeable differences or whether they develop (and thus can be changed) through experience.
Learning styles

Which learning style is the right one?

- When learners express a preference for seeing something written (visual) or spending more time in a language laboratory (auditory), we should not assume that their ways of working are wrong, even if they seem to be in conflict with the pedagogical approach we have adopted.

- Instead, we should encourage learners to use all means available to them.

- Research on learning styles should make us skeptical of claims that a single teaching method or textbook will suit the needs of all learners.
Learning styles

Learning an L2 with difficulty

**Lenore Ganschow and Richard Sparks (2001)** have studied many cases of young adults who find foreign language learning exceedingly difficult.

- They identified several ways in which these students differ from successful learners.
  - Most perform poorly on at least some of the measures that make up aptitude tests.
  - Some have problems with certain kinds of verbal skills, even in their own language.
Learning styles

• What is most important about this research is its finding.

Finding:

With great effort and instructional support, some of these students are able to succeed in spite of their difficulties.

• The challenge then is to find instructional approaches that meet the needs of learners with a variety of aptitude and learning style profiles.
Personality

- A number of personality characteristics have been proposed as likely to affect second language learning, but it has not been easy to demonstrate their effects in empirical studies.

- As with other research investigating the effects of individual characteristics on second language learning, different studies measuring a similar personality trait produce different results.
Personality

The personality characters that we are going to cover are:

1. Extroversion/Introversion

2. Inhibition

3. Anxiety

4. Willingness to Communicate
It is often argued that an extroverted person is well suited to language learning. However, research does not always support this conclusion.

Some studies have found that success in language learning is correlated with learners' scores on questionnaires measuring characteristics associated with extroversion such as assertiveness and adventurousness.

However, others have found that many successful language learners do not get high scores on measures of extroversion.

Lily Wong-Fillmore (1979) found that, in certain learning situations, the quiet observant learner may have greater success.
Personality

Inhibition

- It has been suggested that inhibition discourages risk-taking, which is necessary for progress in language learning.

- This is often considered to be a particular problem for adolescents, who are more self-conscious than younger learners.
In a series of studies, Alexander Guiora (1972) found support for the claim that inhibition is a negative force, at least for second language pronunciation performance.

One study involved an analysis of the effects of small doses of alcohol (known for its ability to reduce inhibition) on pronunciation.

Study participants who drank small amounts of alcohol did better on pronunciation tests than those who did not drink any.

We may also note that when larger doses of alcohol were administered, pronunciation rapidly deteriorated!

While results such as these are interesting, they may have more to do with performance than with learning.
What is anxiety?

Learner anxiety?

Feelings of worry, nervousness, and stress that many students experience when learning an L2.

Is it a stable feature? Or a dynamic one?

For a long time, researchers thought of anxiety as a permanent feature of a learner's personality.

The majority of language anxiety scales measure anxiety in this way.

For example, students are assumed to be 'anxious' if they 'strongly agree' with statements such as 'I become anxious when I have to speak in the second language classroom'.
However, such questionnaire responses do not take into account the possibility that anxiety can be temporary and context-specific.

More recent research acknowledges that anxiety is more likely to be dynamic and dependent on particular situations and circumstances.

For example,

• a student might feel anxious when giving an oral presentation in front of the whole class but not when interacting with peers in group-work.

Whatever the context, anxiety can play an important role in second language learning if it interferes with the learning process.
Personality

Anxiety

• Is it always a bad thing?
• Not all anxiety is bad
Personality

Anxiety

• It has been argued that a certain amount of tension can have a positive effect and even facilitate learning.

  • Experiencing anxiety before a test or an oral presentation can provide the right combination of motivation and focus to succeed on it.

• Because anxiety is often considered to be a negative term, some researchers have chosen to use other terms they consider to be more neutral (e.g. tension)
Personality

Willingness to Communicate

- A learner's 'willingness to communicate' has also been related to anxiety.

- We have all experienced occasions when we have tried very hard to avoid communicating in a foreign language.

- **When do you usually find yourself avoiding communication?**

- This often has to do with:
  - the number of people present
  - the topic of conversation
  - the formality of the circumstances.
Personality

Willingness to Communicate

Example:

• A colleague in Canada, who works in the area of second language learning and speaks several languages, recently confessed that he avoided the corner store in his neighbourhood because the store's owner always spoke French to him.

• He recognized the owner's efforts to help him improve his skills in this new language, and was grateful for it, but, as he told us with embarrassment, it was just easier to go to the store where he could use English.
Personality

Willingness to Communicate

According to Macintyre, Clement, Dornyei, and Noels (1998),

• learners who willingly communicate in a wide range of conversational interactions are able to do so because their prior language learning has led to development of self-confidence

• Such self-confidence is also a result of:
  • a lack of anxiety
  • a sufficient level of communicative competence
  • a series of reasonably pleasant [second language] experiences
Personality

Other Personality Characteristics

• Several other personality characteristics such as self-esteem, empathy, dominance, talkativeness, and responsiveness have also been studied.

• However, the available research does not show a single clearly-defined relationship between personality traits and SLA.
Why do we have mixed findings of personality studies?

1. The major difficulty in investigating personality characteristics is that of identification and measurement.

2. Another explanation is that personality variables may be a major factor only in the acquisition of conversational skills, not in the acquisition of literacy or academic skills.

   • The confusion might be due to the fact that comparisons are made between studies that measure communicative ability and studies that measure grammatical accuracy or metalinguistic knowledge.

   • Personality variables seem to be consistently related to the former, but not to the latter.
Quantitative and Qualitative Research:

Most of the research on personality variables has been carried out within a QUANTITATIVE research paradigm, that is, an approach that relies heavily on measuring learners' scores on personality questionnaires and relating these to language test performance.

Some researchers have argued that a more QUALITATIVE approach to understanding and investigating personality variables is needed to adequately capture their depth and complexity, especially as they emerge and evolve over time.
Motivation and Attitudes

- Robert Gardner (2003) has carried out a research on the relationship between a learner's attitudes toward the second or foreign language and its community, and success in second language learning.

- It is difficult to know whether

  - Positive attitudes
  - Produce(s)
  - Successful learning
Motivation and Attitudes

• **Robert Gardner (2003)** has carried out a research on the relationship between a learner's attitudes toward the second or foreign language and its community, and success in second language learning.

• It is difficult to know whether

  ![Diagram showing the relationship between positive attitudes and successful learning](image)

  - Positive attitudes
  - Produce(s)
  - Successful learning

• Although the research cannot prove that positive attitudes and motivation cause success in learning, there is ample evidence that **positive motivation** is associated with a willingness to keep learning.
Motivation and Attitudes

• Motivation in second language learning is a complex phenomenon.

• It has been defined in terms of two factors:

  • **Learners' communicative needs**

  • **Learners' attitudes towards the second language community**

• If learners need to speak the L2 in a wide range of social situations or to fulfill professional ambitions, they will perceive the communicative value of the second language and will therefore be motivated to acquire proficiency in it.

• Likewise, if learners have positive attitudes towards the speakers of the language, they will desire more contact with them.
Motivation and attitudes

Robert Gardner and Wallace Lambert (1972) coined the terms:

**Instrumental Motivation**
Motivation that is essentially practical, such as the need to learn the language in order to get a better job or read a technical material.

**Integrative Motivation**
Motivation for second language learning that is based on a desire to know more about the culture and community of the target language group and even a desire to be more like members of that group.
Motivation and Attitudes

- Research has shown that these types of motivation are related to success in second language learning, but the distinction is not always very clear.

- In some learning environments, it is difficult to distinguish between these two types of orientation to the TL and its community.
Motivation and Attitudes

• Is motivation a stable characteristic or a dynamic one?

• Early research on motivation tended to conceptualize it as a stable characteristic of the learner.

• More recent work emphasizes the dynamic nature of motivation and tries to account for the changes that take place over time.
Motivation and attitudes

Zoltan Dornyei (2001a) developed a process-oriented model of motivation that consists of three phases:

1. Choice motivation
   - Generating motivation/getting started and setting goals
2. Executive motivation
   - Maintaining motivation
3. Motivation retrospection
   - Students' evaluation of their performance
Motivation and Attitudes

An example of how one might cycle through these phases would be:

• A secondary school learner in Saudi Arabia is excited about an upcoming trip to Italy and decides to take an Italian course (choice motivation).

• After a few months of grammar lessons she becomes frustrated with the course, stops going to classes (executive motivation) and finally decides to drop the course.

• A week later a friend tells her about a great Italian conversation course she is taking, and her 'choice motivation' is activated again.

• She decides to register in the conversation course and in just a few weeks she develops some basic Italian conversational skills and a feeling of accomplishment. Her satisfaction level is so positive (motivation retrospection) that she decides to enroll in a more advanced Italian course when she returns from her trip to Italy.
Motivation in the Classroom

• In a teacher's mind, motivated students are usually those who participate actively in class, express interest in the subject matter, and study a great deal.

• Teachers can make a positive contribution to students' motivation to learn if classrooms are places that students enjoy coming to because:
  
  • the content is interesting
  
  • the content is relevant to their age and level of ability
  
  • the learning goals are challenging yet manageable and clear
  
  • the atmosphere is supportive
Motivation in the Classroom

Deci and Ryan (1985) divided motivation into:

- Intrinsic motivation
- Extrinsic motivation
Motivation in the Classroom

Intrinsic motivation

Intrinsic motivation refers to an individual’s motivation to perform a particular activity because of internal rewards such as joy, pleasure, satisfaction of curiosity, feelings of competence and self-determination.

Extrinsic motivation

Whereas in extrinsic motivation the individual expects an extrinsic (external) reward such as good grades, praise from others, money, prizes, and positive feedback.
Motivation in the Classroom

- Graham Crookes and Richard Schmidt (1991) point to several areas where educational research has reported increased levels of motivation for students in relation to pedagogical practices.

Included among these are:

- Motivating students into the lesson
- Varying the activities, tasks, and materials
- Using co-operative rather than competitive goals
At the opening stages of lessons (and within transitions), it has been observed that remarks teachers make about forthcoming activities can lead to higher levels of interest on the part of the students.
Motivation in the Classroom

- Students are reassured by the existence of classroom routines they can depend on.

- However, lessons that always consist of the same routines, patterns, and formats have been shown to lead to a decrease in attention and an increase in boredom.

- Varying the activities, tasks, and materials can help to avoid this and increase students' interest levels.
Motivation in the Classroom

Using co-operative rather than competitive goals

- Co-operative learning activities are those in which students must work together in order to complete a task or solve a problem.

- These techniques have been found to increase the self-confidence of students, including weaker ones, because every participant in a co-operative task has an important role to play.

- Knowing that their team-mates are counting on them can increase students' motivation.
Motivation in the Classroom

• Cultural and age differences will determine the most appropriate way for teachers to motivate students.

• In some classrooms, students may thrive on competitive interaction, while in others, co-operative activities will be more successful.
Identity and ethnic group affiliation

• Members of a minority group learning the language of a majority group may have different attitudes and motivation from those of majority group members learning a minority language.

• Children as well as adults are sensitive to social dynamics and power relationships.
Identity and ethnic group affiliation

How do relations of power in the social world affect interaction between L2 learners and TL speakers?

• Bonny Norton (1995)

• A longitudinal case study

• Drawing from data collected of the language learning experiences of immigrant women in Canada

• All the participants in her study were highly motivated to learn English.

• However, there were social situations in which they were reluctant to speak.

• In which situations?

• When there was a power imbalance.

• Their experiences in those situations limited the opportunities they had to practice, and to continue to develop the second language outside the classroom.
Identity and ethnic group affiliation

• Kelleen Toohey (2000)

• She observed that immigrant children in English-medium kindergarten classes were quickly assigned identities such as successful/unsuccessful, big/small, talkative/quiet, etc., in their first year of school.

• Of course, they also had the identity of 'being ESL'.
Identity and ethnic group affiliation

• Because learners' identities impact on what they can do and how they can participate in classrooms, this naturally affects how much they can learn.

• For example,

  • one of the learners was consistently excluded from imaginative interactive activities with her peers;

  • another learner was perceived as someone who never listened or did the 'right thing'.

• Toohey argues that these identities could eventually lead to:

  • their isolation

  • restricted or less powerful participation in their classroom community
Identity and ethnic group affiliation

- Elizabeth Gatbonton, Pavel Trofimovich, and Michael Magid (2005) found a complex relationship between feelings of ethnic affiliation and second language learners' mastery of pronunciation.

- They found that learners who had achieved a high degree of accuracy in pronouncing the L2 were sometimes perceived as being less loyal to their ethnic group than those whose L2 speech retained a strong 'foreign accent'.

- Such perceptions can affect learners' desire to master the L2, especially in contexts where there are conflicts between groups or where power relationships imply a threat to one group's identity.
Learner beliefs

• Second language learners are not always aware of their individual cognitive or perceptual learning styles, but virtually all learners, particularly older learners, have strong beliefs and opinions about how their instruction should be delivered.

• These beliefs are usually based on
  • previous learning experiences
  • and the assumption (right or wrong) that a particular type of instruction is the best way for them to learn.

• Research indicates that learner beliefs can be strong factors in their experience in the classroom.
Learner beliefs

- **Carlos Yorio (1986)**

  - He made a survey of adult international students in a communicative ESL program

  - He found high levels of **dissatisfaction** among the students.

  - The type of communicative instruction they received focused exclusively on **meaning** and spontaneous **communication** in group-work interaction.
Learner beliefs

- In their responses to a questionnaire, the majority of students expressed concerns about several aspects of their instruction, most notably, the absence of:
  - attention to language form,
  - corrective feedback,
  - or teacher-centered instruction.

- Although this study did not directly examine learners' progress in relation to their opinions about the instruction they received, several of them were convinced that their progress was negatively affected by an instructional approach that was not consistent with their beliefs about the best ways for them to learn.
Age of acquisition and the CPH

• The age characteristic is easier to define and measure than personality, aptitude, or motivation.

• However, the relationship between age and success in SLA is controversial.
Age of acquisition and the CPH

- It is frequently observed that most children from immigrant families eventually speak the language of their new community with NATIVE-LIKE fluency, while their parents often fall short of such high levels of mastery of the spoken language.

- Certainly, there are cases where adult second language learners have distinguished themselves by their excellent language skills.

- Many adult second language learners communicate very successfully in the language even though subtle differences of accent, word choice, or grammatical features distinguish them from monolingual native speakers and from second language speakers who began learning the language while they were very young.
It has been hypothesized that there is a critical period for second language acquisition just as there is for first language acquisition.

What is the Critical Period Hypothesis?
Age of acquisition and the CPH

In addition to the possible biological differences between children and adults that are suggested by the Critical Period Hypothesis, the conditions for language learning are often very different.

How?
Age of acquisition and the CPH

**Children:**

- In informal language learning environments, children usually have more time to devote to learning language.

- They often have more opportunities to hear and use the language in environments where they do not experience strong pressure to speak fluently and accurately from the very beginning.

- Their early imperfect efforts are often praised or, at least, accepted.
Age of acquisition and the CPH

**Adults:**

- Older learners might find themselves in situations that demand more complex language and the expression of more complicated ideas.

- Adults are often embarrassed by their lack of mastery of the language and they may develop a sense of inadequacy after experiences of frustration in trying to say exactly what they mean.

- Such negative feelings may affect their motivation and willingness to place themselves in situations where they will need to use the new language.
Age of acquisition and the CPH

On the other hand, some studies of the L2 development of older and younger learners, learning in similar circumstances, have shown that,

- at least in the early stages of L2 development, older learners are more efficient than younger learners.

- By using their metalinguistic knowledge, memory strategies, and problem-solving skills, they make the most of second or foreign language instruction.
Age of acquisition and the CPH

• In educational settings, learners who begin learning a second language at primary school level do not always achieve greater proficiency in the long run than those who begin in adolescence.

• There are countless anecdotes about older learners who achieve excellence in the second language.

• Does this mean that there is no critical period for second language acquisition?
The critical period: More than just accent?

- Most studies of the relationship between age of acquisition and second language development have focused on learners' pronunciation.

- These studies have concluded that older learners almost inevitably have a noticeable 'foreign accent'.

- But what about other linguistic features? Is syntax or morphology as dependent on age of acquisition as phonological development?
The critical period: More than just accent?

**Study:**

**Researcher:** Mark Patkowski (1980)

What did he study?

He studied the relationship between acquisition of features of an L2 other than accent.

What was his hypothesis?

Even if accent were ignored, only those who had begun learning their second language before the age of fifteen could ever achieve full, native-like mastery of that language.
The critical period: More than just accent?

Method/ procedure:

He recorded the spoken English of:

- **67 highly educated immigrants to the US**
- **15 highly educated native-born Americans**

They had started to learn English at various ages, but all had lived in the US for more than five years.
The critical period: More than just accent?

Method/ procedure (Cont.):

• The main question in Patkowski's research was:

  Will there be a difference between learners who began to learn English before puberty and those who began learning English later?

• Factors other than age?

  He also compared learners on the basis of other characteristics and experiences that might be as good as age in predicting or explaining a person's success in mastering a second language. For example, he looked at:

  • the total amount of time a speaker had been in the US
  • the amount of formal ESL instruction each speaker had had
The critical period: More than just accent?

Method/procedure (Cont.):

- A lengthy interview with each person was tape-recorded.

- Because Patkowski wanted to remove the possibility that the results would be affected by accent, he did not ask the raters to judge the tape-recorded interviews themselves.

- Instead, he transcribed five-minute samples from the interviews and removed from them any identifying or revealing comments about immigration history or language background.
Method/ procedure (Cont.):

• These transcribed samples were rated by trained native-speaker judges.

• They were asked to place each speaker on a scale from:

  0 = no knowledge of the language

  to

  5 = a level of English expected from an educated native speaker
The critical period:
More than just accent?

Findings:

All native speakers and 32/33 second language speakers who had begun learning before 15

4+ or 5

The homogeneity of the pre-puberty learners seemed to suggest that, for this group, success in learning a second language was almost inevitable.
The critical period: More than just accent?

In contrast,

The majority of the post-puberty group 3+, but there was a great deal of variation.

The performance of this group looked more like the sort of range one would expect if one were measuring success in learning almost any kind of skill or knowledge: some people did extremely well; some did poorly; most were in the middle.
The critical period: More than just accent?

How about the other factors?

- There was some relationship between those factors and learning success.

- However, age was often found to be so closely related to the other factors that it was not really possible to separate them completely.

- For example,
  - length of residence in the US sometimes seemed to be a fairly good predictor. However, while it was true that a person who had lived in the country for fifteen years might speak better than one who had been there for only ten years, it was often the case that the one with longer residence had also arrived at an earlier age.

  - amount of instruction, when separated from age, did not predict success to the extent that age of immigration did.
The critical period: More than just accent?

Conclusion:

• Age of acquisition is a very important factor in setting limits on the development of native-like mastery of a second language.

• This limitation does not apply only to accent.

These results gave added support to the Critical Period Hypothesis for second language acquisition.
Intuition of Grammaticality

**Study**

**Researchers:** Jacqueline Johnson and Elissa Newport (1989)

**Subjects:**

- 46 Chinese and Korean speakers who had begun to learn English at different ages.
  - All were students or faculty members at an American university
  - All had been in the United States for at least three years.
- A comparison group of 23 native speakers of English
Intuition of Grammaticality

Procedure/ Method:

• The participants were asked to judge the grammaticality of a large number of sentences that tested twelve rules of English morphology and syntax.

• They heard sentences on a tape and had to indicate whether each sentence was correct.

• Half of the sentences were grammatical, half were not.

• They grouped the participants in the same way as Patkowski, comparing

  those who began their intensive exposure to English between 3-15
  with
  those who arrived in the US between 17-39
Intuition of Grammaticality

Findings:

Age of arrival in the United States was a significant predictor of success on the test.

- Learners who began earliest achieved the highest scores on the judgement task.

- Those who began later did not have native-like language abilities and their performance on the test varied more widely.
Intuition of Grammaticality

Study:


He carried out a replication of the Johnson and Newport study

Subjects:

Hungarian immigrants to the United States.

In what way was this study different from Johnson's and Newport's?

In addition to examining their judgements of grammaticality, he asked participants to take language aptitude tests.
Intuition of Grammaticality

Findings:

• For participants who began learning English as adults, aptitude scores were correlated with success.

• However, there was no such correlation for those who learned English in childhood.

• We need to remember here that most aptitude tests test metalinguistic abilities instead of other language abilities.
Intuition of Grammaticality

Conclusion:

• There is a strong relationship between age of immigration and second language proficiency

• Adult learners may learn language in a way that is different from the way children learn.
Some research suggests that older learners may have one important advantage:

they appear to learn faster in the early stages of second language learning.
Rate of Learning

**Study:**

**Researchers:** Catherine Snow and Marian Hoefnagel-Hohle (1978)

They carried out research project in Holland

**Subjects:**

- A group of English speakers who were learning Dutch as a second language.
- The learners they were following included:
  - children as young as three years old
  - older children
  - adolescents
  - adults.
Rate of Learning

Procedure:

• They used a large number of tasks to measure different types of language use and language knowledge.

  • They assessed pronunciation, AUDITORY DISCRIMINATION, grammatical morphemes, grammatical complexity, sentence translation, grammaticality judgement, vocabulary, story comprehension and storytelling.

• Participants were first tested within six months of their arrival in Holland and within six weeks of their starting school or work in a Dutch-language environment.

• They were tested two more times at four- or five-month / intervals.
Rate of Learning

Findings:

• Adolescents were by far the most successful learners. They were ahead of everyone on all the tests on the first test session (except on the pronunciation test).

• Surprisingly, it was the adults, not the children, whose scores were second best on the other tests at the first test session.

• In other words, adolescents and adults learned faster than children in the first few months of exposure to Dutch.

• By the end of the year, the children were catching up, or had surpassed, the adults on several measures.

• Nevertheless, it was the adolescents who retained the highest levels of performance overall.
Rate of Learning

**Conclusion:**

Their results provide evidence against the critical period for language acquisition.
Other interpretations:

Other researchers have interpreted the results differently:

• Some of the poor performance of younger learners could be accounted for by the fact that some of the tasks, (e.g. sentence judgement or translation) were too hard for young learners.

  In fact, young Dutch native speakers with whom the second language learners were compared also had trouble with these tasks.

• The study shows that adults and adolescents learned faster in the first year of second language development. This may be because they were learning a language that is very similar to the one they already knew.
What is the significance of the study?

The study is particularly valuable in showing that adults and adolescents can make considerable and rapid progress towards mastery of a second language in contexts where they use the language in social, personal, professional, or academic interaction.
At which age should L2 instruction begin?

• Many people who have never heard of the CPH believe that, in school programmes for foreign language teaching, 'younger is better'.

• However, both experience and research show that older learners can achieve high levels of proficiency in their L2.
At which age should L2 instruction begin?

Decisions about the age at which instruction should begin cannot be only based on the CPH.

• Some researchers argue that older learners may prefer to speak with a foreign accent because they want to continue being identified with their L1 cultural group.

• Adults do not always get the same quantity and quality of language input that children receive in school and play settings.
Studies such as those by Patkowski or Newport and Johnson dealt with L2 speakers who had spent many years living, working, and going to school in the L2 environment.

They found that, even after 20 years, only those who had had an early start had a high likelihood of being indistinguishable from people who had been born in that environment.

It is important to acknowledge that achieving native-like mastery of the second language is neither a realistic nor necessarily a desired goal for second language learners in many educational contexts.
At which age should L2 instruction begin?

• The study by Snow and Hoefnagel-Höhle dealt with the achievement of a variety of L2 skills after a few months.

• They found that it was the older children and adolescents who had made the most progress in that time period.
At which age should L2 instruction begin?

- The kinds of skills the older learners were able to acquire in a short period of time will satisfy the needs of learners in many learning contexts where the **goal** is
  - the ability to use the language for everyday communication
  - rather than **native-like mastery**.
At which age should L2 instruction begin?

- If the goal is native-like mastery of the target language, it might be better for the learner to be completely surrounded by the language as early as possible.

**Disadvantage**

- Early intensive exposure to the second language may cause the loss or incomplete development of the child's L1.
At which age should L2 instruction begin?

When would it be more efficient to begin L2 teaching later?

• When the goal is basic communicative ability for all students in an educational system,

• and when it is assumed that the child's native language will remain the primary language,
At which age should L2 instruction begin?

- Some second language programmes that begin with very young learners but offer only few hours of instruction do not lead to much progress.

- For this, learners who start later (e.g. 10, 11, or 12) often catch up with those who started earlier.
At which age should L2 instruction begin?

- In Clare Burstall's (1975) study, students who had made progress in early-start programmes, sometimes found themselves placed in secondary school classes with students who had had no previous instruction.

- Teachers tended to teach the simple basics.

- Teachers would usually teach the basics that suit the level of the majority of their students.

- Thus, after years of classes, learners who have had an early start may feel frustrated by the lack of progress, and their motivation to continue may be diminished.

- Clearly the age at which instruction begins is not the only factor that determines success in the second language classroom.
At which age should L2 instruction begin?

- Decisions about when to start second language programmes in schools should be based on realistic estimates of how long it takes to learn a second language.

- One or two hours a week will not produce advanced second language speakers, no matter how young they were when they began.
At which age should L2 instruction begin?

- Age is one of the characteristics that determine the way in which an individual approaches second language learning.

- However, rate of learning and eventual success in learning are also affected by important factors other than age such as:
  - the opportunities for learning (both inside and outside the classroom),
  - the motivation to learn,
  - and aptitude for language learning.
Thank you