

Pause for thought: nativelike late L2 beginners

This paper starts from the premise that we may never disprove the existence of a critical period. We are all aware of late L2 beginners who are in terms of their day-to-day lives indistinguishable from native speakers of the L2 in question. Such cases do not suffice, however, to falsify the Critical Period Hypothesis (CPH) for its staunchest advocates (e.g. Abrahamsson & Hyltenstam 2009; Long 2013).

For them the criterion for falsification is 'scrutinized native-likeness' (Abrahamsson & Hyltenstam 2009) with regard to last detail of the later learner's L2 proficiency. Birdsong, a critical period sceptic, accepts (2014: 47) that in such cases - not because of some bioprogrammed guillotine but simply because of the mutual influence of a multilingual's knowledge of his/her languages - 'nonnativelike will eventually be found'. Accordingly, he says, if 'across-the-board nativelike is what is required to disconfirm the CPH, the CPH is invulnerable to falsification'. This means that the whole debate about the empirical basis of the critical period has run into the sand. We argue that it is nevertheless important to keep reporting cases of late L2 learners who attain nativelike L2 proficiency, to give a salutary pause for thought with regard to the uncritical blanket assumption that young L2 beginners do well and older L2 beginners do not.

We report here on a selection of studies which demonstrate the very high proficiency potential of older L2 beginners, and we try to draw out from the relevant data some socio-affective factors that seems to have a role in promoting L2 native-likeness among older beginners.

References

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