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This book gives examples of how to outline a foreign language teaching in which *the typical home work consists of preparing something to say*, something which is made up by the students themselves and with their own contents. *The typical lesson is characterised by students performing orally* in class, in groups or/and to the teacher.

The spring board for all this is *speech*, in the sense of prepared speeches, with genuine messages, produced by the students themselves. If the students are offered oral activities of this kind, they will have a fair chance of reaching the optimal stage of performing *spontaneously* in the target language.

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## A Review of Recent Research on Age-Related Differences in Second Language Acquisition

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The notion of a critical period in language acquisition was advanced by Lenneberg in 1967, but the question of the role of age in second/foreign language acquisition remains an intriguing and lively research area. Articles have recently been published in several different journals such as *Cognition*, *Language*, *Cognitive Psychology*, and *Studies in Second Language Acquisition*. Work on age-related differences is of great interest not only for theoretical reasons, but has immediate practical implications for language teaching. The aim of this review is to extract important features of the research on age in order to shed some light on the present understanding of what used to be called the "critical period".

Lenneberg provided evidence regarding *first* language acquisition, which generated a 'critical period hypothesis', meaning "the age-limited potential for language acquisition" ending after puberty (1967:175). We now have further strong support for the existence of a weak version of Lenneberg's critical period hypothesis in first language acquisition, i.e. that language is not completely unlearnable after puberty, aphasic loss etc, *but* certain central parts of grammar remain difficult (for a review see Long 1990; Newport 1990). The most crucial (and cruel) evidence comes from the study of Genie, who was deprived of human contact and linguistic input from the age of about one to thirteen (Curtiss 1977), and from late learners (after age 12) of American Sign Language (Newport *et al* 1990).

The evidence supporting the existence of a critical period in first language acquisition stimulated research on whether the critical period extends to second language acquisition (SLA). A great deal of research has been carried out in this domain, resulting in four books, Krashen *et al* (1982), Harley (1986), Singleton (1989), Singleton & Lengyel (1995), and countless articles. Broadly, it is possible to distinguish three stages of research on age and SLA. The first is characterised by short-term studies seeking evidence for the existence of a critical period in SLA. The majority of these studies were published in the 1970s, and examined the *rate* of acquisition, i.e. the speed at which acquisition happens over a period of time. Typically, such studies used the technique of "teaching and testing" which benefited older learners because of their superior cognitive skills (for a review see

Krashen *et al* 1979; 1982 and Long 1990). Even though flaws in methodology and other shortcomings have been identified in these early studies, their results point in favour of the existence of a critical period, and three hypotheses were generated:

1. Adults proceed through the early stages of morphological and syntactic development faster than children (where time and exposure are held constant).
2. Older children acquire faster than younger children.
3. Child starters outperform adult starters in the long run.

It was also found that the critical period ended at different (but overlapping) ages for different language components; for phonology the limit seemed to be around the age of 6, whereas syntax and morphology were affected only later. Hardly any studies exist for the acquisition of vocabulary.

The second stage of research on age and SLA sought to refine the methodology and thus provide more reliable evidence. The earlier studies had shown that adolescents and adults had an advantage in both phonology and syntax. Johnson & Newport (1989) pointed out that this advantage was only short-lived, and emphasised the need for long-term studies which compared the *ultimate attainment* reached after several years of exposure to the second language with the competence of native speakers. In the 1980s a few such studies were published, eg Coppieters (1987), and Johnson & Newport (1989). These examined the syntax and morphology acquired by immigrants to France (Coppieters 1987) and the United States (Johnson & Newport 1989), and compared their performance with a control group of native speakers. Coppieters (1987) and Johnson & Newport (1989) obtained their data from grammaticality judgement tasks along the lines of studies in the emerging tradition of Universal Grammar, and yield strong support in favour of the critical period hypothesis. Coppieters showed that his test-group consisting of highly-educated, near-native speakers of French (with various L1s) living in France still could not perform like native speakers. Johnson & Newport, which is regarded the least ambiguous study to date, showed a strong advantage for the early arrivals (all Korean and Chinese) in the US. Only children under age 7 (at the time of arrival) performed like the native speaker control group. Arrivals between the ages of 8 and 15 had lower test scores, but they still performed in a unanimous way. Those who arrived after the age of about 15 produced test scores that were lower, but also more *variable* and *unrelated* to the Age of Arrival. Length of Residence, motivation, self-consciousness, and American identification were controlled for. Thus, a sudden drop in performance, marking the end of a critical period, was not observed. Rather performance declined gradually from about age 7 until adulthood. This called for new terminology, and there is now growing preference for the term *sensitive* period (first used by Lamendella 1977), meaning the time during which language acquisition is most efficient. Even more recent terminology includes *maturational constraints* on language learning/

development (Newport 1990; Long 1990).

Very soon after Johnson & Newport's publication (1989), when it seemed as if the existence of age-related constraints on SLA had been "proved", Long put forward a challenge for future research. He urged researchers to "produce learners who have demonstrably attained native-like proficiency despite having begun exposure well after the closure of the hypothesized sensitive periods" (1990:274). Two such studies have now been published (Birdsong 1992; Ioup *et al* 1994), which mark the beginning of the third stage of research on age and SLA. Birdsong (1992), in an attempt to replicate Coppieters's study, reports an investigation of 20 native speakers of English who were near-native speakers of French. They were exposed to French only after puberty, and were compared to a control group of 20 native speakers of French. The test scores from the grammaticality judgement tasks showed that Age of Arrival in France correlated with proficiency levels (consistent with Johnson & Newport 1989). It was also shown that the near-native speakers of French differed significantly from the native speakers *as a group*, but 15 of the 20 subjects performed at the lower range of the native speakers' performance. Thus, Birdsong states, near-native, post-pubertal starters can perform like native speakers.

Ioup *et al* showed that their subject, a British woman exposed to (and completely immersed in) Egyptian Arabic only at the age of 21, successfully acquired native-like spoken Arabic. Native speakers judged her performance in the areas of phonology, auditory perception and syntax. It was found that the subject consistently diverged from native speakers only when interpreting subject pronoun anaphora inside a relative clause – a complex syntactic feature peculiar to Egyptian Arabic. This study has thus found an adult starter who was able to acquire even the phonology of a second language to the level of native speakers.

The results of these recent studies suggest the existence of a sensitive period/maturational constraints in the sense of a *gradual* decline in language learning abilities possibly starting at the age of 7, but allowing for wide individual differences. The sensitive period may end at different, though overlapping, times for different language components (eg phonology vs lexis, cf Hurford 1991). Also, clearly there are people who are able to reach native-like proficiency even if the first exposure was after puberty. In view of these facts it seems preferable to rethink the critical period as being sensitive, or to assume that maturational constraints operate in SLA.

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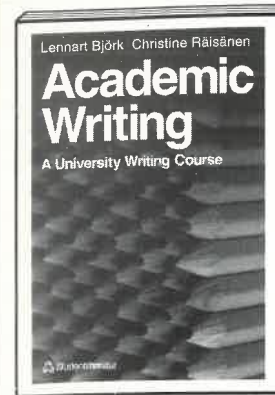
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## Frequency Matters

This is just a brief note to point out that 1995 saw the introduction of frequency information in two major English learners' dictionaries, viz. *Collins COBUILD English Dictionary* (2nd ed.) and *Longman Dictionary of Contemporary English* (3rd ed.). In *COBUILD* the c. 15,000 most frequent words are identified and subdivided into five frequency bands. In *LDOCE* the 3,000 most frequent words for speech and writing respectively are subdivided into three bands of 1,000 items each. Welcome as this new feature is, a word of warning is called for, because the problem of homonymy/polysemy has by no means been solved, and this is particularly true of *COBUILD*. For instance, *buck* (-s, -ed, -ing) is marked as outside the c. 3,500 and inside the c. 7,000 most frequent items, but which *buck* does this refer to? Judging from inspection of the 5-million *COBUILD* corpus available on CD-ROM it seems that at least 25% of the total number are *Bucks* for Buckinghamshire and another 20-25% /parts of/ other proper names, leaving only half of the recorded instances to be subdivided between some 15 noun and verb senses, the predominant one being, even in British English, "dollar" (*a fast buck*). In conclusion, anyone who wants to use this frequency information for vocabulary teaching and testing should check the underlying data first.

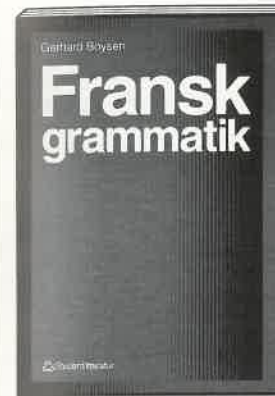
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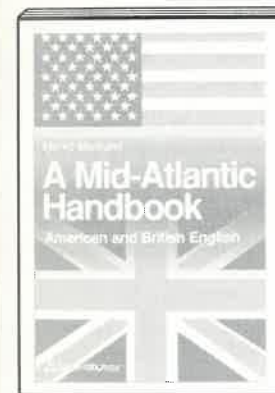
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