A REFLECTION ON LANGUAGE ACQUISITION THEORY DEALING WITH THE CRITICAL PERIOD ISSUES AND ITS IMPLICATION FOR ENGLISH STUDY IN INDONESIA

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ABSTRACT

Language acquisition be it as a first or a second language is still an up to date topic in language education. This can be seen from the numerous researches carried out by specialists in the field. In view of first language acquisition, their investigation usually goes to the stages of language development of children in connection to age till language maturity is acquired. Almost similar to the area of quest in first language, in second language, researchers' curiosity is aimed at uncovering the period of successful language acquisition whether it is similar in process to that in first language learning. Also, they search for answers to questions like "Is language acquisition faster at younger age than at older age? Is there a period where language learning progress will be slower? If there is, at what age is it? What is the impact of learning a second language before and after puberty? What problems are faced by adult learners of second language?". And one most challenging source of keeping the spirit of research on issue is the hypothetical statement, the so called Critical Period Hypothesis. This article presents a discussion on language acquisition, particularly on second language as an attempt to make all parties involved in language education, especially English education in Indonesia, see what the proponents and opponents say about the unsolved issue of language acquisition and be more aware of implication of the existing theories for English language study in the country. It is concluded that from all the pro and contra arguments a uniformity of view cannot be reached yet. Accent has been proven as a refutation to the hypothesis. But this is not considered to be a significant finding because accent is regarded as the least important aspect of SLA proficiency.

Key words: language acquisition, Critical Period Hypothesis, accent, English, implication

Introduction

As every individual is inseparable from language, discussions on issues which are related to language are always up-to-date. How language is learned or acquired has continued to become an important thing to reveal, be it a first language or second language. In other words, the existing explanations to the acquisition of a language both as a first and as a second language are considered inadequate. As a result, specialists or experts in the field still keep making an attempt to conduct researches and still their findings have not come to uniformity. This condition makes these researchers more challenged. In the case of first language acquisition, it is the child's acquisition of language or number of lexical items and the stages of language development that become the main concern. For example, when a child starts saying a language unit and how the unit from a smaller one to a larger one develops, such as

from a phoneme to morpheme, then to word, phrase etc. Also, how many words a child has acquired when he is at a certain age, say one and a half years old, two years old and so on until acquiring language maturity.

In fact, the answers to first language acquisition questions are still uncertain. More serious attention than that paid to first language study is about second language acquisition investigation, especially about languages which are internationally used like English. This is because learning a first language is not the same as learning a second language. Research findings on second language acquisition are also varied, for example, that a learner's age affects his or her acquisition. This raises controversial issues among second language acquisition researchers. As a result, researchers pay a lot of attention to the problems of acquiring a second language. To pursue the answer to the controversy those researchers continue to conduct research. The language that is much paid attention to is English since the language is the most dominant in the world-wide. Besides being used as a native or national language in several countries such as America, Australia, and England, this most dominant language is also used as a second language in some other countries like Malaysia, The Philippines, India, Hongkong, and a foreign language probably in all other countries around the world like Indonesia. Such language status makes people who are involved in language education in every country keep thinking, talking about it which is then realized in researches. So, it is not surprising that there are always new issues coming up with regards to English Language Education as a second and as a foreign language. And issues across countries may trigger the spirit of knowing more and more about the language. Enthusiasts of English language education around the world continue to conduct research so as to uncover things that help make language education distinct. Their research findings are exposed nationally and internationally by publishing them in Books and Journals. The issue of second language acquisition even has caused a long lasting controversy that there is a period where learning a language becomes more difficult due to age. In idea is stated in the form of hypothesis the so called Critical Period Hypothesis (CHP).

This article will present some issues of language acquisition dealing with first and second language, the critical period hypothesis and the implication of the discussion for English language study in Indonesia. Specifically, the points of discussion covered in this article are (1) What is language acquisition? (2) What are the first language acquisition stages and second language acquisition stages like? (3) What do the proponents and the opponents of the Critical Period Hypothesis say to support their own claim? (4) What is the implication of the language acquisition discussion for the study of English in Indonesia? The answers to those questions no. 1 through no. 3 are mainly accessed the internet. Meanwhile, the explanation for the implication is mainly based on the arguments of both the proponents and the opponents of the Critical Period Hypothesis.

DISCUSSION

What Is Language Acquisition?

Language acquisition is the process by which humans acquire the capacity to perceive and comprehend language, as well as to produce and

use words and sentences to communicate. It is one of the quintessential human traits, because nonhumans do not communicate by using language. Language acquisition can be divided into two: first-language acquisition, which studies infants' acquisition of their native language and second-language acquisition, which deals with the acquisition (in both children and adults) of additional languages. (http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Main Page: Language Acquisition). Similarly. according to another source, language acquisition is also defined as unconscious progression or development of language. It is a process that occurs through language use in ordinary conversation and is the typical progression by which infants and young children first learn to talk. It is the development of language in children. Further, in view of age and language aspect acquisition, it is said that by the age of six, children have usually mastered most of the basic vocabulary and grammar of their first language. And Second language acquisition, also known as second language learning or sequential language acquisition, refers to the process by which a person learns a "foreign" language-that is, a language other than his or her mother tongue.

(http://grammar.about.com/od/il/g/languageacquisitionterm.htm: Language Acquisition).

Based on the explanations above now we can have a similar perception about language acquisition for first language and second language that first language acquisition which lasts up to the age of six is done unconsciously and naturally. Meanwhile for second language acquisition, it is at a later age – after six years old. And the process of learning the language is no longer natural – i.e. unlike the first language or mother tongue learning. Second language acquisition is consciously done. Besides that, it has also been made clear that second language in this case is not a matter of how many more languages to learn in addition to the first language acquired but any language, be it the second, the third and so on. All languages other than the mother tongue are considered a second language. So, for instance, an Indonesian person who has acquired Bahasa Indonesia as his mother tongue, and he wants to learn English, English will become his second language which happens to be a foreign language in Indonesia. Also, when he wants to learn another language, say German, that is also called second language learning or acquisition. Shortly, all languages in addition to the mother tongue are categorized as a second language, and the learning of one is counted as Second Language Acquisition.

What are the first language acquisition stages and second language acquisition stages like?

Researchers define language acquisition into two categories: first-language acquisition and second-language acquisition. First-language acquisition is a universal process regardless of home language. In first language acquisition, babies listen to the sounds around them, begin to imitate them, and eventually start producing words. Second-language acquisition assumes knowledge in a first language and encompasses the process an individual goes through as he or she learns the elements of a new language, such as vocabulary, phonological components, grammatical structures, and writing systems.

It is also said that all children acquire language in the same way, regardless of what language they use or the number of languages they use. Acquiring a language is like learning to play a game. Children must learn the rules of the language game, for example how to articulate words and how to put them together in ways that are acceptable to the people around them. In order to understand child language acquisition, we need to keep two very important things in mind: First, children do not use language like adults, because children are not adults. Acquiring language is a gradual, lengthy process, and one that involves a lot of apparent errors.

The following are linguistic milestones or the stages of both First and Second Language Acquisition

First language Acquisition or Linguistic Milestones – From 0 to 5 years of Age

Age (Months)	Linguistic Milestones
0	Recognition and preference of mother's voice (even from inside the womb!) Ability to distinguish phonemes Can distinguish own language from a foreign language
4	Child can recognize own name Child is sensitive to word order
7	Early babbling is seen Start to understand first words (e.g. Mummy)
12	Jargoning (when babbling becomes more specified to the child's mother tongue: stress and intonation patterns are recognizable) First words produced
18	Understand around 50 words Produce two-word utterances
24	Multi word utterances produced with basic grammatical features
60	6,000 word capacity Ability to produce complex sentences has been gained, with full comprehension

Source:https://sites.google.com/a/sheffield.ac.uk/all-about-linguistics/branches/what-is-child-lanuage-acquistion (Table adapted from Matthew Saxton, 2010:17)

Second Language Acquisition Stage:

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Stage 1: Pre-	This is also called "the silent period," when the student takes in		
production	the new language but does not speak it. This period often lasts six		
	weeks or longer, depending on the individual.		
Stage 2: The individual begins to speak using short words and sentence			
Early production	but the emphasis is still on listening and absorbing the new		
	language. There will be many errors in the early production		
	stage.		
Stage 3: Speech	Speech becomes more frequent, words and sentences are longer,		

Emergent	but the individual still relies heavily on context clues and famili	
	topics. Vocabulary continues to increase and errors begin to	
	decrease, especially in common or repeated interactions.	
Stage 4: Beginning Fluency	Speech is fairly fluent in social situations with minimal errors. New contexts and academic language are challenging and the individual will struggle to express themselves due to gaps in vocabulary and appropriate phrases.	
Stage 5: Intermediate Fluency	Communicating in the second language is fluent, especially in social language situations. The individual is able to speak almost fluently in new situations or in academic areas, but there will be gaps in vocabulary knowledge and some unknown expressions. There are very few errors, and the individual is able to demonstrate higher order thinking skills in the second language such as offering an opinion or analyzing a problem.	
Stage 6: Advanced Fluency	The individual communicates fluently in all contexts and can	

Source: http://www.colorincolorado.org/article/26751/ (Kristina Robertson and Karen Ford, 2008). Language Acquisition: An Overview.

From the two figures above it is obviously seen the difference between first and second language acquisition. In first language acquisition from the age of 0 to 5 years old, there are 7 (seven) stages and from the age of after 5 (five) years old, there are only five stages to go through. The first stage is preproduction, also known as the silent period. Learners at this stage have a receptive vocabulary of up to 500 words, but they do not yet speak their second language. Not all learners go through a silent period. Some learners start speaking straight away, although their output may consist of imitation rather than creative language use. Others may be required to speak from the start as part of a language course. For learners that do go through a silent period, it may last around three to six months

At the second stage learners are able to speak in short phrases of one or two words. They can also memorize chunks of language, although they may make mistakes when using them. Their active and receptive vocabulary have reached up to around 1000 words at this stage which lasts for about six months.

Next, during the third stage which is called speech emergence, their vocabularies increase to around 3000 words. Also, they can communicate using simple questions and phrases although they may often make grammatical errors. Then, during the fourth stage called intermediate fluency learners' vocabulary increases to around 6000 words, and they are able to use complicated sentence structures. Besides that, they are also able to share their thoughts and opinions in spite of frequent errors with more complicated sentence structures. The final stage is

advanced fluency, which is typically reached somewhere between five and ten years of learning the language. Learners at this stage can function at a level close to native speakers

What Do the Proponents and the Opponents of the Critical Period Hypothesis Say to Support Their Own Claim?

In language education one unsolved thing that becomes the concern of language education enthusiasts and researchers is second language acquisition. As we know learners of second language are those who have acquired a first language or one that is also termed as mother tongue or native language. Thus, the learners of a second language are no longer an infant or a child who is only a few months or below four years old or some say 6 years old. Mostly, the learners of a second language, are pubescent, adolescent up to adult people. Topics that are raised in relation to this period of language learning, for example, are: Is there any difference in success of learning between learners below four or some say 6 years old and those after this age? What sorts of barrier are faced by each category of learners? Does each period of learning category have its own strength and weakness in acquiring the language being learned? etc. Responses to these questions are still varied.

In this section the issue dealing with second language acquisition which is hypothesized as critical period which still remains a controversy up to now will be discussed by presenting ideas and arguments put forward by experts or specialists in the field.

The critical period hypothesis was first proposed by Montreal neurologist Wilder Penfield and co-author Lamar Roberts in their 1959 book Speech and Brain Mechanisms and was popularized by Eric Lenneberg in 1967 with Biological Foundations of Language. (Wikipedia, the free encyclopedia). The hypothesis claims that there is an ideal time window to acquire language in a linguistically rich environment, after which further language acquisition becomes much more difficult and effortful. More emphatically, the critical period hypothesis states that the first few years of life is the crucial time in which an individual can acquire a first language if presented with adequate stimuli. If language input doesn't occur until after this time, the individual will never achieve a full command of language especially grammatical systems. (http://linguistlist.org/ask-ling/lang-acq.cfm#process. In other words, the Critical Period Hypothesis is the subject of a long-standing debate in linguistics and language acquisition over the extent to which the ability to acquire language is biologically linked to age. This implies that a learner's ability to acquire a first language and a second language is not consistent. A learner will be more successful in his first language acquisition than in his second language acquisition due to age. This is in line with the assumption which still needs verifying i.e "children are better at second language acquisition (SLA) than later starters" (Nikolov, 2002: 17).

Among those who have conducted researches to prove the truth of the hypothesis are Krashen (1975), Felix (1985) and Nikolov (2002). The following are some comments given by Felix and Krashen as quoted in http://linguistlist.org/ask-ling/lang-acq.cfm#process. Second Language Acquisition Felix (1985) states that several researchers, however, remain unconvinced that language acquisition is part of

general development: He claims cognitive abilities alone are useless for language learning, as only vocabulary and meaning are connected to cognition; lexicology and related meanings have conceptual bases. Felix' criticism of the assumption that L2 fluency simply requires skilful applications of the correct rules is supported by the lack of psychological empirical evidence for Piaget's idea.

Furthermore, it is said that although Krashen (1975) also criticises this theory, neither he nor Felix discredit the importance of age for second-language acquisition. Krashen (1975), and later Felix (1985), proposed theories for the close of the critical period for L2 at puberty, based on Piaget's cognitive stage of formal operations beginning at puberty. In his opinion, the 'ability of the formal operational thinker to construct abstract hypotheses to explain phenomena does inhibit the individual's natural ability for language learning. This idea is supported by Krashen(1975) that SLA has mostly examined naturalistic acquisition, where learners acquire a language with little formal training or teaching. According to both Felix and Krashen, this corresponds to Noam Chomsky's UG theory, which states that while language acquisition principles are still active, it is easy to learn a language, and the principles developed through L1 acquisition are vital for learning an L2. The three of them (Krashen, Felix and Chomsky) seem to support the idea that language acquisition is due to naturalistic factor rather than training or teaching factor.

Somewhat different, other experts opine that in second-language acquisition, the strongest evidence for the critical period hypothesis is in the study of accent, where most older learners do not reach a native-like level. However, under certain conditions, native-like accent has been observed, suggesting that accent is affected by multiple factors, such as identity and motivation, rather than a critical period biological constraint (Moyer, 1999; Bongaerts *et al.*, 1995; Young-Scholten, 2002 quoted by Nikolov, 2002). This implies that the age factor is not more influential than other motivation factors in second language acquisition.

In response to the still controversial CPH mentioned above, particularly with regards to native like accent acquisition, Nikolove (2002) has made an attempt for revealing the truth of it. The research was directed to provide an answer to the CPH that was first raised by Lenneberg as mentioned earlier which claimed that "There is a period during which learners can acquire a second language easily and achieve native-speaker competence, but after this period second language acquisition (SLA) becomes more difficult and is rarely entirely successful (Lenneberg, 1967)." I would like to emphasize two key words here, namely **Easy** and **Difficult**. These two words can be paraphrased as "To learn a second language before the age of six is much easier than to learn it after six. And the learner's language quality is better when the study is done no later than 6." Things as such make second language acquisition studies more challenging for sure.

Two questions that were raised as the ground for his research are: Is it true that studying a second language after puberty will be slower than studying one before puberty? How do experts in SLA study respond to this question? According to Nikolove (2002), it is not likely yet to give an absolute answer to the question as researchers of second language learning so far have not unanimously confirmed the answer. However, prior to conducting the research, Nokolove (2002) had already put some controversial arguments in his theoretical review which I then specified into both the proponents and the dissidents as shown in the Table below:

The Proponents and Opponents of the Critical Period Hypothesis (CHP):

Proponent	Opponent
1.An authentic accent is not available	1.Scovel (1988) argues that the critical
unless SLA begins before the critical age	period for pronunciation is around puberty.
(e.g., Scovel, 1988; 1995; DeKeyser,	
2000).	
2.Long (1990) suggests that the acquisition	2.Krashen's (1985) view, acquisition is
of native-like accent is not possible by	always available to adults as they have
learners who begin learning the target	continued access to Universal Grammar.
language after the age of six; There is a	
gradual decline in a language capacity	
which is complete by the onset of puberty.	
4.As for the pedagogical implications,	3. Singleton's interpretation, 'the
several authors argue for the teachability of	evidence does not consistently support the
phonology in adulthood (e.g.Pennington,	hypothesis that younger learners are
1998).	inevitably more efficient than older
	learners in the phonetic/phonological
	domain' (Singleton, 1989, p. 137).
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The research was designed to challenge the strong version of the CPH and is based on successful adult learners. It was aimed to find out if adults who started SLA after puberty could achieve native-like proficiency and could be misidentified as native speakers on a tape, or that accentless proficiency is only available to early starters. The subjects or participants that were used were successful adult learners at the English Department of Janus Pannonius University, Pecs in the spring semester of 1993. Two target languages were used, namely Hungarian and English, and 33 participants aging from 20 to 70 years old but started SLA after puberty, at the age of 15 or later as adults. In Study 1, 20 learners of different mother tongues have been acquiring Hungarian in the host environment; whereas in Study 2, 13 Hungarians had been learning English as a foreign language and had stayed in the host environment for a relatively short period. The two groups of subjects who were good speakers of the target languages were interviewed about whether or not they had ever been mistaken for native speakers. Also they were asked to read out an authentic passage in the target language.

In his research finding report, entitled "The Critical Period Hypothesis Reconsidered: Successful Adult Learners of Hungarian and English", Nikolove (2002) who had been so concerned about the existence of the strong version of the CPH, especially about the accent as one aspect of SLA study, this study has revealed some details concerning what factors play an important role in achieving native-like proficiency. The case studies indicate that all people who have been frequently mistaken for native speakers definitely strive for accentless proficiency. And according to Nikolove (2002), these findings are strengthened by Bongaerts et al.(1997) and Loup et all. (1994). In short, Nikolove's research finding has proved

that the strong version of the Critical Period Hypothesis cannot be maintained (Nikolove, 2002:84). This implies that learners of second language can still acquire native-like proficiency after puberty. However, he still recommends further research to find out if his finding is true for target languages other than Hungarian and English.

Nikolove's finding about the accent is actually not very important. According to Cook (1995) accent is the least important aspect of SLA proficiency, and speakers who fail to achieve native-like accent lose nothing important.

What is the Implication of the Language Acquisition Discussion for the Study of English in Indonesia?

What is certain about language acquisition based on the exposure of ideas shared from the specialists is that first language acquisition process is different from that of second language acquisition. In the former process, the acquisition is done unconsciously; where is in the latter, the learner acquires the language consciously. It means that learning problems faced by first language learners are not similar to those faced by second language learners. In learning a first language, the learner is set free from being reluctant to use the language as making mistakes is not something to fear or to be afraid of. On the contrary, for second language learners particularly adult learners, a feeling of shyness or reluctance usually occurs because to them mistakes are to be avoided.

So, speaking of the implication of the theories of language acquisition as already presented above for the study of English in Indonesia, I would say that in spite of the variety of views and ideas about Critical Period Hypothesis (CPH) implicitly all the arguments support the idea that there is a period where language is better studied at young age than old age. It seems that only two points that are left to be proved, namely the age and accent matters. Regarding the age, it is not known yet the exact age to learn a second language best. They are not of the same view yet about this. Some say, at the age of four, some at the age of 6, even some say before puberty. Then, about the accent matter, Nikolove (2002) has proved that those who started learning after puberty, could also be native like which means that age is not a factor for shaping a learner's accent to be native like. More important than age is the degree of exposure to the language. But the discussion implies that the earlier to learn a second language, the better quality will be attained and the acquisition will be faster too. This psycholinguistic view should be realized well by all parties involved in language education, especially English education since its status is only a foreign language in this country; yet it is so important to acquire.

It is absolutely true that accent is not significant in language use. Even Cook (1995) asserted that accent is the least important aspect of SLA proficiency, and speakers who fail to achieve native-like accent lose nothing important. And accent which was at first said to be impossible to acquire but it was refuted by Nikolove (2002) through his experiment. It means that learners of second language still can acquire native accent. Not to mention the also a weak point of his research that the subjects used were all exceptional and avid language learners. Also, they had had been so much exposed to the target languages.

However, with reference to studying English, according to me, it is better to have English native like when I, as an Indonesian person, speak English rather than Indonesian accent. If it is possible, why not? It means that when an Indonesian learner is exposed to English at young age, the benefit would be of two fold: quicker to learn and English native like. Therefore, English should be learned early. This is in line with permanent defect of the speech organs, the so called fossilization, as theorized by Selinker (1972). Selinker (1972) considers fossilization to be a fundamental phenomenon of all second language acquisition (SLA) and not just to adult learners. In addition, with regards to accent, I once had some experience. I used to have fellow teacher whose name was Edwin, from New Zealand teaching at Australia Centre-Medan. His accent was very unfamiliar to me. However, I unexpedctedly found that it did not only happen to me, but also to my other fellow teacher, Ben, who was from England teaching at that same institution. Ben was not familiar with Edwin's English either. Really so surprising!

CONCLUSION

The discussion above has disclosed that learning problems faced by first language learners are not similar to those faced by second language learners. In learning a first language, the learning is unconsciously done, unlike for the second language learners which is done consciously. It means that first language learner is set free from being reluctant to use the language as making mistakes is not something to fear or to be afraid of. On the contrary, for second language learners particularly adult learners, a feeling of shyness or reluctance usually occurs because to them mistakes are to be avoided.

With reference to the Critical Period Hypothesis (CPH), based on its proponents and opponents' arguments and views, it can be concluded that up to this present time there is no absolute uniformity of ideas about the theory of second language acquisition yet. Whether or not a younger learner surely acquires his second language faster or more slowly than an older one; Or whether age has no impact on language learning success at all is not yet clearly revealed. Even after seeing what Nikolove (2002) has done in his attempt to verify the CPH is still seemingly inadequate to make a firm judgment about it since it was just directed to accent; whereas, accent is not significant in deciding on language learning success. Instead, it only distinguishes being native or non-native. Finally, it is hoped that this article will inspire us to pay greater attention to language acquisition matters.

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PENGANTAR

Pada edisi ini terbitan Bahas dimulai dengan bahasan Morfosintaksis Bahasa Melayu Batubara (kajian pada verba persepsi: Teŋok (lihat) dan doŋo (dengar) dibahas oleh Basyaruddin, Analisis Kontrastif Prefiks Ter- Bahasa Karo Dan Bahasa Indonesia(Suatu Sumbangan Untuk Pembelajaran Bahasa) oleh Sanggup Barus, Mengajar Membaca Bahasa Inggris dibahas oleh Johan Sinulingga, A Reflection On Language Acquisition Theory Dealing With The Critical Period Issues And Its Implication For English Study In Indonesia oleh Willem Saragih.

Selanjutnya, Mesra membahas tentang Pengaruh beberapa mata kuliah Dasar-dasar menggambar Terhadap menggambar model. Diikuti oleh Pengadilen Sembiring Analisis teks narasi cerita rakyat "asal mula danau toba" dilanjutkan oleh Marisi Debora, The Effect Of Learning Styles On Students' Sentence Structure Achievement. Kesulitan Membedakan Bunyi Vokal Bahasa Prancis dibahas oleh Rabiah Adawi.

Kemudian Bahas pada periode ini ditutup oleh tulisan **Herna Hirza** Berbagai Ragam Kebudayaan Nias, **M. Eko Isdianto**, Bahasa Dan Teknologi. Dilanjutkan dengan Framework For Articulating Beliefs: Reflections on Teaching and Learning Experiences oleh **Ariatna**. Diikuti oleh **Nurilam Harianja**, Medan makna aktivitas memasak (membakar) Dalam bahasa prancis.

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