

# Discuss the debate of the perfect age to achieve the goal of native-like proficiency in SLA between young learners and adults

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**Abstract:** This article delves into the debate surrounding the optimal age for attaining native-like proficiency in Second Language Acquisition (SLA). Focusing on the Critical Period Hypothesis (CPH), it weighs arguments favouring early childhood learning against empirical evidence challenging this notion. These studies show that successful adult language learners can achieve near-native proficiency despite linguistic problems, while emphasizing their capacity to overcome these obstacles with dedication and strategic approaches. The article, furthermore, explores additional factors influencing SLA, including motivation, learning environment, and language exposure, which highlights the significance of intrinsic motivation and diverse learning strategies in facilitating language learning process. By considering these factors, a nuanced understanding of SLA emerges, suggesting that adult learners possess the potential to reach significant levels of language proficiency, thereby enriching scholarly discourse and informing pedagogical practices

**Keywords:** Second Language Acquisition (SLA), Critical Period Hypothesis (CPH), native-like proficiency, factors, approaches, young learners, adults

## 1. Introduction

In the field of Second Language Acquisition (SLA), the topic of how age factors influence L2 acquisition has been under discussion for a long time. The two notions that many researchers and scholars focus on investigating are the native-like proficiency between inside the Critical Period Hypothesis (CPH) and outside the Critical Period Hypothesis (Schouten, 2009; Singleton, 2012). In light of the robust debate in the cognitive domain, students are supposed to take higher advantage of language learning rather than adults. This paper offers a critical view toward the discussion, supporting that children acquire language better at the critical period; yet, there are exclusive possibilities that late L2 learners can also reach native-like level.

### Critical Period Hypothesis in SLA

The Critical Period Hypothesis (CPH) refers to an optimal timeframe of language development in which learners are able to acquire the target language and achieve the goal of “native-like” competence; however, as far as the critical period pass, learners may not reach the ultimate attainment in learning (Lenneberg, 1967). The research of Nelson (2012)

mentions a shred of neurological evidence from Penfield that the idea of ‘the younger = the better’, when a learner gets exposed to their first language in early childhood, they can achieve entire success. In the initial period, a child learns a language naturally and effortlessly, while an adult is normally fraught with lots of struggles (Morgan-shot et al., 2012). Later, researchers change their direction to support the idea of CPH in second language acquisition (SLA). Larsen-Freeman and Long (2014) point out the importance of age that L2 beginners may encounter many challenges, especially those with limited access to the target language. The research by Dekeyser and Larson-Hall (2005, p.103) draws a conclusion to the onset of age that children eventually reach a native-like competence through a massive input, clearly shown in their pronunciation and adults are more influenced by the shortcuts provided by explicit learning. It, thus, makes the goal of achieving native speaker competence become harder when there exists complexity in explicit rules. This phenomenon is explained by the fact that children are provided with an ideal type of input known as simple and concrete objects, whereas adults receive

different situations, both the elements of motivation would show it outweighed effectiveness, especially L2 as a “foreign language” is linked to integrative motivation. In contrast, instrumental motivation closely connects to L2 as a “second language” (p.258). However, it is worth stressing that not only do students need to develop their motivation; teachers and educators should adopt suitable strategies to boost students’ motivation. In order to increase the efficiency in learning, students should set their own goals so that they can later direct their study route toward their expectations Oroujlou and Vahedi (2010). Indeed, learners should understand their needs and purpose of learning a language: is it for a job, for entertainment, or just for the mandatory requirement? As they have already defined their priority, it will be easier for them to pursue a high level of competence.

### Summary and conclusion

The paper has discussed a dispute in the realm of the perfect age to learn a second/foreign language. Starting at traditional viewpoint that the younger a learner learns a language, the higher the language proficiency a learner can reach. However, the paper also provides counter-evidence against this foundational idea to prove that there exist exceptional and exclusive situations when it comes to learners. Children in the critical period will be advantageous for more implicit exposure to the language, whereas adults need to acquire more factors for explicit learning. It is easier for young learners to reach native-like proficiency; it yet does not mean that it is impossible for adults to achieve that level. As adults develop their strategies and memory, they are able to reach the ‘near-native’ or even ‘native-like’ during their adulthood. Findings from myriads researchers at various periods question the CPH concept, and the subject of debate still goes on, which encourages further scholars’ participation with multi-perspectives.

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