

Analysis of "The Critical Period Hypothesis reconsidered: Successful adult learners of Hungarian and English" by Marianne Nikolov

Alejandro Bernal
Quality Leadership University, Panamá

M. Nikolov's article appeared in the International Review of Applied Linguistics in Language Teaching in January, 2000. In it, the author does not directly state the research questions, but the following may be inferred: a. Can some adults who started SLA after puberty achieve native-like proficiency? b. What motivated them and what strategies did they use?

Before the evidence is explained, it is worth mentioning how the sampling was conducted. The instrument that the author used was an interview. In this interview, the participants had to talk about their language learning experiences. After that, they had to describe an embarrassing moment in their life or a happy moment they remembered with pleasure. Finally, they had to read out loud an authentic passage in the target language. These samples were recorded on tape, and then some children, students and teachers were to identify whether the speaker was a native or not.

Two studies were conducted: one of them was in Hungarian and the other one was in English. In the Hungarian study, there were a couple of participants who were identified as native speakers of Hungarian by most of the judges. This means that some adults really can achieve native-like proficiency because most judges were deceived by their barely noticeable or even non-existent accent. It is worth mentioning that these good speakers learned Hungarian without instruction; one of them learned through books and other kinds of exposure she could get. The other participant learned Hungarian by guessing meaning from context when he listened to BBC programs on the radio, and he got so good at impersonating news reporters that he still does it.

Interestingly, of all the judges, children were the most accurate when identifying the non-native speakers. Teachers, albeit more critical, were deceived the most. It is important to keep in mind that each individual judge had different standards or evaluated differently, which might have affected the results. In fact, there were some native speakers who were mistaken for non-native speakers.

Regarding the motivation of the participants, it varied greatly from person to person, but it was concluded that they had intrinsic motivation to improve their language proficiency. They would take any opportunity to practice using the target language.

This article, like any other in the field, has both weaknesses and strengths. Regarding the strengths, it can be said that the use of different language styles (e.g. embarrassing moment, reading aloud, learning experience) was appropriate to have more variety in the samples since a non-native speaker might speak well, but not necessarily read well. Having different kinds of judges was also appropriate because they had different ways to identify non-native speakers; thus, they worked as a stricter "filter" of sorts. However, this can also be considered a weakness because the standards were too broad and varied to have a clear assessment.

Another weakness is the length of the voice samples; they were too short to determine whether the speaker was native or not, not to mention the quality of the recording was also not clear enough in some cases. Another weakness from this study is the definition of proficiency. The author does not explain exactly what it means for the study, and it seems to be focused on accent rather than proficiency. Therefore, there is a clear weakness in a central definition of this study.

One thing that we could learn from this article is the fact that adults can achieve a good pronunciation and intonation level so long as we find ways to aid them; for instance, they might need more instruction than younger learners, but they can achieve high proficiency, nonetheless. They can even reach a high level by themselves as shown by this article. Another thing that we could learn a weakness because the standards were too broad and varied to have a clear assessment.

from this article is to provide diverse ways to assess learners, which can include authentic materials to have them be exposed to "real life" language.

REFERENCE

Nikolov, M. (2000). The Critical Period Hypothesis reconsidered: Successful adult learners of Hungarian and English. Retrieved from https://www.researchgate.net/profile/Marianne_Nikolov/publication/249930949_The_Critical_Period_Hypothesis_reconsidered_Successful_adult_learners_of_Hungarian_and_English/links/55ca8eee08aebc967dfbe604/The-Critical-Period-Hypothesis-reconsidered-Successful-adult-learners-of-Hungarian-and-English.pdf