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On the Role of Input and Needs in Second/Foreign Language Acquisition

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When teaching English in elementary schools was introduced in Korea in 1997, the theoretical basis was the critical period hypothesis (CPH). During the debate for and against teaching English in elementary schools, few people raised questions about whether the CPH will work in Korea. It seemed that people took it for granted that the "younger=better" theory would work because the research data prove it. But as Nunan (1999) points out, most of the research is irrelevant to settings in which English is taught as a foreign language. Four years have passed since teaching English in elementary schools started in Korea, but there have been no reports that children acquired fluency. This paper proposes that language acquisition is a function of input and needs. According to this hypothesis, the reason why Korean children did not acquire fluency can be attributed to lack of input and needs in and outside the classroom.

1997年に韓国の初等学校（小学校）の教科目として英語教育が取り入れられたとき、その理論的根拠は決定的時期理論であった。初等学校への英語教育取り入れに対して賛否両論が交わされたここ数年の間、決定的時期がロサンゼルスやカナダなどで効果があったのと同じく韓国でも効果があるはずだいわれた。しかしこのような主張に異議を唱える人はほとんどいなかったのである。韓国の子供がロサンゼルスなどで速やかに英語を身につけた事例は初等学校での英語教育を正当化する裏づけにすらなったのである。

The younger=the better理論は多くの研究からその効果が立証されたため、韓国でもそのまま当てはまるはずだということは既定の事実と化した。しかしこのような研究などは、Nunan(1999)が述べている通り、主に北米地域で行われたものであって、英語を外国語として教えている状況とは無縁の研究である。韓国では8歳からの英語教育が導入されて以来すでに4年が経つが、ロサンゼルスやシンガポールなどの地域のような、早期教育の効果があったとの報告はまだ出ていない。本稿ではむしろ、言語習得は年齢より入力と必要の関数であることを主張した。この仮説によれば、8歳から英語教育を受けている韓国の子供が流暢性を得られなかったのは、入力と必要が教室内外で欠けているからであると言えよう。

When teaching English in the elementary school was introduced in Korea in 1997, the theoretical basis was the critical period hypothesis (CPH). During years of debate for and against introducing teaching English in elementary schools, very few people raised a question about whether the CPH will work in Korea as it works in California or Canada. Success stories of Korean children acquiring English fast in such places as Los Angeles were quoted in justifying teaching English at younger age. It seemed that people took it for granted that the "younger=better" theory would work because the research data proved it. But the fact was overlooked that most of those research data were from research in North American environments. Nunan (1999) points out that "unfortunately, most of the research is irrelevant to settings in which English is taught as a foreign language. Many of the claims in favor of beginning language study in elementary school are based on North American investigations into the effects of foreign language programs in the elementary school (FLES)" (p. 3; 2001, p. 14). It seemed to many Koreans that if the age for starting to learn English were lowered to 8 from 12, the great advantage of an early start would come as automatically as the CPH stated.

When the CPH was suggested by Penfield (1959) in the sixties, the tendencies of linguistic studies were the rise of innatism against behaviorism. The theoretical support for the CPH was from Lenneberg's classical work, *Biological Foundations of Language* (1967) and Chomsky's LAD hypothesis (1965). With the theoretical support, the CPH became rapidly a belief by the general public and also by many second/foreign language teachers. But it still remains "a universal folk belief shared by many linguists" (Cook, 2001, p. 493). The provocative arguments behind the CPH and the Chomskyan generative linguistics were:

1) Language is acquired by **the innate system** in the brain.
2) Human brains are **preprogrammed** at birth to learn a language.
3) Language is not learned; it **grows in the mind**.
4) Language learning is **biological,** a change of the

genotype to the phenotype.
5) Language is acquired in a **special module** in the brain.
6) The innate system (LAD) is **triggered by the input**.
7) Input should be of **systematic** and **regular** kind (Curtiss, 1996 quoted from *Research Notes* (1996)).

This study proposes that language acquisition is a function of language input and needs:

y = kx
(y: language acquisition, k: language input, x: language needs)

This equation can be plotted on a graph where input is on the vertical and needs on the horizontal axis. The acquisition will be calculated by the total square area on the graph that these two variables make. In the EFL situation like Korea or Japan, the graph will produce a very little total square area with scanty input and needs. In comparison, in the U.S.A. and Singapore it will produce a massive total square area with ample input and needs. So language acquisition depends upon the amount of input and needs children have even at younger age. This equation predicts that age alone will not bring natural language acquisition without adequate amounts of input and needs.

Comparison of English input and needs in Korea, the U.S.A., and Singapore

To compare the amount of input and needs that the elementary school children actually have, questionnaires were conducted with 135 Korean elementary school children, 68 immigrant Korean children in the U.S.A., and 93 Singaporean children. The subjects' age range was 9-10 in Korea, 7-12 in the U.S.A., and 8-12 in Singapore. To know the status of English in Singapore, eight statements were given to professor Foo Chee Jan at RELC Institute, an authority in teaching English in Singapore, and his answers are given after each statement in italics below:

1. An elementary school teacher teaches all subjects always in English except the Chinese language class. *Yes.*
2. A teacher in the elementary school speaks English to the students outside the classroom at school. *Yes.*
3. Students speak English outside the classroom with other students. *Yes.*
4. Children are more comfortable with English than with their mother tongue. *Yes.*
5. All the textbooks are written in English at elementary schools except the Chinese language.

Yes.

6. All the textbooks are written in English at secondary schools except the Chinese language. *Yes.*
7. English is recommended as a means of instruction, but there are not enough English proficient teachers in the schools. *No, all teachers are proficient in English.*
8. English is the first language among elementary school children. *Yes, statistically speaking, it is safe to say that English is the first language of most elementary school children.*

Answers from Professor Foo show that English is the first language among children, that children are more comfortable with English than with their parents' language, and that children learn all subjects with textbooks written in English except the Chinese language. Singapore is a total immersion situation.

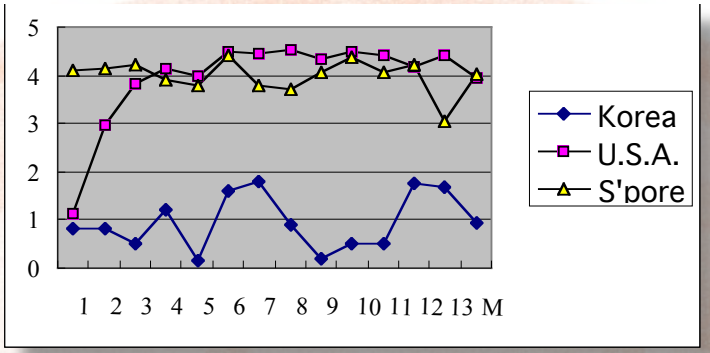
The items for English input in Figure 1 are arranged in a continuum of primary input sources to secondary input sources from number 1 to 13:

1) My parents speak to me in English.
2) My brothers and sisters speak to me in English at home.
3) After school my friends speak to me in English
4) People on the street use English for communication with other people.
5) I speak English at stores when I buy things.
6) My teacher speaks to me in English at school.
7) I watch T.V. programs in English.
8) I listen to the radio in English.
9) I chat on on-line or use Internet in English.
10) I read English comics and storybooks.
11) I read English newspapers and magazines.
12) I watch English video movies or animations.
13) I listen to English audio story tapes or conversation tapes.

A 0-5 scale was used for the degree of agreement, 5=very much, 4=much, 3=a little, 2=little, 1=almost none, 0=none.

The graph in Figure 1 shows that children both in the U.S.A. and Singapore have much higher input throughout the continuum than Korean children. The status of English in Singapore is almost the same as that of the U.S.A. Korean immigrant children in the U.S.A. have lower levels of input for items 1 and 2 than for other items. This may be the indication that they speak more Korean than English at home.

Figure 1: *Comparison of English Input in Korea, the U.S.A. and Singapore*



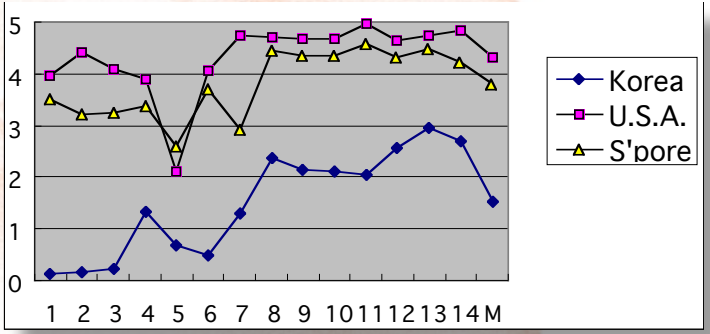
M=mean

The items for English needs in Figure 2 were arranged in a continuum of the immediate needs to the future needs from number 1 to 14:

1) *I need to speak English to buy food or drinks*
2) *I need to speak English to protect myself from any danger*
3) *I need to speak English to make friends*
4) *I need to speak English to maintain my pride or identity*
5) *I need to speak English to get love from my family*
6) *I need to speak English wherever I go in Korea/the United States/Singapore*
7) *I need to speak English to get teachers' praise in the class*
8) *I need to know English to enjoy English movies*
9) *I need to know English to use internet or computer games*
10) *I need to know English to read English comics or story books*
11) *I need to learn English to get a higher mark in English examinations*
12) *I need to learn English to know a lot of things in this world*
13) *I need to know English to get a good job in the future*
14) *I need to know English to be a successful person.*

The graph in Figure 2 shows that children both in the U.S.A. and Singapore have much higher needs throughout the continuum than Korean children.

Figure 2: *Comparison of English Needs in Korea, the U.S.A. and Singapore*



The Role of input and needs in second/foreign language acquisition

In second language research materials, the expressions easily found are "Language is a function of brain maturation (Lenneberg, 1967)," "Second Language Acquisition as a function of age (Long, 1993)," "L2 acquisition as a function of age (Bialystok, 1997)," etc. What these expressions imply is that there is a strong correlation (negative) between the age of arrival of the learners in the English speaking countries and their second language acquisition. This may be true in the second language situation, but it does not apply to learners in a situation where English is taught several hours a week in the classrooms as a foreign language. There is no explanation about why children in Korea or Japan do not acquire English even at younger age while children in Los Angeles do. The input hypothesis alone cannot explain the difference between children in Korea and those in Los Angeles. In many cases even with sufficient input, acquisition does not occur. For instance, parents' languages are lost in the second generation, even though there is sufficient input from parents. In this case, the language needs are the factor that causes language loss (Crystal, 88). Children have very little needs to use the parents' language to satisfy anything in their daily lives in the society where English is the dominant language.

The motivation behind the proposal that language acquisition is a function of language input and needs is in the fact that age is not the sole factor that determines success in second/foreign language acquisition. In the U.S.A. or Singapore, the factors of language input and needs do not arise as variables because they are always there. It is in the foreign language situation that these two factors come to the picture. As seen in Figures 1 and 2, there is a large difference in levels of the input and needs between Korea and the U.S.A. or between Korea and Singapore. In the case where children are the learners, age is not a variable in those countries. The differences in acquisition between them should be explained by other than the age factor. These other factors are proposed to be the amount of input and needs.

Conclusions

It can be said that the CPH is irrelevant in Korea unless conditions are met. It is difficult to expect the effect of the "earlier=better" theory without ample input and needs for the CPH to work. The effect of the CPH is about natural acquisition of linguistic competence, mainly speaking ability. If the CPH works in Korea, the effect should be uniform, not exceptional. But there is no report that Korean elementary school children acquired natural speaking ability. As DeKeyser (2000) states, "Early age confers an absolute, not a statistical, advantage—that is, there may very well be no exceptions

to the age effect (p. 518)," but "Implicit acquisition processes require massive amounts of input, which only a total immersion program can provide, not a program consisting of a few hours of foreign language teaching per week (p. 520)." The CPH only applies to age of acquisition, not age of instruction (DeKeyser, 2000, p. 505). Lack of the opportunities for comprehensible output (Swain, 1985) also disqualifies Korea as a place where the CPH effect can be expected. Therefore, in the proper sense, the general belief that the CPH effect will occur in Korea has no theoretical basis.

As Korea is not the place where the CPH can be tested, it makes more sense to test the proposition that language acquisition is a function of input and needs.

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