

Later language learning

Callum: Hello, I'm Callum Robertson and this is Weekender. If you're listening to this programme then more than likely you are either trying to learn English or perhaps teaching English. So let me ask you this question, do you think that age has anything to do with your ability to learn a language? Is it easier to learn a language when you are a child? Is it more difficult to master a language the older you are?

Language learning is an incredibly complex area of research. In the programme today we take a simple look at this topic which was recently covered in a science programme on BBC domestic radio.

One word which is very useful to know when talking about this subject is the verb acquire and its noun, acquisition. Learning your mother tongue is described as 'first language acquisition'. Learning another language is then described as second language acquisition.

Young children, it seems, pick up languages very easily but as we get older, it seems to be much more difficult. What could be the reasons for this, is there some cut-off point in our growth after which the ability to absorb language easily changes?

One theory is known as the Critical Age or Critical Period Hypothesis. This theory suggests that the most important period for learning a language ends when we are about 12 years old and after this time a language which we haven't started to learn can't fully be learned. Lydia White is a professor at the department of Linguistics at McGill University. What does she think of the Critical Period Hypothesis?

Professor Lydia White

The Critical Period Hypothesis is quite controversial and comes in many forms. Common to most versions is the claim that for a certain period of your life things are very beneficial for acquiring languages. In my view adult second language learners can successfully acquire a second language to the extent of being indistinguishable from native speakers. So in other words I do not believe it's impossible for an adult to fully acquire the second language.

Callum: She's not convinced by the Critical Period Hypothesis. She thinks that adults can successfully acquire a second language. In fact she believes that adults can learn a language to the level that they seem like a native speaker. She expresses this in the following phrase

Professor Lydia White

In my view adult second language learners can successfully acquire a second language to the extent of being indistinguishable from native speakers.

Callum: Adults can learn a language so that they are 'indistinguishable from native speakers' Indistinguishable – you can't tell the difference.

So if adults can learn a languages as well as a native speaker, why then does it seem so difficult to do and why is it something that children can seem to do so comparatively easily? Dr John Coleman is Director of the phonetics laboratory at the University of Oxford. He has a very simple theory. What is it?

Dr John Coleman

The ability of adults to learn foreign languages is often underestimated. Children spend an awful amount of time learning their first language, their exposed to it a lot of the time. They've only got certain things to do, they don't have to go out and do a job, or learn to drive a car or whatever, they're very very focussed on what they're doing whereas most adults who are learning a language later in life just don't have the luxury of spending anywhere near a fraction of the time that children spend learning languages.

Callum: Dr. Coleman thinks it's just a simple matter of time. Adults are much busier in their lives than children. They have day to day responsibilities and jobs and simply do not have the luxury of time that children do. But is it as simple as that? Erik Thiessen is director of Carnegie Mellon University's Infant Language and Learning Lab. He thinks that adults have a disadvantage that infants don't have. What is this disadvantage?

Erik Thiessen

We as adults have more than 20 years of experience with a dominant language which is going to interfere with acquiring a second language and that's a handicap that infants don't face. So there are things that you can certainly do as an adult to help yourself but I'm afraid that infants are always going to be the blue riband champion language learners.

Callum: Erik Thiessen thinks that influence from our own language can be a handicap to acquiring a second language. A handicap – it makes it difficult to do. This handicap is something that infants don't have, learning is new to them.

So if you are an adult, trying to learn English or any other language, then don't worry, it is possible! It's not as easy as when you were very young but it can be done. And as ever, my unscientific advice is to practise as much as possible and try and immerse yourself in as much English as possible. Good luck

That's all from this edition of Weekender