



PART 1

Read the text below and answer questions 1–13.

THE CRITICAL PERIOD HYPOTHESIS IN LANGUAGE ACQUISITION

A

The critical period hypothesis (CPH) proposes that human beings have a biologically constrained window during which language is acquired with unusually high efficiency, and that after this window, achieving native-like competence becomes markedly more difficult. The idea is most closely associated with Eric Lenneberg, who argued that maturational changes in the brain limit ultimate attainment after childhood. In this view, age is not merely a factor that slows learning; it alters what levels of phonological and grammatical mastery are realistically reachable. At the same time, contemporary researchers treat the CPH less as a single claim and more as a cluster of related predictions about different components of language, because “native-like ability” is not one skill but a set of interacting capacities.

B

Early support for a biologically delimited period drew from two kinds of observation. First, young children acquiring a first language usually do so rapidly and without formal instruction, suggesting that early development is tuned to linguistic input. Second, rare clinical and social cases in which children experienced extreme deprivation of language exposure were interpreted as evidence that late input cannot fully compensate for missed early experience. Such cases are ethically troubling and scientifically difficult to interpret, because deprivation often co-occurs with trauma, malnutrition, and limited education. Even so, they helped focus attention on a central question: whether age imposes a hard constraint on ultimate outcomes, or whether it simply changes the pace and conditions under which learning takes place.

C

Neurobiological explanations typically point to neuroplasticity and to developmental processes that reshape learning mechanisms over time. During childhood, the brain shows a high capacity for reorganisation in response to experience, which may facilitate rapid phonological tuning and the implicit extraction of grammatical regularities from everyday input. As development proceeds, synaptic pruning reduces some forms of diffuse connectivity, and language processing becomes more specialised. Researchers have also linked the hypothesis to hemispheric lateralization, the gradual concentration of language functions within particular neural networks. These maturational shifts do not imply that adults cannot learn; rather, they suggest that adult learning may rely more heavily on



conscious analysis and explicit strategies, which can produce high proficiency but may not replicate the effortless automatisisation often seen in early childhood.

D

Second-language acquisition provides a large body of evidence relevant to the CPH because it allows systematic comparisons between earlier and later starters under a range of exposure conditions. Many studies report strong age effects for pronunciation, with later learners more likely to retain a foreign accent even after long residence in the target-language environment. For grammar and vocabulary, patterns are less uniform: some adults reach near-native performance on certain measures, especially when they have intensive exposure and strong motivation, while average outcomes often decline as starting age increases. Researchers therefore debate whether age primarily constrains particular subsystems—such as fine-grained phonetic perception—rather than placing a uniform ceiling on all aspects of language competence.

E

A persistent challenge is separating biological maturation from differences in learning circumstances. Older learners typically receive less total input than children, and their input may be qualitatively different: classroom instruction can emphasise rules and written forms rather than rich interaction. Adults may also have fewer immediate social necessities to use the new language, or they may experience anxiety, identity pressure, and fear of error that reduce willingness to speak. In addition, migrant learners often face unequal access to supportive networks, stable work schedules, and opportunities for sustained immersion. If adults underperform relative to children, the cause may lie partly in constraints on time, exposure, and social participation, not only in a closing biological window.

F

Another key debate concerns whether the relevant developmental window is truly “critical” or better described as “sensitive”. A critical period implies a relatively abrupt boundary after which certain outcomes become unattainable; a sensitive period implies a gradual decline in learning efficiency. Many datasets resemble a slope rather than a cliff: performance tends to decrease with later starting ages, but not in a way that suggests an immediate cutoff at a single birthday. This pattern can be interpreted as support for sensitivity, while still acknowledging that early exposure offers consistent advantages—especially for rapid, implicit uptake of sound patterns and for the formation of automatic processing routines. The framing matters, because it shapes how strongly one should interpret age effects as biological limits rather than statistical tendencies.



G

Bilingual development and education policy add further nuance to public interpretations of the CPH. Children exposed to two languages early can reach native-like ability in both, although measured vocabulary in each language may appear lower at certain ages because input is divided across contexts, not because overall capacity is reduced. In schooling, starting instruction earlier can help, particularly for listening and pronunciation, yet early programmes with minimal weekly contact often produce modest gains. Quality, intensity, and continuity of input can be more decisive than starting age alone. For these reasons, many researchers treat the CPH as an organising framework that highlights age-sensitive components and the conditions that best support learners at different life stages, rather than as a simple claim that adults are incapable of high achievement.

Questions 1–4

Choose the correct heading for each paragraph.

List of Headings

- i** Why later learners may struggle for reasons unrelated to biology
- ii** Early bilingualism and how vocabulary measures can mislead
- iii** How educational timing matters less than input quality
- iv** Competing interpretations of whether change is abrupt or gradual
- v** Lenneberg's age-window idea and what it predicts
- vi** Extreme deprivation cases and the limits of what they prove
- vii** A neural account involving pruning and specialised processing
- viii** Using second-language evidence to test age-related constraints
- ix** The role of motivation as the only determinant of success

1 Paragraph A

2 Paragraph B

3 Paragraph C

4 Paragraph D

Questions 5–8



The text has seven paragraphs, **A–G**. Which paragraph contains the following information? Choose the correct letter, **A–G**. **NB** You may use any letter more than once.

5 The claim that adult outcomes may reflect limited opportunities for sustained immersion and participation, not just maturation.

6 The idea that bilingual children's test scores can look uneven because input is split across situations.

7 The suggestion that research patterns often show gradual decline rather than a sharp boundary.

8 The point that pronunciation is the area where age effects are most consistently reported in second-language studies.

Questions 9–13

Complete the sentences below. Choose **NO MORE THAN TWO WORDS** from the text for each answer.

9 Neurobiological explanations cite, a capacity illustrated by the brain's reorganisation in response to experience.

10 As the brain develops, a process known as reduces some forms of diffuse connectivity.

11 In second-language research, age effects are most consistently found in

12 Some researchers argue the evidence looks like a rather than a sudden cutoff.

13 In bilingual development, vocabulary may seem lower in each language because input is

Answer Key

1. v
2. vi
3. vii
4. viii
5. E
6. G



7. F

8. D

9. neuroplasticity

10. synaptic pruning

11. pronunciation

12. slope

13. divided