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An Overview of Language Learning at an Early Age

Treball de Fi de Grau/ BA dissertation

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Abstract

Age has always been seen as a key factor for native-like ultimate attainment in language learning and this has made foreign language learning at an early age more and more popular in recent times. Due to this fact, a huge amount of research has been conducted on Young Language Learning including Young Learners' characteristics, their learning process and how teaching and assessment should be executed. This paper aims to highlight the most relevant findings in this field of research, starting with age as an individual difference that activates language learning and the Critical Period Hypothesis. It then moves on to review the most important findings in relation to Young Language Learners. Lastly, the paper also presents whether what is being done in schools is appropriate or not considering the reviewed research and proposes ideas on how to handle the Young Language Learning environment to get the expected results.

Keywords: Young Language Learners, early language learning, Critical Period Hypothesis, teaching Young Learners, assessing Young Learners

1. Introduction

The creation of applied linguistics in the latter half of 1950s (Malmkjær, 2002) carried with it a great interest regarding the field of language acquisition, a topic that has been deeply explored in research. Lately though, “a smorgasbord of recent of studies have inquired into how young language learners develop in a variety of programmes” (Nikolov, 2009:1) due to the fact that an early start to learn languages has always been considered beneficial in order to achieve native proficiency over time. Most of the published work related to this population has greatly contributed to the study of L2 acquisition.

In order to explore how the study of language learning at an early age contributes to Second Language Acquisition, it is important to go over how age, known as one of the main individual factors that triggers language learning, and the Critical Period Hypothesis (CPH) affect L2 learning in the event that they do so. With this research we will be able to shed some light on whether the popular “earlier the better” statement is accurate or not.

Young language learners (YLLs) belong to a special category placed inside foreign language learners (FLLs), a concept usually used as a synonym for second language learners (SLLs) by most of us. However, it is worth knowing the differences between them and their characteristics so that the aims of the paper can be fulfilled.

This study aims to understand the characteristics young language learners have, how those influence the way they learn and therefore the way they have to be taught. In order to be able to do so, the paper will begin with a general theoretical background regarding the Critical Period Hypothesis. The way it applies to L1 acquisition, but also

if it has anything to do with L2 acquisition will be taken into account. It will then move on to look at the differences between second language learners and foreign language learners within whom we will find the so-called young learners. The essay will then focus on them, their learning process and how teaching and assessment are carried out in the aforementioned context. Following these considerations, the paper will conclude by reviewing different useful notions and concepts that could help future YLL teachers.

2. Age as an individual difference for language learning

2.1 The Critical Period Hypothesis: origins and definitions

According to Nikolov (2009), many discussions on the age factor in language learning are prone to focus on The Critical Period Hypothesis (CPH). The concept originated in 1959 when Wilder Penfield and Lamar Roberts, Canadian neurologists, proposed the idea that “language development is maturationally constrained due to a loss of cerebral plasticity” (Long, 2013: 3). They also claimed that children are able to learn more than one language until they become pre-teens (between nine and ten years of age) due to the function of the left hemisphere of the brain.

Lenneberg (1967) agreed with the fact that the ability to acquire a language is biologically linked to age and that there is the existence of an ideal time-window to learn a language where the first years of life are crucial for acquiring a language provided that adequate input is provided. Nevertheless, his research expanded the aforementioned theory. According to him, until thirteen years of age, language acquisition happens in both hemispheres and it is after this age when language learning is focused on the left hemisphere contradicting what Penfield and Roberts had

previously suggested. Therefore, after around preadolescence, easy language learning is unlikely to happen. Due to his theories, Lenneberg is known as the “father” of the Critical Period Hypothesis.

Concepts such as critical period and sensitive period are often confused and used for the same purpose but they are not the same. While sensitive periods “refer to a limited time window in development during which the effects of experience on the brain are usually strong” (Knudsen, 2004, cited in Voss, 2013: 2), critical periods are a type of sensitive period where there is a “heightened sensitivity to environmental stimuli required to trigger some aspect of learning or development” (Long, 2013: 3). We are talking about different concepts and the duration of these periods of time might also be different depending on what we are referring to.

A critical period has different stages, the onset (gradual increase of sensitivity), a peak period and an offset (sharp decrease of sensitivity). In language learning there is no gradual onset since the sensitivity required for language development starts at birth. The decline is gradual and the ability to learn a language during this period depends on other things such as exposure, and other individual differences among other issues (Long, 2013).

2.2 The Critical Period Hypothesis in L2

CPH was initially constructed in the context of L1 acquisition and everything that has been previously stated belongs to this field of research but tests soon began to be carried out to see if the concept also applied to second language acquisition. The most important and cited work regarding the CPH in SLA is Johnson and Newport’s (1989)

study on the role age had in the acquisition of L2 grammar. In their research study, many experiments were carried out and they found no evidence for native-like ultimate attainment in fully matured L2 learners. With the results in their hands they were able to determine that “there is a gradual decline in language learning skills over the period of on-going maturational growth and a stabilization of language learning skills at a low but variable level of performance at the final mature state” (Johnson and Newport, 1989: 97). With this, they gave support to the CPH.

Singleton in 1989 also conducted research on this topic and after experimenting with it, different positions of the CPH for SLA aroused. Those are “the younger the better” (Singleton, 2004: 61), “the older the better” (Singleton, 2004: 72), “the younger the better in some respects” (Singleton, 2004: 84) and “the younger the better in the long run” (Singleton, 2004: 94). Although they might seem to exclude one from another, they are not since they have shown to be true in the different examined contexts.

As has been previously stated, the aforementioned pieces of research can now be considered antique since we are now able to find more modern studies. A brief example of what has been researched is DeKeyser (2000), Birdsong and Molis (2001), Seol (2005), Mackay *et al.* (2006), Rasinger (2007), Abrahamsson and Hyltenstam (2009), DeKeyser *et al.* (2010), etc. that we can find in Nelson (2012). Examples of native-like ultimate attainment are present in the majority of these works that cover the acquisition of grammar and pronunciation, which would show that the fact that “second language acquisition will not happen outside the critical period” (Nelson, 2012: 47) is false

although age has a general effect on SLA. We could then confirm that the CPH has a questionable impact on SLA.

3. Second Language vs. Foreign Language

The concepts of Second Language and Foreign Language are very often taken as synonyms. This is due to the fact that although there are relevant differences between them, those can sometimes be difficult to notice. It is important to mention that a given language will not only be considered first, second or foreign language. This will depend on the learner, the teacher and the learning context (Punchihetti, 2013). In order to avoid confusions, definitions of both contexts are provided below.

3.1 Second Language

A Second Language can be mistakenly stated to be the language learned after the First Language (Punchihetti, 2013). According to Richards and Schmidt (2010) a Second Language can be broadly defined as any language learned after the native one. However, this term is used more specifically for a language that is considered important in the learner's country of residence though it may not necessarily be the first language of many people who use it. Since this is the case, the learner of a second language should be able to have the possibility to practice and use that language in his or her own country (Punchihetti, 2013).

According to Richards and Schmidt (2010:44), “the learning of Catalan by speakers of Spanish in Catalonia (...) is a case of Second Language Learning”, for example. Catalan would be in this case considered as a necessary language used in daily life, education and government. The Spanish speaker learner of Catalan in Catalonia

will easily have a close relationship with his or her Second Language and will be able to use and practice it.

3.2 Foreign Language

Also in Richards and Schmidt (2010: 224), a foreign language is defined as “a language which is not the native language of large numbers of people in a particular country or region, is not used as a medium of instruction in schools, and is not widely used as a medium of communication in government, media, etc.”. Foreign Languages are often chosen by each learner but are also those taught in schools for academic purposes and professional reasons. The majority of foreign language learners study in exolingual contexts where the “target language is unavailable to learners outside their language classroom” (Punchihetti, 2013: 5).

Punchihetti (2013: 2) illustrates foreign language use: “In the case of a Moroccan learning English from an Englishman in Sri Lanka, English (...) for the Moroccan student, who has probably had Arabic and French as his first and second languages, (...) would (...) be a foreign language”. English in this specific context would not be a necessary language for his daily life nor would be the language used in education and government.

Punchihetti (2013) also mentions that Foreign Language Learners is the group of learners that includes the most varied range of learner age groups. Although the majority of them are adults, a large number of young children and adolescents are included, particularly in schools contexts.

4. Young Language Learners

In the field of discussion that concerns children learning languages there are a number of markers used to designate them that are chosen depending on specific contexts. The labels are “young learners” (YLS) and “early language learners” (ELL). In the case of English being the studied language “early English language learners” (EELL) and “English young learners” (EYL) are also used (Garton and Copland, 2019).

Ellis (2014) states that the term “young learner” is vague and can often lead to confusion although in the English language teaching (ELT) profession it is often used to refer to any learner under the age of 18 that shares needs and rights as children following the United Nations Convention on the Rights of the Child celebrated on 1990. It is also defined by members of the teaching community as a term that could mean “someone who’s just embarking on their (...) language learning journey or it could mean a five-year-old” (Ellis, 2014: 75). What all interpretations have in common is the fact that they differ from older learners and adults in the sense that they are still developing cognitively and emotionally (Garton and Copland, 2019).

The ELT profession has created different terms to describe children from different ages in order to be able to fulfil the specific requirements each specific group has. Children between two and five are known as very young learners or early starters. Young learners, juniors or *tweens* are used for those students whose ages go from six to eleven. Up until fourteen years old they are considered early teens and we can call those learners between fifteen and seventeen young adults (Ellis, 2014).

4.1 The characteristics of Young Learners

It is not possible to say that by age x a student will be able to do a specific thing since each child develops at a different speed. Nevertheless, what is clear is that there is a big difference between what very young learners can do and what elder ones are able to do.

On the one hand, according to Scott and Ytreberg (1990), students until the age of seven understand situations before they can understand the language that is being used, they use language skills even if they are not aware of it and they use logical reasoning up to a certain extent. They also tend to have short attention spans and concentration and sometimes they find it difficult to differentiate the real from the imaginary. This kind of learners cannot decide on their own what to learn and learn best when they are playing and enjoying themselves.

On the other hand, Young Learners after seven are, in general, more mature. They are very competent in their L1 (they are aware of syntactic rules), they like to ask questions all the time and have no problems differentiating fact and fiction. They are able to make decisions about their learning process and love working in groups.

All these characteristics are important for teaching. Teaching methods will surely differ depending on the learners' age, since some activities can work very well with the former group and not with the latter one and the other way around.

4.2 Teaching Young Language Learners

4.2.1 Types of early language learning programs

The starting age, the time dedicated to early language learning, the curriculum and the teachers mark the difference from an early language learning program to another (Nikolov and Mihaljević Djigunović, 2011). Johnstone (2009a, cited in Nikolov and Mihaljević Djigunović, 2011) in his several studies has found four different models of early language learning programs. In the first one, very general topics such as colours or parts of the body are used for teaching the foreign language. The second model uses topics that the student has already had contact with in their other subjects like animals, their habitat, etc. The third one tries to sensitize children to languages and the last one would be that in which different subjects are taught in a foreign language, that is to say maths, PE or art would be taught in English instead of in the students' L1. The chosen program will have important consequences as to the level of L2 achievement. The first two are the most popular ones and share some characteristics. Those are that only one to three sessions per week are dedicated to language instruction and that teachers who are usually not language specialists often fail to have a native like level of proficiency in the foreign language being taught. Since that is the case, young language learners are not expected to obtain a native proficiency level.

4.2.2 Teachers as key actors for early language learning

Teachers are basic and important figures in early language learning since they are the main source of input and the ones in charge of what happens inside the learning environment that is a classroom. Teachers are expected to be

proficient in the students' L1 as well as the L2, should also be familiar with the content and the theoretical principals of how children learn (Curtain and Dahlberg, 2010; Johnstone, 2009a cited in Nikolov and Mihaljević Djigunović, 2011). This does not happen in all the cases, often, when one of the requirements is fulfilled the others are not. Apart from this, not all children are equal, individual differences such as motivation, aptitude or language anxiety play a role and teachers need to be aware of them in order to be able to succeed and make all students acquire the necessary knowledge in the six basic areas of language learning (reading, writing, grammar, vocabulary, listening and speaking).

4.2.3 Teaching reading to Young Learners

Reading is a very dynamic and interactive process that may end up being the main source of strengthening the language (Kang Shin and Crandal, 2019). Reading is the skill that will remain with us even if we stop practicing a language. We will still be able to read and understand a text in a foreign language that we used to speak as well even though we cannot do it anymore (Scott and Ytreberg , 1990).

In order to make sense of a printed text, several skills are needed, most of which usually come from our L1. If Young Learners know how to read in their first language, the required skills can easily be transferred to the L2. When this is not the case, reading is often delayed in Early Foreign Language classrooms (Kang Shin and Crandal, 2019).

Depending on the student's L1, the reading learning process will be easier. That would be the case of those students whose L1 shares the same alphabetic writing system as the L2 and that the spelling-sound correspondence is also the same in both languages. For instance, a Japanese L1 student of English as a Foreign Language will have more

difficulties than a German L1 student learning the same L2. The Japanese student will have to start by learning the letters of the Roman alphabet, then their combination and finally the sounds. Only once this is completed will he or she be able to start recognizing words (Scott and Ytreberg, 1990) and create the needed background knowledge (vocabulary, for example) that is needed to understand texts.

Making reading enjoyable is important, that is why teachers often use different methods all throughout the learning process. Some of the most widely used methods according to Scott and Ytreberg (1990) involve activities with flashcards, reading of dialogues or songs as well as silent reading practices.

4.2.4 Teaching writing to Young Learners

Writing, as we have seen with reading, is also a very dynamic and interactive process (Kang Shin and Crandal, 2019). It is an essential and useful part of the Foreign Language lesson since in writing, knowledge of other areas of study such as grammar and vocabulary is also shown (Scott and Ytreberg , 1990).

To create a printed text is not an easy job. It takes a long time to master these skills even in the L1 (Scott and Ytreberg , 1990) and those are also needed (Kang Shin and Crandal, 2019). We need to presuppose that the student can already write in their own language or that he/ she has at least started and, if that is not the case, writing is also delayed in the FL classroom.

As was the case for the teaching and learning of reading skills, the L1 of the student and the intended L2 also play a key role when learning writing. Some L1s work better for some L2 than others.

Writing activities vary according to the level of proficiency students have and also across sessions. Scott and Ytreberg (1990) propose guided ones such as copying and dictations for very early stages and then move on to activities where the student has to fill the gaps with words or sentences and free writing tasks (dialogues, descriptions, letters, short stories, etc.) for older learners.

4.2.5 Teaching grammar to Young Learners

Word grammar, sentence grammar and text grammar are a basic part of a language learning program. Young Learners are not aware of it, particularly less so in the first stages.

There are several methods for teaching grammar (Puchta, 2019). It can be taught explicitly by theoretically focusing on the rules, their exceptions and how they apply or using more implicit methods where students infer the rules and apply them by producing language. The most common way of learning grammar implies the teacher explaining the rules and students practicing them consciously through exercises. It is not recommended to start with rules in the first stages. Explicit grammar should be introduced once the student is more mature for him/ her to be able to understand the rules and integrate them into their speech.

Grammar is the area of language study that is most often perceived as boring by the students. That is why Puchta (2019) strongly recommends combining short grammar lessons and exercises with other speaking or vocabulary activities.

4.2.6 Teaching vocabulary to Young Learners

Vocabulary, as we have been able to see in previous subsections and as we will see in future ones, is essential in any language learning process. Without it, students are able neither to express themselves in written and oral production nor to comprehend what is going on in listening and writing activities. Young Learners tend to enjoy learning vocabulary since according to Hestetræet (2019) once they know the words they need, they perform better in other language learning areas.

Hestetræet (2019) also claims that vocabulary is learned little by little and that we cannot expect students to have the same number of words they have in their L1 when learning a foreign language. Vocabulary in a foreign language class has to be introduced gradually depending on the age and the personal interests students have.

Teachers often find that, in spite of being provided with topic-based books that contain different lessons emphasising specific subjects and eliciting concrete vocabulary (Scott and Ytreberg, 1990), there are limited kind of practices they can perform when teaching the foreign language lexicon. That is why Hestetræet (2019) suggests the combination of explicit teaching of words with the use of flashcards or picture books as well as the use of ICT (information and communication technology) in their Early Foreign Language classes or lessons.

4.2.7 Teaching listening skills to Young Learners

Listening skills are the first that children acquire (Scott and Ytreberg, 1990) since they are exposed to sounds from the very first moment. This does not mean that it is easy to master them, since some aspects need to be taken into consideration.

Listeners have to be very active in order to process the information that is being given since unlike with reading, things are said once and there is no way to go back to them (Scott and Ytreberg , 1990; Kirköz, 2019). In order to help, teachers are encouraged to use clear vocabulary that should already be part of the learner's knowledge so that the understanding of the audio or any other listening source is possible. Phonemic knowledge is also needed unless we want students to confuse "ship" with "sheep" due to the fact that they are not able to distinguish /i/ from /i:/ (Kirköz, 2019). Also having in mind one of the characteristics Young Learners have, it is impossible to have students listening to audios for long periods of time since they have a short attention span and whole listening sessions are not recommended (Scott and Ytreberg, 1990).

In a Foreign Language classroom, there are many activities that involve listening comprehension. Those can vary from active ones like songs, listen and so activities or identifying what is being said with pictures to more quiet ones like ordering facts or answering questionnaires (Scott and Ytreberg, 1990).

4.2.8 Teaching speaking skills to Young Learners

Speaking is a productive language skill crucial in our world where English is considered a *lingua franca* and its acquisition goes hand by hand with that of listening (Kirköz, 2019).

Encouraging students to speak is not easy since it is the most demanding skill for the teacher to teach (Scott and Ytreberg, 1990). Insecurities from teachers arise, they often do not believe they are good models for the students (Kirköz, 2019) since as can

be seen in previous sections, Young Foreign Language learners' teachers are not native speakers of that language.

Speaking is also frustrating for students because they know how to express emotions, feelings and ideas in their L1 and think that they have to be able to do so in the FL (Scott and Ytreberg, 1990). They also lack knowledge from other learning areas such as vocabulary, for example, and tend to insert words in their first language to fill the positions they cannot fill in the foreign language. That is why speaking has to be practiced once students are provided with the necessary knowledge. Otherwise, speaking could become a nightmare to YLs (Kirköz, 2019).

Scott and Ytreberg (1990) and Kirköz (2019) both agree on the fact that speaking has to be practiced in groups or pairs. Some of the activities they recommend include games, role plays, descriptions of their classmates and storytelling.

4.3 Assessing Young Language Learners

Formal assessment may not always be obligatory (Scott and Ytreberg, 1990) especially in very early stages of FL learning. Yet researchers have suggested that assessment in general can have a positive effect on language learning.

The main purpose of assessment is to find out where the learner is standing in the ongoing learning line (Masters, 2014 cited in Papp, 2019), although findings can then be used for other purposes such as certification, selection or teaching future plans. Whatever these other purposes may be, the aim of all assessment should be to improve the students' learning outcomes bearing in mind that the gathered evidence will only be a sample of all the information that could be collected. That is why different methods

of evaluation exist depending on the young learner's age, context of instruction and amount and type of exposure to the foreign language (Papp, 2019).

Tests are not the only way of assessment, class observation and homework are also ways to see and monitor students' progress. In fact, although in many primary and secondary schools assessment tends to be language-focused often forgetting about speaking (Papp, 2019), evidence that preference towards the use of assessment tools that involve tasks which replicate real life situations and that are intellectually challenging at the same time as test performance is given (McKay, 2006 cited in Inbar-Lourie and Shohamy, 2019). Traditional paper-pencil ways of assessment are still the most widely used methods in schools that tend to forget the existence of modern technology in teaching and assessing contexts (Papp, 2019).

McKay (2006) proposes that an effective way of assessment is obviously that connected with the curriculum in which the learning process takes place. Teachers have the need to make note of how "the cognitive, social, emotional and physical characteristics have an impact on language learning" (McKay, 2006:16) in order to make decisions about assessment tasks. According to McKay (2006), an evaluation task is done to do good if it gives educators feedback in the teaching and learning process, if it gives valuable information regarding how well the curriculum is being delivered and last but not least if it provides students with feedback that motivates them to study harder. In opposition, assessment can be done to exert power; it happens when the aforementioned characteristics of effective assessment do not take place (Papp, 2019) and has a negative impact on the learner that is aggravated in young learners due to their vulnerability.

5. Implications for teaching

All throughout the paper we have been saying that there is a growing interest on children to grow up bilingual and parents wanting them to start learning a foreign language at a very young age. It is true that a lot of students end up mastering an L2 but most of them do not.

As a student in a school where English and French were offered as foreign languages and taking both of them and attending a language school as well, without any aim to generalise, most of the previously mentioned factors that need to be taken into account in Young language learning contexts were not applied in any of the learning contexts I was involved in.

To start with, most of the language teachers that can be found in schools and language academies often lack knowledge of the cognitive and emotional characteristics their students have, although they have obtained certificates that allow them to teach. This involves the aforementioned Young Language Learner's traits, but also the individual differences that make a difference in ultimate attainment.

We have also seen how important it is to create a classroom environment where all the different language skills are taken into consideration so that the main objective of having students succeed in their language learning is accomplished. Nevertheless, in schools some of these skills seem to be considered more important than others. While there is a huge focus on Use of English tasks, in class there are no actual opportunities for students to speak and when they do so, their interventions tend to be very short. Listening and reading tasks are often based on translation and not general

comprehension of audio fields and texts. This ends up with boring classes that do not motivate students' learning.

Moreover, the assessment system is monotonous as well. Students are waiting for a written test that will evaluate their knowledge at the end of each didactic unit. They do not contemplate other forms of assessment. Homework, for example, is often used by teachers as a way of punishment when the students' behaviour is not the adequate one. Students do this homework they are given but feedback, in this context, is not likely to arrive and Young Language Learners' motivation towards learning may decrease.

There are several ideas that can be implemented in order to improve the above mentioned situations. These could be useful to handle Young Learner's learning and make it successful, which at the end of the day is what all parents seek when sending their children to learn a language.

Firstly, teachers need to be given more information and training especially when they are going to work with Young Learners. They also need to have been provided with more knowledge on how a classroom should look like, that is to say they have to know what it is that would be desirable to be happening in the sessions.

To avoid having tedious classes, a wider range of activities can be done, not just grammar and vocabulary exercises. Planning more in-group or in-pairs activities is a crucial need. This would bring more dynamic lessons and would encourage students to participate and therefore, practice their speaking skills. The main objective in listening and reading tasks is often to understand every single word and teachers even tend to

translate them but they should train students to get their own definitions once they have had access to the whole source of knowledge. By doing so, Young Language Learners' language skills may be highly improved.

As for assessment, using the wide range of activities that can flourish during a Foreign Language session to track students' progression is an indirect way of evaluation that may not demotivate them. Teachers should stop using homework to reprimand and provide feedback to all the activities that are given to them, as this would show them how they progress and motivate them to keep studying and accomplishing the goal of mastering a FL.

6. Conclusions

This study began by wondering whether age, often seen as one of the main individual differences that activate language learning, and the CPH had an effect over L2 learning. Many early discussions carried out regarding the topic concluded that L2 acquisition was not possible after the critical period. Nevertheless, more modern studies showed instances of second language native-like ultimate attainment which would provide enough evidence to claim that although age does have a general effect on SLA, the CPH's impact on that field of research is questionable. The focus was then placed over Young Language Learners, a group of children learning foreign languages regardless the proved-wrong "earlier the better" belief that has been considerably growing in the recent years. They serve as an example to see how language learning takes place at an early age. Since their characteristics and learning process differ from those an adult has, teaching and assessment have to be remodelled in order to get the

best out of them. Theoretical and practical tips are given so that it can be successfully done following experts' opinions. Finally, a judgement based on all the reviewed research on whether teaching and assessment are appropriately carried out in schools is given as well as specific ideas on how to handle a young language learners' classroom.

The paper, however, is subject to some limitations. While the current bibliographical study covers a wide range of topics, it is true that there is not enough space for more in-depth discussion of some relevant issues, particularly in the teaching section, where a very brief summary of everything that has been researched in each language learning skill is given. It would have been interesting to have access to a wider range of sources but due to the fact that only online materials such as network journal articles and books, or part of them, were accessible, the project contains a limited number of references. In addition, the majority of them focus only on English being the studied foreign language due to its status as *lingua franca*.

Some of the main directions for further research should involve reviewing studies that cover the study of other languages to see whether differences emerge or not. Also, testing everything that has been reviewed through experimental research like classroom observations or interviews to members of the teaching community to see their perspectives would be an extremely interesting further step to take as well as trying to put in practice the suggestions that have been given to cope with a young language learners class so that we could see if they are effective and realistic.

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