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Host: Our topic today is languages. I'm speaking with Dr. Julia Chinthia, a linguist and expert on bilingualism. So, Dr. Chinthia, how many people in the world are bilingual?

Guest Dr. Julia Chinthia About half the people in the world are bilingual, meaning they use more than one language in everyday life.

Host: Wow, that's a lot. Why are so many people bilingual?

Dr. Chinthia Well, in some countries, there are many different languages spoken. For example, in Indonesia, which is a huge country, there are over 300 different languages. So most people learn a common language—Indonesian—to communicate at school and work. And, in fact, many people speak three or four languages.

Host: Now, around the world, which languages are spoken the most?

Dr. Chinthia In terms of native speakers—people who grow up speaking a language—Chinese has the most speakers, About 1.2 billion people. That means one in six people in the world speaks Chinese.

Host: Interesting!

Dr. Chinthia However, English is the most widely used second language. About 2 billion people use English as a second language.

Host: Now why is that?

Dr. Chinthia Well, people learn English because it's used all over the world as a common language—in business, in school, and for tourism.

Host: And what about native English speakers. Are they bilingual as well?

Dr. Chinthia No, unfortunately. Maybe they don't feel the need to learn another language. For example, only about 10 percent of native English speakers in the United States learn a second language. And there could be other reasons ...

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Speaker: In this class, we're going to look at how people learn language. First, let's talk about babies: How do babies learn language? Well, they learn by hearing language around them. They're ready to learn language at birth. Parents don't have to teach babies how to talk—not like we're taught to read and write in school. No, we just talk to a baby, and the baby will learn. Now you may wonder, why do babies learn so easily? Well that's a very interesting question ...

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Professor Brian Murphy: E01 Now, let me ask, how many of you have studied a new language, not the language you grew up speaking? Show of hands? All right, OK. Well, today we're going to look at second language acquisition—that is, learning a second language. And one question that linguists like myself have tried to answer for many years is, why is it considerably easier for kids to learn a second language than adults? Now, we're going to look at a few different theories about this. First we'll look at a theory that says there's a critical period or phase—or ideal time in life—for language learning. And then we'll talk about other factors, such as the learning environment, attitude, and motivation. **(COACHING TIP 1) E02** Now, from the show of hands, I see that many of you've had your own personal experience with language learning. And I have recently, too—I started studying Mandarin Chinese—*pu-tong-hua*—this last year. And so I've been going to class, you know, listening to language CDs. And I'm learning, but it's tough. It's tough to learn a new language. And then today, I went into my son's class—he's in first grade now—and one of my son's friends, Zhiwei—he goes by Steven now—he just moved here last fall from China. And when he first came into the class, he didn't speak a word of English. I mean, not one word. But now, he's talking away in English, not always perfectly, but very easily, very fluent. And I'm, like, wow! This is so unfair. We've both been studying a new language for the same amount of time, but he's learning it so much more quickly. **(COACHING TIP 2) E03** This is, in fact, something that linguists are very interested in—understanding this difference between how kids and adults learn a new language. Now one explanation is that there's a critical period for language learning. Now this theory was first introduced in the 1960s by a linguist named Eric Lenneberg. And Lenneberg's theory says that during childhood, language learning is very easy. Basically our brains are just ready for language learning. But later, starting in adolescence and as we get older, our brains change—we lose this childhood ability, and it becomes more difficult to learn language. And that's why adults have trouble learning a new language. **E04** Well, if you're an adult, that's a bit discouraging, right? You can look at my son's friend Steven, who's six years old, and me, who's 29-plus, and say, well, OK, Steven is still in the critical phase; his brain works perfectly right now for language learning. But you, you're way past the critical phase, and your brain's already changed, so too bad! I'm sorry. But wait a minute! Is this comparison between me and Steven really fair? I mean, there's an age difference, but there are a lot of other differences

as well. Can we really say that my lack of progress learning Chinese is only because I've passed the critical phase? No, no, no. Many people, including linguist Robert DeKeyser, would say no, you have to look at other factors. OK. **(COACHING TIP 3) E05** Now one obvious factor in second language acquisition is environment—the place where the person is learning. So Steven is here in an all-English environment, where he's speaking English all day at school, and all of his friends speak English. Me, on the other hand, I'm just taking a class two hours a week. So, sure, I listen to my Chinese CDs in my car on the way to work, but other than that, I'm not in an environment where I hear a lot of Chinese. And I wonder, what if it were the other way around? What if I went to China, and was in school all day hearing Chinese? And Steven was studying English only two hours a week. Do you think that would change how well we were each learning the language? Yeah, I'm sure it would. So, environment plays a significant role in language acquisition. **(COACHING TIP 4) E06** Another factor in second language acquisition is a person's attitude about learning the new language. How do you feel about learning? Now when I was watching Steven in the classroom, playing with his friends, it was clear he didn't feel at all embarrassed about his English language abilities. You know, he can't speak perfectly yet, but when he made a mistake, he didn't care, and neither did his friends. They just kept on playing. Me, on the other hand, I find it very difficult to speak Chinese when I'm not sure what I'm saying. I get very nervous and embarrassed. And, as a result, I don't practice speaking as much as I should. So clearly, a person's attitude about learning is very important in acquiring a second language. **E07** Finally, the last factor we'll look at is motivation. OK, why is the person learning the language? Now, Steven is probably very motivated to learn English. All his friends speak it, so he needs to learn it in order to play with them. I, on the other hand, want to learn Chinese, but I don't need to. So we're both motivated to learn, but perhaps my motivation isn't quite as strong. **E08** All right, so, what do we understand about second language acquisition? Well, there does seem to be a critical period in childhood when language learning is much easier. But it's important to look at all the factors—and there are several, including environment, attitude, and motivation—which help decide if someone is going to be a successful language learner. As for me? I'm not ready to give up on Chinese just yet!

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Rob: OK, so what does everyone think about this “critical period” theory? Like, the big thing is that it's harder to learn a language if you're an adult, right?

Alana: Actually, speaking from my own experience, I'd say the other factors he mentioned are just as important.

Molly: What other factors?

Alana: Well, attitude, environment, and motivation. Those were big for me.

Molly: Hmm.

Rob: Really? How so? Like what was your experience like?

Alana: Oh, OK, well, I came to the United States from Russia as a teenager, and every time I spoke, I got so nervous. I was afraid people would make fun of me.

Molly: Oh, really? I thought kids learned easily.

Alana: Well, I was in high school, so a little older. Anyway, I made some friends, I watched a lot of TV—and now I feel pretty comfortable talking to anyone.

Molly: Good.

Rob: Ayman, what about you? What was it like for you?

Ayman: Oh, well, to me, the critical period explains a lot. My niece, who's four, came over here when I did—two years ago. And she sounds like you guys.

Rob: Really?

Ayman: She talks like a native speaker. And I'm so jealous!

Molly: Oh, you'll get there, you know, it's just a matter of time ...

Rob: Oh, definitely.

Molly: And practice.

Rob: I mean, for two years you sound good, definitely.

Molly: Yeah.

Ayman: Yeah.

Rob: I wouldn't worry about it.