

Are children less proficient language learners in the short term? New evidence from rate of learning in 9 year-old children and adults.

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The role age plays in modulating second language learning has been a central topic in the recent SLA debate pointing at an apparent paradox. On the one hand ultimate attainment studies have consistently showed that children reach higher attainment levels compared to adults (Abrahamson & Hyltenstam, 2009; Munro & Mann, 2005), whilst on the other evidence coming mainly from classroom-based studies showed that older learners are advantaged if the rate of learning is considered (Muñoz, 2006; 2008).

Another important point regards the distinction between explicit and implicit language instruction, with a number of researchers maintaining that adults may be advantaged in explicit instruction contexts, as these favour language analytic skills linked to cognitive development.

Current teaching methods in the classroom mainly rely on explicit language instruction and it is not clear what the results of a comparison between child and adult learning would be under controlled implicit learning conditions.

In this laboratory-based study I aimed at investigating comprehension in the very early stages of language learning in a communicative learning environment. A group of 9 year olds and a group of adults (both L1 English) were compared on their understanding of the morpho-syntax of a semi-artificial language (Brocanto2, Morgan-Short, 2007; Morgan-Short et al. 2013, 2014). This version of Brocanto2 consisted of 12 pseudo-words with English phonotactics but displayed the word order of Japanese.

Over three consecutive sessions of about 45 minutes, instruction was provided using a computer board game similar to draughts. After vocabulary training and an exposure phase, the participants played six games (20 sentences per block). They were asked to perform moves on the board following an auditory description in Brocanto2 and gained points when a move was correct.

Sentences were coded for syntactic complexity, word order and the semantics of the verb used and the participants' scores were analysed together with their reaction times. Instead of the expected asymmetry, the results revealed very similar attainment trajectories for children and adults.