

## The Impact of Early Language Learning

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### Highlights

- Just like in first language learning, age can influence how well we learn a second language.
- For classroom language learning, the amount of time and the kind of classroom activities used may predict success more than age.
- Starting earlier and learning a second language for a longer period of time is most likely to lead to proficiency.
- Because older children and adults have experience in learning languages and learning in general, these groups can sometimes make great progress even in short periods of time.

We often hear that children are amazing at acquiring their first language (L1); by the time they reach school age, they are using complex grammar and demonstrating a wide vocabulary. Even more impressive, these young learners might show up at school with two languages in their toolbox or add a second language (L2) with far less effort than older children and certainly their adult counterparts. The differences in learning between children and adults are frequently used to promote the general assumption that, when it comes to language learning, younger is always better. As this piece shows, the facts are more complicated. Moreover, some research suggests that there are benefits to learning languages beyond developing language proficiency.

### Age and language learning in naturalistic settings

One issue with research on language acquisition is that a lot of it centers on acquisition in naturalistic settings (like the home or the community) rather through formal learning (like the classroom). There is also research that suggests that age-related factors make it impossible to acquire a first language after a specific period of time. This assumption is called the Critical Period Hypothesis (CPH).

Some researchers proposed that the CPH applies to L2 learning just as it does to L1 learning- this means it might be impossible to learn a second language after a specific age as well! One important focus of such research examines the influence of age as an ultimate predictor of language. Research shows that, although older children and adults may make faster progress initially in L2 learning, younger children always have an advantage in terms of ultimate attainment. This means that native-like competence and, particularly, the lack of a non-native accent is only possible (albeit not guaranteed) with an early start (see Granena & Long, 2013).

### Learning in the world language classroom

Although there is a lot of research that shows that children learn languages quickly and effectively in naturalistic settings, there's less to support that classroom learning

of language is as helpful to young children's acquisition as naturalistic learning. In fact, some researchers (e.g., Patkowski, 2003) argue that the CPH applies only to naturalistic learning contexts in which language acquisition occurs mostly by exposure.

In many parts of the world including the United States language programs are often described as "drip-feed" instruction, meaning that students receive a small number of hours of instruction per week over a period of several years. This approach produces small proficiency gains (see, for example, Davin, Rempart & Hammerand, 2014), and starting earlier does not seem to make a difference (Muñoz &

Spada, 2019). In a large study that examined the impact of children's ages on classroom language learning, the Barcelona Age Factor (BAF) project, this finding was confirmed. The BAF project examined students learning English at ages 8, 11, 14 and over 18, and the researchers looked at students' progress after 200, 416 and 726 hours of instruction. The results of the BAF project showed that older starters made faster progress initially but that the younger learners caught up with the older learners in listening and speaking over time; the overall number of hours of exposure was more important than the age at which the children started (Muñoz, 2006). Other authors have similarly suggested that a key factor in L2 learning is the quantity and quality of exposure to the target language (Flege, 2018).

In addition to developing language proficiency, language instruction has been associated with other academic benefits. For example, Armstrong and Rogers (1997), comparing elementary students over one semester who had three Spanish lessons per week versus those who had not learned Spanish, found that the Spanish students had significantly better scores on math and language. Similarly, Taylor and Lafayette (2010) compared students who had 30 minutes of world language instruction per day with those who had not, across Grades 3,4, and 5, in Louisiana. They examined the student test scores on the Iowa Test of Basic Skills and the Louisiana Educational Assessment Program for the 21st Century. The authors demonstrated that, for each additional year of world language instruction and controlling for other factors, the world language students significantly outperformed their non-world language counterparts at every level.

### **Length and type of exposure**

Why do young children and adults acquire languages in such different ways? It may be that different learning mechanisms are more appropriate for different age groups. For example, DeKeyser (2003) has suggested that children learn implicitly or in naturalistic settings but they need massive amounts of input for this to happen. On the other hand, older learners have cognitive skills from having learned in formal settings, and they can learn in classroom settings. Long (2013) has suggested that the optimal situation for instructed L2 learning would involve starting learners as early as possible in programs that offer the type of "quasi-naturalistic" exposure that is typical of language immersion settings. In this context, young learners could still take advantage of their implicit learning mechanisms and, because of their length of exposure to the language, they would be able to reach high levels of proficiency.

Recently, dual language immersion (DLI) programs have become popular in the U.S. In Utah, the state follows a 50/50 DLI model which means that students have equal amounts of exposure to English and another language beginning in first grade and continuing throughout elementary school. This model of instruction, which means the language is taught through school subjects like math and social studies, is closer to the naturalistic setting described above. Data collected over several years in the Utah DLI programs show that children attain high levels of proficiency (Watzinger-Tharp, Rubio & Tharp, 2018; Watzinger-Tharp, Tharp & Rubio, 2021). Starting so early and with such a focus on input means that their proficiency continues to develop at a steady pace beyond the early years. In this learning context, an early start results in very positive outcomes.

## Takeaways

Learning language has positive impacts both in the language classroom and beyond. Findings about the impact of age in L2 acquisition can be crucially relevant for classroom learning since they may inform parents and administrators regarding the best time to introduce language learning or the most appropriate duration of a language program. Evidence from research shows that an early start may be advantageous when children are exposed to language in situations that approximate what occurs in a naturalistic setting: implicit learning and ample amounts of input over an extended period. On the other hand, when there are constraints on the available instructional time, a later start to L2 learning seems to be advisable since older learners can tap into their advanced cognitive abilities and make faster progress.

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#### **How to Cite this Brief**

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