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**SECOND LANGUAGE ACQUISITION 4**

Series Editor: David Singleton, *Trinity College, Dublin, Ireland*

# **Age and the Acquisition of English as a Foreign Language**

Edited by

María del Pilar García Mayo

and María Luisa García Lecumberri

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# ***Introduction***

MARÍA DEL PILAR GARCÍA MAYO and MARÍA LUISA GARCÍA LECUMBERRI

The issue of how the age at which a person is first exposed to a language that is not his/her first influences the learning experience has been one of the topics most frequently considered in second language acquisition (SLA) research. Several books (Birdsong, 1999; Harley, 1986; Singleton, 1989; Singleton & Lengyel, 1995) and numerous articles to be mentioned here deal with the topic from various theoretical perspectives.

The reasons for the interest in the so-called 'age issue' relate not only to theoretical matters (Is there a difference between how children and adults learn a second language? Is there still room for an innate faculty to continue its work in adulthood?) but also to practical questions that have to do with when it would be more appropriate to begin instruction in a second/foreign language, which are obviously of great interest for language planners.

However, looking at the literature, one realises that most of the studies on the age issue have been carried out in second language (L2) situations in which the learner has access to the L2 not only in the classroom but in the world in which s/he is daily immersed. This is, obviously, very different from foreign language (FL) settings in which the learner has access to the input provided in the classroom and little else (Cook, 1999).

In July 2000, some of the contributors to this volume converged in San Sebastián (Spain) to participate in a University of the Basque Country Summer Course entitled 'El factor edad en la adquisición de lenguas extranjeras' (The age factor in foreign language acquisition). One of the purposes of the course was to familiarise high-school teachers, researchers and the general public with recent research on the age issue and to present the results from two longitudinal projects carried out in the Basque Autonomous Community and Catalonia on the topic.

The present volume is one of the outcomes of that meeting. We believe it sets itself apart from other books focusing on the age factor because (1) it

deals with the acquisition of a foreign (rather than a second) language, and (2) it discusses issues surrounding the learning of English as a third language in two bilingual communities: the Basque Country and Catalonia. The purpose of the volume is twofold: on the one hand, the three chapters included in the Theoretical Issues section provide an overview of the most current research on the issue of age in FL learning. On the other, the six chapters in the Fieldwork in Bilingual Communities section present research on the age factor carried out in two English as a foreign language (EFL) instructional settings in Spain.

Within the first section, David Singleton (Chapter 1: Critical Period or General Age Factor(s)?) considers the question that, in the author's own words 'continues to divide the field of SLA research, namely, whether age effects constitute a manifestation of a pre-programmed critical period specifically related to language' or whether they are the result of a general decline related to aging and to other factors such as motivation, exposure and instruction. The concept of the critical period is analysed from different perspectives and as related to both native-language and FL acquisition. After examining a wide amount of evidence the author concludes that age must be seen to involve a number of issues, amongst them and notably the knowledge of previous languages, which may be more significant than neurological questions.

Jonathan Leather (Chapter 2: Phonological Acquisition in Multilingualism) addresses the acquisition of FL phonology, reviewing an extensive amount of up-to-date research. Before exploring the relationship between age and FL acquisition, the author deals with fundamental questions such as the connection between perception and production and goes on to explore theoretical issues related to the study of phonological acquisition. He appraises the frameworks which researchers have adopted from the 1950s structuralists to current models such as Optimality Theory, Autosegmental Phonology or Phenomenological Phonology. The effect on FL acquisition of learners' characteristics such as age is considered in addition to other factors such as motivation, aptitude and native language influence as well as phonological questions such as sound markedness and universals. In the last section, Leather reflects on the methods of phonological acquisition research, advocating longitudinal studies that may be more successful in isolating the different factors involved, and highlighting the value of FL research for linguistic theory and for the understanding of native languages.

Chapter 3 by Stefka Marinova-Todd (Know Your Grammar: What the Knowledge of Syntax and Morphology in an L2 Reveals about the Existence of a Critical Period for SLA) focuses on the knowledge of syntax and morphology as one of the more reliable and valid measures of L2 profi-



ciency. The author presents a critical review of the literature on the acquisition of L2 morphosyntax which, in most cases, shows that older learners achieve lower levels of success in the L2 than younger learners. However, recent evidence of adult learners with near-native performance in the L2 challenges the claim made by the Critical Period Hypothesis (CPH) and the study of those individual cases, Marinova-Todd argues, should be of extreme importance to SLA research. The implications for FL programme designers seems to be that it is not the age of the students only but the availability of and access to high-quality FL instruction and other factors such as motivation.

In the second part, *Fieldwork in Bilingual Communities*, the book presents research on the age factor carried out in two English as a foreign language (EFL) instructional settings in Spain. As we have already mentioned, this research has been carried out with bilingual subjects who were learning English as a third language (L3) in two bilingual communities: the Basque Country and Catalonia. The six chapters included in this section report on research which, as a whole, provides evidence for the claim that the early introduction of an FL in a formal instructional setting does not contribute to better results as regards to proficiency in that language.

In her contribution (Chapter 4: *The Influence of Age on the Acquisition of English: General Proficiency, Attitudes and Code Mixing*) Jasone Cenoz sets the scene for hers and the following three papers (García Mayo, García Lecumberri and Gallardo, and Lasagabaster and Doiz) explaining the general characteristics and results of a research project being carried out at the Department of English, University of the Basque Country by members of the Research in English Applied Linguistics (REAL) group. This project addresses the influence of age and other factors on the acquisition of English as an FL in Basque bilingual schools. Cenoz explores the effect of the introduction of English as a foreign language at three different ages on general proficiency in English, attitudes towards learning English and code-mixing. She finds that younger learners show better attitudes and motivation towards language learning. However, older learners progress more quickly in FL acquisition, which may be due to cognitive maturity and different input types at different ages.

Chapter 5 by María del Pilar García Mayo (*Age, Length of Exposure and Grammaticality Judgements in the Acquisition of English as a Foreign Language*) deals with the issue of grammaticality judgements (GJs) by bilingual (Basque/Spanish) learners of different age groups in an EFL setting. The author reports on a study whose main aims were: (1) to establish comparisons between GJs provided by (a) EFL learners of different age groups at the time of first exposure to English but with the same amount of exposure to the language, and (b) the same group of learners at

time 1 (396 hours) and time 2 (564 hours) of exposure to English; and (2) to determine whether 'higher' cognitive development is related to 'higher' metalinguistic awareness. The author concludes that there is evidence in favour of the hypothesis that the longer the exposure to the language, the more native-like performance becomes. However, an earlier start does not produce significantly better results in a situation of FL acquisition. These findings are commented on in the light of the issue of the early introduction of English as a third language in institutional settings.

Chapter 6 (English FL Sounds in School Learners of Different Ages) by M. Luisa García Lecumberri and Francisco Gallardo concentrates on the acquisition of L3 phonetics and phonology by bilingual children in a formal instruction setting. They consider theoretical and methodological issues related to FL pronunciation acquisition research and highlight factors which are believed to be relevant for phonological acquisition, such as age, transfer and exposure and explore connections amongst them. Later the authors present data on the acquisition of English as an L3 elicited in order to estimate overall production, perception of vowels and consonants, estimated intelligibility and degree of foreign accent. The results indicate that most of these measures favour older starters. Some inter-group differences were seen as related to strategies employed depending on cognitive maturation, rather than on instruction starting age. The authors conclude that, as expected, early age does not prove to be an advantage in the medium term and in a formal instructional setting as far as various indicators of phonetic development are concerned.

In the next chapter (Chapter 7: Maturational Constraints on Foreign Language Written Production) David Lasagabaster and Aintzane Doiz analyse the impact of the age factor on the written production in English as an FL. As in other studies within the project being carried out within the group, these authors study bilingual students belonging to three age groups who have the same time of exposure to the FL, but who have started instruction at different ages. They apply three different analyses to their data: (1) a communicative holistic analysis, (2) a quantitative analysis and (3) an error analysis. They observe that older students prove to be significantly better than the younger ones in the holistic and quantitative measures. The authors suggest that this is related to the cognitive stage and amount of writing experience, which are connected to age and length of educational exposure. Error analysis revealed that each age group made different types of errors, which are seen as stemming from the varying degrees of competence and complexity of structures used, which, in turn, are related to age.

Carmen Muñoz (Chapter 8: Variation in Oral Skills Development and Age of Onset) describes a research project that is being carried out in Catalonia. This project analyses the effect of starting age in Catalan–

Spanish bilingual EFL school learners. Students progress is monitored at two different points during their instruction period (after 200 and 416 hours). Muñoz focuses on the development of oral communicative skills, the relationship between length of instruction and language development and the use of native languages in the FL as related to instruction onset age. As was found in the other chapters, the results show that the older learners have an advantage at both analysis times for communicative oral and aural interactive tests whereas for listening comprehension there were no significant differences. The author discusses the results appealing to such factors as cognitive maturity, general language aptitude, learners' age and FL instruction onset age and draws implications for language planning and curriculum design.

Mia Victori and Elsa Tragant consider language learning strategies and age (Chapter 9: Learner Strategies: A Cross-sectional and Longitudinal Study of Primary and High-school EFL Learners). The authors analyse Catalan-Spanish bilingual learners of English to investigate differences in reported strategy use as a factor of linguistic competence and of age amongst subjects from four different age groups (10, 14, 17 year-olds and adults). Additionally, a subsample of learners are followed up to monitor changes over time in strategy use. Results indicate that, despite considerable individual variation, older students display overall a larger number of strategies and more cognitively demanding ones. The longitudinal analysis shows that as they become older and FL proficiency increases so does the variety of strategies used.

The book is addressed to both professionals and graduate students interested in FL acquisition. We hope it will contribute to revise some spurious beliefs about age and language learning, and to clarify the essential differences between FL instructional settings and other language acquisition contexts. We also hope it will be of use to both language planners in general and specifically to those in multilingual communities where an FL is introduced at school.

We would like to express our gratitude for the financial support provided by the different research grants from the Spanish Ministry of Education and Culture (DGICYT PS95-0025, DGES PB97-0611 and BFF-2000-0101) and the Basque Government (PI-1998-96) without which the work presented in some of these chapters would not have been possible.

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*Part 1*

# ***Theoretical Issues***



## *Chapter 1*

# ***Critical Period or General Age Factor(s)?***

DAVID SINGLETON

### **Introduction**

The question of whether there is an age factor in language development is perennially a topic which attracts wide interest and generates fierce debate. The reasons why it continues to be so energetically discussed are both theoretical and practical in nature. On the theoretical front there is an interaction between the notion of maturational constraints on language acquisition and the idea that language development is underpinned by special bioprogramming; and on the practical level the claim that younger L2 beginners have an advantage over older beginners is constantly invoked and disputed when decisions are being taken about the optimal starting point for L2 instruction in schools.

In fact, few L2 researchers now question the proposition that those learners whose exposure to the L2 begins early in life (and whose exposure to the language is substantial) for the most part eventually attain higher levels of proficiency than those whose exposure begins in adolescence or adulthood. The question that continues to divide the field, however, is whether age effects in L2 acquisition constitute a manifestation of a pre-programmed critical period specifically related to language or whether they reflect other, more general, factors which may militate against the learning of new skills and which happen to be concomitants of increasing age. The present chapter addresses this question first by looking at some early work on the age factor, second by looking at the notion of the critical period and some relevant evidence in respect of L1 acquisition, third by examining the L2 evidence for three different interpretations of the Critical Period Hypothesis bearing on L2 acquisition, and finally by exploring some explanations of age effects which do not rely on the idea of a critical period for language.