

Three Misconceptions about Age and L2 Learning

Variability Reading E

Annela Teemant & Stefinee E. Pinnegar

Age has often been considered a major, inverse factor for success in learning a second or foreign language. However, researchers have committed three types of errors in making this claim: (1) misinterpretation, (2) misattribution, and (3) misemphasis.

Myth	Fact
Misinterpretation: Children pick up languages quickly.	Older learners are generally faster and more efficient in the initial stages of L2 learning.
Misattribution: Differences in brain activation patterns between children and adults during language learning explain language proficiency differences.	No link has been established between L2 learning and the state of neural networks. It is possible that adult and child learners localize their learning differently without showing different learning outcomes.
Misemphasis: Group comparisons show adults are not capable of achieving nativelike proficiency in a second language.	Some adult learners have outperformed early learners. Cognitive, motivational, and environmental factors are more important than age. Most adults fail to engage in ways that lead to high levels of success.

Implications:

1. "Age does influence language learning, but primarily because it is associated with social, psychological, educational, and other factors that can affect L2 proficiency, not because of any critical period that limits the possibility of language learning by adults" (p. 28).

2. Foreign language teaching in the early grades “will be able to cover only half as much material in a year as the middle school course, which in turn will progress much more slowly than the secondary or university course” (p. 28).
3. In the early grades, “L1 instruction is more important than L2 for ultimate literacy and academic achievement in the L2” (p. 29).
4. “Children in late-exit bilingual programs do better than those in early-exit programs” (p. 29).
5. “Children who arrive as immigrants in U.S. schools in later grades show better academic performance than those who start in kindergarten” (p. 29).
6. “Children who start learning English after the early elementary years, even as late as during high school, can become nativelike speakers” (p. 29) with highly motivating, well-structured learning environments.

Source:

Marinova-Todd, S. H., Marshall, D. B., & Snow, C. E. (2000). *Three misconceptions about age and L2 learning*. TESOL Quarterly, 34 (1), 9-34.

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Teemant, A. & Pinnegar, S. (2007). *Understanding Language Acquisition Instructional Guide*. Brigham Young University-Public School Partnership.



Principles of Language Acquisition

Bohdana Allman



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