

Language learning aptitude in primary-level L2 learners

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Language learning aptitude has proved to be a reliable predictor of achievement in instructed adult second language (L2) learning (Dörnyei & Skehan, 2003), but much less is known about the role of aptitude in child L2 learners. Existing research indicates that aptitude appears to play a certain role in naturalistic contexts (Abrahamsson & Hyltenstam, 2008), yet studies investigating the role of aptitude in L2 classroom settings are still in short supply (but see, e.g., Kiss & Nikolov, 2005). Using the MLAT-E(UK), we measured language learning aptitude at two points in time in English-speaking L2 beginners aged 8-9 (N = 111) who were exposed consecutively to two European L2s for one lesson per week over one school year. Individual aptitude components significantly correlated with gains in French (the second L2 the children experienced) in terms of grammar, reading and listening, but not writing, mirroring cumulative results from adult samples (Li, 2015), though not from a recent study with child learners (Muñoz, 2014), and indirectly supporting the view that different components of aptitude may be differentially associated with success on different aspects of L2 proficiency (Kormos, 2013; Sáfár & Kormos, 2008). Seemingly contrary to the finding that younger children tend to rely above all on memory abilities (Harley & Hart, 1997), language-analytic ability, together with phonetic ability, emerged as a significant predictor of overall French achievement. In accordance with existing work involving learners who have not yet reached cognitive maturity (Kiss, 2009; Milton & Alexiou, 2006; Suárez & Muñoz, 2011), we found that aptitude was not (yet?) stable in the children, with significant improvements as well as strong correlations in evidence between testing times. We develop the argument that measures of aptitude can serve as predictors in classroom-based child L2 learning, despite the dynamicity of cognitive abilities in young learners.

Keywords: child L2 learning, language learning aptitude, instructed L2 learning.