Are children less proficient language learners in the short term? Evidence from L2 comprehension in 9 year olds and adults

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

As current teaching methods in the classroom mainly rely on explicit language instruction, more research is needed to investigate child and adult learning under controlled implicit learning conditions.

In this laboratory-based study I aimed at investigating comprehension in the very early stages of L2 learning in the context of implicit computer-assisted instruction. Ten 9 year olds and ten adults (L1 English) were compared on their comprehension of the morpho-syntax of a version of Brocanto2 (Morgan-Short, 2007; Morgan-Short et al. 2013), a fully productive semi-artificial language displaying Japanese word order.

After vocabulary training and training in a novel computer board game, the participants were shown game moves and simultaneously exposed to auditory Brocanto2 sentence stimuli that described them. Subsequently they were asked to perform novel moves on the board following an auditory description in Brocanto2 (6 blocks over three consecutive days).

Interestingly, the analysis of the participants’ scores (correctly performed moves) revealed very similar attainment trajectories for children and adults. However, the analysis of reaction times showed that mean latencies across blocks were significantly shorter for children compared to adults. Finally, a preliminary analysis of the coefficient of variation (CV) in the two groups (Segalowitz & Segalowitz, 1993; Segalowitz & Hulstijn, 2005; Lim & Godfroid, 2015) found evidence of differences between children and adults relative to the early emergence of automaticity patterns.

Keywords: computer-assisted instruction, rate of learning, L2 comprehension, incidental learning, age differences.