

Research Summary

Age, Aptitude, and Learning Languages

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Overview of the Study

When it comes to learning languages, it seems that the younger you start the better. However, it is debated whether this points to the existence of a “window” of time during childhood when we are favorably wired to learn languages or simply to patterns of general decline associated with getting older. To help answer this question, this study explored the influence of *age of acquisition* (how old someone is when they learn a new language) and *aptitude* (how good someone is at learning languages) on the ability levels achieved by L1 Russian speakers learning two very different languages (English and Hebrew). Findings confirmed that younger learners attained higher levels of grammatical ability in the new language than older learners; and that aptitude made a difference for older learners but not younger.

Research Method

Two groups of L1 Russian speakers were studied. The first (76 members) had learned English after moving to North America. The second (68 members) had learned Hebrew after moving to Israel. Both had lived in their new countries for at least eight years. Group members were given two tests: one that measured their verbal aptitude for language learning and another that measured their grammatical ability in the new language. Test takers’ grammatical abilities were then compared with their ages and aptitude scores. Two hypotheses were tested: 1) that the decline in new language gains typical of late childhood would “flatten” between adolescence and adulthood, and 2) that aptitude would only significantly influence the language gains of adults, but children would learn regardless.

Results

Results confirmed the hypotheses. The factor that most affected the language gains of young members (<18) was *age*. Regardless of aptitude, those who started acquiring the language in childhood achieved higher levels of grammatical ability than those who began as either young adults (18-40) or older adults (>40). Moreover, a steep decline in attainment was seen among adolescents (around age 12) followed by a steady leveling off among adult learners. In contrast, the factor most affecting the language gains of adult members (> 18) was *aptitude*. How good they were at learning languages seemed to make a real difference in the grammatical ability they were able to achieve.

Practical Implications/Significance

Similar patterns related to *age* and *aptitude* mark the learning of both groups. Younger really does seem to be better, at least when it comes to grammar. Young learners achieved higher language ability regardless of aptitude while adults relied more on aptitude to advance. In addition, ability levels dropped steeply after age 12 followed by plateaued achievement among adults. These findings certainly seem to support an “optimal window” view of language learning.

Original Text:

DeKeyser, R., Alfi-Shabtay, I., & Ravid, D. (2010). Cross-linguistic evidence for the nature of age effects in second language acquisition. *Applied Psycholinguistics*, 31(3), 413–438. <https://doi.org/10.1017/S0142716410000056>