

María del Pilar García Mayo and María Luisa García Lecumberri, eds. 2003: *Age and the Acquisition of English as a Foreign Language*. Clevedon: Multilingual Matters.

M. Luz Celaya
Universidad de Barcelona
mluzcelaya@ub.edu

The age factor has always been one of the main concerns in SLA research. However, the focus is no longer on the issue of whether there exists a critical period, as was the case in the 70s and 80s, but rather on the appropriate age to begin instruction in the L2. This trend is specially relevant in foreign language acquisition contexts all over Europe and clearly evident in Spain, where the *Reforma* brought about the introduction of English at an earlier age (from 11 to 8) and further innovations may advance the starting age to 6. Although these changes do not seem to take findings from recent research into account, as we shall see below, they reflect the general concern about the importance of languages, especially English, in our daily life. The book under review is, therefore, of the utmost interest: *Age and the Acquisition of English as a Foreign Language*, as the editors themselves state in the introduction, is the result of a Summer Course (“El factor edad en la adquisición de lenguas extranjeras”) in the University of the Basque Country. The volume collects some of those contributions in two parts: part 1, “Theoretical Issues,” with three chapters meant as an overview on the age factor, and part 2, “Fieldwork in Bilingual Communities,” which deals with several aspects investigated by the teams at the University of the Basque Country (chapters 4 to 7) and the University of Barcelona (chapters 8 and 9).

The first chapter in part 1 (“Critical Period or General Age Factor(s)”) is by David Singleton. After a thorough introduction to the CPH and the concept of the CP in FLA, Singleton reviews studies on the CP in SLA in relation to the attainment of native-like proficiency, the effortless acquisition of an L2 before the CP, learning and processing mechanisms, and, finally, naturalistic and instruction settings. Although age effects are evident in the studies, it is not always clear, Singleton argues, that they are the result from a CP in the usual understanding of the concept. So many different conclusions in studies and so much variation from individual to individual have led researchers to consider other explanations for the effects of age. Singleton finishes the chapter with the revision of four of these explanations (motivational factors, cross-linguistic factors, educational factors, and general cognitive factors) and concludes by saying that “the idea of a critical period for language development may well have had its day” (18).

Chapter 2 deals with phonological acquisition in multilingualism and chapter three with grammar and the CP. In my opinion, this is an excellent structure, since we move from the most general and relevant aspects in chapter 1 to the revision of studies on those areas of language that have received the most attention. The reader gets thus a very complete state of the art before part 2 (“Fieldwork”). From Jonathan Leather’s very detailed account of phonological acquisition in relation to age (chapter 2, “Phonological Acquisition in Multilingualism”), I would like to focus on two statements which throw new light on the issue. First, and similarly to Singleton above, Leather argues that age should be taken together with other factors to explain differences between learners, since, even if there is evidence of a foreign accent in learners who begin early, there is also

evidence of native-like pronunciation in adult learners. Secondly, Leather claims that deviant forms in L2 cannot be explained solely in terms of L1 influence; orthography, markedness and universals are put forward as possible causes for the appearance of those forms. Therefore, a comparison with the L1 system alone cannot explain phonological development.

Chapter 3 (“Know your Grammar: What the Knowledge of Syntax and Morphology in an L2 Reveals about the Critical Period for Second/Foreign Language Acquisition”), by Stefka H. Marinova-Todd, is a very clear and complete review of studies for and against the CPH in the area of morphosyntax. The author argues that there is enough evidence to defend the idea that, even if younger learners generally get higher levels of success, morphosyntax is the area where some late learners may attain near-native level. This finding is briefly discussed in relation to foreign language acquisition contexts. However, we should not forget that one of the main points in the chapter, namely, the association between SLA and native-like attainment, is being seriously questioned nowadays as a valid premise in SLA research (see Cook 2002).

This first part of the book presents the necessary theoretical background and provides interesting lines for further research. However, it is striking to notice that, except in one case in chapter 2, the overall findings presented in part 2 have not generally been taken into account in this theoretical part. Although I do not know whether the editors aimed at a strong cohesion between both parts or not, it would have been interesting to find a closer connection between them or else to have a final conclusion to the volume.

Part 2 presents the results from ongoing research on age and related factors in a foreign language acquisition setting. The choice of topics is excellent and complete. In chapter 4 (“The Influence of Age on the Acquisition of English: General Proficiency, Attitudes and Code Mixing”), Jasone Cenoz explains the situation of English as a third language in the Basque Country, where it was introduced in kindergarten as a pilot experience in 1991, and describes the study designed to analyse the age factor. This description is referred to by the authors of chapters 6 and 7 to avoid unnecessary repetitions. Then, Cenoz presents her own study with three groups of learners (N=135) who have received the same number of hours of instruction (600 hours) but whose starting ages differ. Age is analysed in relation to rate of acquisition (measured by several tests that reflect proficiency in English), to attitudes and motivation (a specific questionnaire was used to gather information), and, finally, to code-mixing (measured in the oral production). Older learners obtain higher results than younger learners in most of the measures of proficiency, and these differences are statistically significant. However, the opposite trend appears in relation to attitudes and motivation, since younger learners present more positive attitudes and are more motivated than older learners. Finally, younger learners do not code mix more than older. As the author acknowledges, these findings should be completed with the longitudinal results and, from my point of view, with more subjects and schools (there is only one school involved). However, thanks to the very clear presentation of the results and the excellent discussion that follows, the study allows both for a follow-up and further comparisons with other studies.

Chapter 5 (“Age, Length of Exposure, and Grammaticality Judgements in the Acquisition of English as a Foreign Language”), by María del Pilar García Mayo, starts with a brief but complete review on age and then focusses on the grammaticality judgement task,

which is the task used to gauge target-like performance in this study, and on linguistic awareness, an issue related to this task. The research questions are three: whether length of exposure has any influence on target-like performance, whether an earlier exposure implies more target-like performance, and, finally, whether higher cognitive development can be related to higher degree of metalinguistic awareness. The author found that a longer time of exposure to the foreign language produced better results. As for the second and third research question, and similarly to results in Barcelona which the author herself refers to, older subjects perform better and show more linguistic awareness than those whose instruction had started earlier. The study has been designed so as to allow both a comparison between the participants whose age of first exposure was 8–9 and those whose age was 11–12 (after 396 hours in both cases) and also a longitudinal analysis of the two groups, whose data are collected again after 594 hours. Since longitudinal studies are scarce, this is one of the strong points of the study.

María Luisa García Lecumberri and Francisco Gallardo deal with age and English sound perception and pronunciation in chapter 6 (“English FL Sounds in School Learners of Different Ages”). After a very clear and complete review of both age and exposure in relation to pronunciation acquisition, the authors describe their study. The participants are three groups of learners (N=60) whose ages of first exposure are 4, 8 and 11, and they all had the same number of years of instruction. The instruments were story telling and re-telling and sound perception tests, all of them very carefully designed and implemented. The results obtained show that the eldest learners differ significantly from the other groups both in sound perception of both vowels and consonants and in pronunciation, in which they were judged as sounding more intelligible and having more TL-like accents than the younger groups. Two main conclusions in the study are that starting earlier does not seem to facilitate FL sound acquisition in a formal context, at least in the period analysed (6 years) and that factors other than AoO have to be taken into account: NL influence, different strategy use related to cognitive development (younger use more fixed word pronunciations), and, finally, the type of input (non-native teachers) that learners receive.

Chapter 7 (“Maturational Constraints on Foreign-language Written Production”) by David Lasagabaster and Aintzane Doiz, deals with the age factor in written production by means of the analysis of sixty-two compositions from three age groups who have different AoO and who are bilingual in Basque and Spanish or monolingual in either. A very good point in the study is the complete and threefold analysis of the written production: a holistic analysis with two evaluators, a quantitative analysis, and an error analysis. In line with previous studies in the Basque Country and in Catalonia, results indicate that older learners get better scores both in the holistic and in the quantitative evaluation. Besides, the error analysis shows that the three groups make different types of errors, which the authors attribute to poor linguistic competence and lack of experience in writing in the younger students, to complexity and length in the older group, and to poorer performance in the intermediate group. The chapter closes with several interesting pedagogical implications.

Carmen Muñoz is the author of “Variation in Oral Skills Development and Age of Onset” (chapter 8). Muñoz reviews several studies on the age factor and issues such as rate and ultimate attainment, on the one hand, and literacy-related L2 skills and communication skills, on the other. In this line of research, Muñoz’s study analyses, first, the

effects of an earlier start on oral and aural communicative skills in a foreign language context and, secondly, the relation between length of instruction and language development. The data were collected at three different times from participants bilingual in Catalan and Spanish, who belong to a larger research project on the age factor (University of Barcelona). Both after 200 and 416 hours of instruction (times 1 and 2 of data collection) students who had begun instruction at 11 years old (Late Starters group) present higher oral productive skills than those who had begun at 8 (Early Starters), as measured by their performance on an oral interview. Auditory receptive skills were measured through a listening comprehension test and also through the oral interview. Results show again an advantage of the LS group in both tests and at both times, but the difference is not statistically significant in the listening comprehension test. This study shows, then, that 416 hours of instruction are not enough to show the advantage of an earlier start in a classroom context. Previous findings in the same research project in other tests also presented an advantage for the LS group. In an excellent discussion the author explains these findings in relation to intervening variables other than AoO such as the two different curricula involved, the effects of both proficiency in L3 and age-at-testing, and proficiency in L1. The chapter closes with interesting suggestions with direct implications for education authorities.

Chapter 9 (“Learner Strategies: A Cross-sectional and Longitudinal Study of Primary and High-school EFL Learners”) is by Mia Victori and Elsa Tragant. Since, as the authors argue, there exist few studies on the relation between learner strategies and age, this study analyses this issue as well as the development of strategies over a period of time through three research questions: whether there exist significant differences in the use of strategies by EFL learners of different age groups, whether there is a developmental trend of strategy use as students get older, and, finally, provided these changes occur, whether they take place progressively or at specific age periods. It becomes clear from the very beginning that the study has been carefully designed. Two preliminary studies were conducted which made the authors finally focus on three groups of subjects aged 10, 14 and 17, who had received different hours of instruction (200, 416 and 726) (cross-sectional study) and also on 38 students who were followed longitudinally from the age of 12 to 14. Data were elicited by means of five open-ended questions on learning vocabulary, pronunciation, spelling, reading, and writing (although as explained by the authors, reading could not be used). The answers were used to develop a classification of learning strategies with sixteen different categories.

In the cross-sectional study, the youngest group was found to use a lower number of strategies than the other two groups but no differences were found between the 14 and 17 years old. Two interesting findings are that as age increases, more metacognitively complex strategies are used and that social strategies such as studying with the help of siblings or asking peers decrease with age. The longitudinal study provides four stages of development from age 12 to age 14. A very interesting picture is given when the participants are placed along the stages; the results are discussed by the authors, who find common trends in the data in spite of individual variability. One of the main findings in this study is that the role of age may be more relevant than that of proficiency level. This issue is one of the relevant ideas offered as suggestions for further research by the authors.

This book is a must for researchers, teachers of foreign languages and university students concerned with the age factor. The following points try to describe in a few words

some of the many qualities of the volume: (1) different aspects of foreign language acquisition are covered; (2) rigorous research methods are used in all the studies; and (3) relevant findings are provided.

After reading the book it becomes clear that the optimal conditions for foreign language acquisition are not catered for in the present school context. We shall wait and see the outcomes of pilot experiences with content-based teaching, which so far seem to yield better results than an earlier start (see Navés and Muñoz 2000).

Works Cited

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