Overcoming age-related differences

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One of the most controversial issues in FL teaching is the age at which language learning should start. Nowadays it is recognised that in second language contexts maturational constraints make an early start advisable, but there is still disagreement regarding the problem of when to start or the best way to learn in foreign contexts. The aim of this paper is threefold: to establish if there is a critical or sensitive period for FL learners; to determine the particular linguistic and cognitive aspects affected by this period; and to make a pedagogical proposal to overcome the age-related problem using an extract taken from the film "Shrek". This proposal comprises two lesson plans using the same film extract, one for children and the other one for older students. These plans are then compared in terms of the different cognitive, linguistic and metalinguistic processes involved in learning and teaching for each age range.

Introduction

One of the most controversial issues in foreign language teaching contexts¹ is the age at which learning another language should start. Even though nowadays research into maturational constraints conducted within second (not foreign) language contexts make it advisable to start early, there are still disagreements concerning the cause of those constraints and the particular contexts where they apply, principally in foreign contexts.

Acknowledging the existence of a period after which language learning becomes more difficult, particularly in foreign contexts, involves important political, economical and educational changes. Political decisions include the creation of laws establishing age of introduction of a foreign language, which in turn have a direct effect on educational policies. In fact the last two educational reforms in Spain have changed the starting age for learning L2: with the LOGSE (Ley de Ordenación General del Sistema Educativo, 1990) it was eight years old and optionally younger, whereas with the LOCE (Ley Orgánica de Calidad de Enseñanza, 2002) it is six years old and possibly younger. This entails the provision of economic resources for materials, personnel and reorganization of university curricula for prospective primary teachers, who have to be ready to teach children at the age suggested by the law.

But in fact, there is still serious disagreement regarding the problem of when to start or the best way (how) to learn in foreign contexts, because results from second language environments have been directly generalized to a completely different situation (Muñoz et al., 2003). That is to say, not everybody agrees that what applies to L2 should also apply to FL in an identical way. Thus, the two questions of when to

¹ In the original text, a superscripted note is used to indicate a footnote, but it is not included in the reproduction.
start and how to do it should be ground for debate not only for Governments and their educational policies, but also in those fields connected with foreign language research and teaching.

The aim of this paper is threefold: to establish if there is a sensitive or critical period that applies to foreign language learners, to determine the particular linguistic and cognitive aspects affected by this period and, following the conclusions of the two previous objectives, to make a pedagogical proposal to overcome the age-related problem.

**Maturational constraints for foreign language learners: When to start**

Initial work about the critical period was carried out by neurosurgeons, who established the age of nine as the cut-off point after which language learning would be harder. However, this assertion did not come from L2 research, but from the personal experience of the researchers (Singleton, 2001). After them, a Psycholinguist (Lenneberg, 1967), established that after puberty language learning abilities would be affected because lateralization processes would be complete, but he partly based his assertion on folk wisdom as well, according to Singleton (2001). Later still, and this time associated to the evaluation of early second language instruction in schools, Krashen (1973) reduced this age to five years, indicating that the period affected other areas besides pronunciation, such as morphology, syntax or pragmatics. However, in response to Krashen’s views, Lamendella (1977) and other subsequent authors, adapted the term “sensitive period”, which had been already used in L1 situations, to L2 contexts, emphasising the fact that language acquisition might be more efficient during early childhood but not impossible at later ages.

The conclusions, up to the nineties, were summarised by Long (1990) indicating, first, that there are sensitive periods governing language development, first or second, during which the acquisition of different linguistic abilities is successful and after which it is irregular and incomplete. Second, the age-related loss in ability is cumulative, and it is not limited to phonology. Third, this deterioration begins by six and has its culmination in adolescence. Nonetheless, there is not yet an up-to-date single explanation to account for all these facts. Besides, even though it seems “the evidence of some sort of maturational constraints is comparatively much more substantial than the evidence against them” (Hyltenstam et al. 2001: 153), all the previous assertions come either from the L1 context, from the L2 context or even from both, but they are still in the process of being attested in a foreign language situation such as the Spanish one.

However, research specifically connected to the FL context is now expanding its scope. Studies can be organised around four areas: rate of learning, ultimate attainment, developmental processes, and age in connection with other factors. The first three aspects have been traditionally studied in second language contexts, but currently all of them are being investigated empirically the FL context (DeKeyser, in press).
In connection with the first aspect, rate of learning, it seems adults are faster learners than children, and older children are faster than younger ones (Long, 1990). This age advantage is more applicable to grammar than pronunciation (for exceptions to these generalisations, see some of the contributions in Birdsong, 1999, among others), that is to say, adults and older children seem to acquire the morphosyntactic aspects of the language faster than younger ones. Nevertheless, when the learning process includes formal instruction, adults seem to do better in all areas -even pronunciation-, and it is not yet clear when children start to catch up.

As for ultimate attainment in FL contexts, that is to say, the final success learners are able to attain as a function of their differential age, several conclusions can also be established. In general, earlier is better for semantics if there is a high memory trait, whereas not-so-early is better for morphosyntax if there is a high analytical verbal ability trait (DeKeyser, in press). For pronunciation, however, explicit intensive instruction is the only factor related to success (Moyer, 1999), so both children and adults benefit from it. There are two additional factors that predict FL success: initial age of instruction –rather than learning- and having acquired L1 literacy skills (Moyer, 1999). The last two factors point to the fact that teaching is highly important in FL situations.

With reference to developmental processes, age appears to effect no influence, although very few studies after Long (1990) have mentioned this aspect. However, even though developmental processes are similar no matter the age, the mechanisms used by children and adults are different: for the most part, children are able to learn without reflecting on the structure of the language whereas a majority of adults need conscious reflection and problem-solving capacities (DeKeyser, in press).

Concerning the fourth issue, age in connection with other factors, two areas have to be differentiated: learner characteristics and learning contexts. One of the learner features that show higher correlations with success in the FL context is aptitude (DeKeyser, in press). In particular, older learners are specially benefited from having high analytic verbal abilities, whereas younger ones tend to success if they have a high memory trait. Motivation and language dominance are also factors that connect age and success in FL contexts (specifically in Spain, Tragant and Muñoz, 2000). As regards the second area, learning contexts, formal instruction seems a good predictor of success, being even more relevant in FL situations. Three different types of instruction are mentioned in the research literature: phonetic instruction –including suprasegmental and segmental training, authentic input and phonological feedback, and input enhancement techniques- (Moyer, 1999), explicit grammatical instruction -in other words, focus on forms teaching- (DeKeyser, in press), and developing L1 literacy skills (Muñoz et al., 2003).
To summarise the previous information and provide some sort of general conclusion, for FL contexts where the final aim does not need to be achieving native-like competence, older is faster, and not-so-young (with L1 literacy skills) would be better if formal instruction and extensive exposure are provided. To avoid accents, intensive phonetic instruction is recommended. Many arguments have been provided to explain these results, either learner-based, including neurological, cognitive, or psychological/affective explanations, or external-based, such as the type or amount of input and instruction the learners receive. However, there is no single variable that is able to explain all the previous results. The cause could be, as Wode says (1994: 341), a combination of factors/explanations interacting in some yet unknown way. Nevertheless, even if the picture we have provided is not very conclusive, pedagogical implications can be still drawn from particular results.

**Pedagogical implications: still thinking about when to start**

In general, that is to say, for L2 and FL contexts, children are better learners if teachers focus on their implicit acquisition processes, emphasize their memory traits, and foster holistic processing of meaning in context, always providing massive amounts of input. Adults, however, tend to be better at explicit acquisition processes using their analytic verbal skills, so teachers should focus on the target language as a code (DeKeyser, in press). However, their developmental stages are the same regardless of the age of learning, even though the cognitive processes involved are completely different. Including these general assertions, the generalization that both children and adults benefit from explicit intensive phonetic training to avoid foreign accents seems to be supported by most SLA literature (Birdsong, 1999; Moyer, 1999).

Particularly for the FL context, ‘drip-feed’ access to the second language does not work, as one cannot achieve native-like proficiency in two or three hours a week (Lightbown, 2000). However, adults and teenagers can still attain very high levels of competence, and even achieve native command of the language, as many exceptions to the critical or sensitive period have been found (Moyer, 1999). These two facts spell good news for teachers, who can still hold “high expectations for their students” (Marinova-Tod et al., 2000: 30) either because they can find exceptions to the rule or because devoting more sessions to learning and teaching increases the probabilities of succeeding in their instruction.

As regards the specific age at which language learning should start, there are no differences in final achievement between teenagers who have been taught from the First Grade onward (six years old: Primary Education) and those who have been taught from later grades (Hyltenstam et al., 2001; to see specific research in Spain: Muñoz et al., 2003). Besides, early elementary FL teaching covers only half as much material in a year as the middle school course, and L1 instruction in the literacy skills is more important than L2 instruction for ultimate literacy and academic achievement in the L2 (Marinova-Todd et al., 2000). These facts do not imply that early teaching is worthless, although to be effective, it has to be
-intensive and adapted to the particular age of the learner. Otherwise, the economic resources involved in earlier FL teaching would be useless.

Therefore, the issue of deciding when to start is a very complex one with no clear answer. Probably, regardless of the fact that a critical or sensitive period does in fact exist, the question is not determining when language instruction should commence, but adapting our teaching to the age at which it does, because successful learning is still possible. Below we offer an example of how to adapt our teaching to the learners’ age so that the same material can be used in two different ways, matching the learners’ cognitive style and maximising the probabilities of success regardless of the learners’ age.

**A proposal: overcoming age-related differences**

We have concluded that the assertion “younger is better” should not be taken too literally. A second conclusion that follows from the previous one is that adult and child teaching must involve different tasks to adapt to the different mechanisms each age uses to become successful language learners.

In general, children tend not to need conscious reflection on form, but use their memory, learn using incidental means and process new material in a holistic way. They should not be expected to carry out metalinguistic reflection, because most of the times they are not even able to do that in their mother tongue. Sometimes it might even be advisable to focus only on oral aspects, as they will in the process of learning their L1 written code, and introducing a new one is liable to create confusion and backsliding. This is even more likely to happen with two codes such as the Spanish and English one, the former having a shallow orthography in which sounds and their spelling are more or less similar, and the later showing a deep orthography, that is to say, with no 1:1 equivalence between the sounds and their written form.

On the other hand, if adults have high analytic verbal skills, they tend to benefit from conscious reflection on the form of language and they are faster learners, particularly if the teaching focuses on linguistic analysis (DeKeyser, in press). However, both children and adults benefit from explicit phonetic instruction, input enhancement and feedback, although in the case of younger learners (below 6/7) it is not desirable to use explicitly a phonetic code, as they may not be ready to carry out processes connected to metalinguistic reflection either in their mother tongue or in the target language (English).

The following proposal takes into account these learning differences and puts into practice the different processes involved in teaching at different ages. In order to show the diverse acquisition mechanisms teachers should foster at different ages, we have created two lesson plans, one for children and one for elder teenagers or adults, using the same material, an extract from the film Shrek (‘Shrek in the swamp Karaoke dance party’). Both include pre, while and follow-up tasks, but each (see table A and B) fosters different acquisition processes through different teaching techniques and procedures.
Tables A and B show the teaching tasks to carry out before, while and after watching the extract of the film we have selected. These activities have also been analyzed in learning terms, that is to say, thinking of the mental processes students are expected to employ to complete each task. The cognitive/learning processes we expect the students will have to draw on have been classified into three categories: the first one includes comprehension of oral or written texts (CPC: cognitive process comprehension) and memorisation of those texts (CPM: cognitive process memorisation), which roughly coincide with the practice of the receptive skills (listening and reading). The second group involves linguistic processes, either oral (LPS: linguistic process speaking) or written (LPW: linguistic process writing). That is to say, the productive skills, speaking and writing. The third category, which has been called metalinguistic processes, consists of morphosyntactic analysis and reflection (LA) and phonetic analysis and reflection (PA). Or in other words, practice of grammatical or phonetic aspects. The second process (phonetic analysis) can be carried out explicitly -in the case of older students- or implicitly -in the case of younger ones, who have not yet received metalinguistic reflection in their L1-. That is to say, children may also focus on pronunciation, but without analysing explicitly any kind of phonetic code, just through activities involving feedback, repeating aloud, imitating, and so on, because they are still in the process of learning their L1, which has a shallow orthography, different from the deep orthography of the English language. If too much conscious reflection is carried out, children might backslide in their L1. However, older children (10/11) might also be expected to reflect explicitly about the L2 if they have done it before in their mother tongue.
Let us now examine the particular tasks intended for each age range. Regarding the pre-listening activities, older students are expected to focus on their comprehension and linguistic processes, as the second task they have to do is to write a summary in English, whereas children need only understand oral input.

There are other differences regarding the while-listening activities. The first session, where the whole film is watched, includes both comprehension and a focus on writing as a linguistic process in the case of adults, whereas the teaching tasks with children entail speaking, rather than writing, and comprehension. Optionally, we can still use very controlled writing with younger students, as they may have already learnt their L1 literacy skills. Another variation involves the use of subtitles with older students, who may want to read what they are listening to in order to feel more secure. However, even though this task can enhance comprehension and linguistic processing, it should not be used with children, as it involves too much fast reading through a foreign language code with a deep orthography.

The second session deals with the particular extract we have chosen. After fostering comprehension, adults are expected to focus on the linguistic and phonetic form and analyse different samples. However, even though comprehension is also fostered with children, they are expected to use their memory to fulfil some tasks, without engaging in too much linguistic processing. In fact, they are introduced very little linguistic analysis –mainly oral- and their phonetic instruction is intended to be implicit and indirect, without reference to the code and with the main aim of getting feedback through repetition, imitation and memorisation. In the final part of both lesson plans, that is to say, the follow-up activities, there is a focus on memory processes in the two options, but adults are also expected to carry out less controlled oral and written linguistic tasks. Besides, we include brief game-like or funny activities which are optional when teaching older students, in case they feel embarrassed. If carried out, however, motivation would be greatly increased.

**Conclusions**

The final aim of this work was to show how to adapt the same teaching material to foster the acquisition mechanisms of students of different ages so that learning is more likely to be successful (DeKeyser, in press). In order to do that, the tasks we proposed for children focused on the oral aspects of language, on memory and on holistic processing of meaning. Adults, on the other hand, were expected to focus on form, analyse the language at an explicit level and carry out metalinguistic reflection. The proposal
we have shown can also be used at University levels: comparing systematically both plans to make prospective teachers aware of the learning—and teaching—differences between both age ranges. In that way they may develop a critical attitude towards the generalization that ‘earlier is better’ and increase their expectations for teaching students of all ages in the belief that appropriate teaching may overcome most starting difficulties.

To bring this discussion to a close, it may not be very appealing to conclude that there is no single or clear-cut answer to the question ‘when should I start teaching?’, but that is the reality. Besides, the vast majority of teachers cannot participate in that decision, which involves political, educational and economical aspects, so it is a debate leading nowhere. An alternative and more appropriate question should be ‘how should I teach the students I already have?’ As Marinova-Todd et al. (2000: 30) say, ‘even though teachers can do little to “improve” a student’s age, they can do much to influence a student’s learning strategies, motivation and learning environment’. Accepting this fact could avoid many teaching disappointments and learning failures. Overcoming the critical or sensitive period is not a question of deciding when, but how.

References


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### TABLE A

#### A. ADULTS AND LATE TEENAGERS

**I. Before the sessions**
- Watch film at home _CPC_
- Make a summary in English _LPW_

**II. During the teaching sessions**

(First session)
- Watch film in English (if beginners, with English subtitles) _CPC_
- Notice characters' personalities and make a description of each with list of adjectives given by teacher (oral and/or written) _LPW_

(Second session: final song)
- Without image, identify who is singing _CPC_
- Stand up (or raise flashcard, if teenagers) when you hear “dance to the music” _CPC_
- Each learner raises his/her flashcards on which different key phrases by different characters are written when they listen to them _CPC_
- With written lyrics, order them as they listen to the song (only some characters, as Shrek, Fiona, Lord Farward, so there is some time in between) _CPC_

### TABLE B

#### B. CHILDREN (AGED 7/8-11)

**I. Before the sessions**
- Watch film at home _CPC_
- Make a brief summary in Spanish _CPC_

**II. During the teaching sessions**

(First session)
- Watch film in English (no subtitles) _CPC_
- Answer simple comprehension questions written on the blackboard beforehand _CPC+LPS/W_
- Make a summary in English with set of out-of-order sentences given by teacher _CPC+LPW_
- Associate with an arrow characters with adjectives that describe them _CPC_

(Second session: final song)
- With list of characters, order them as they sing _CPC+CPM_
- Without image, identify who is singing _CPC_
- Learn the choreography _CPM_
- Raise flashcards with simple phrases or pictures when they listen to them _CPC+CPM_
### Table A (continued)

- With written lyrics, fill in the missing words (content words and/or grammatical aspects) __CPC+LPW+LA__
- Check vocabulary comprehension by telling students to find synonyms or paraphrases that they have to look up in a list __CPC__
- With lyrics, analyse a number of things:
  - Transform contracted verbs into their non-abbreviated version
  - Underline verbs in the past and write down their present form
  - Substitute verbs for synonyms
  - Find and underline the modal verbs __LA__
- Sing the song (with video sound and image on, with video sound off and image on) __CPM+LPS__
- Underline and notice how Shrek and Fiona pronounce these sounds /t/ /θ/ /ts/ /tl/. Try to imitate these sounds in isolation and singing __LPS+PA__

### III. Follow-up

- (If adults, and completely voluntary) students may want to act out the song as in a Karaoke __CPM__
- Project: choose a different song for each character, include lyrics and music and explain to the class why this character could sing the lines chosen. __LPS+LPW__

### Table B (continued)

- Sing these phrases with teacher, at the same time as they watch film __CPM+LPS__
- Sing these phrases without teacher (although teacher may tell them when to do it if needed) __CPM+LPS__
- Order words -or pictures (below 7/8)- in the verses they have learnt __CPC+CPM__
- Check vocabulary comprehension of key words (in English, Spanish or through associating them with pictures) __CPC__
- Sing the song –optionally with pictures symbolising it- (with video sound and image on, without image, without sound) __CPM+CPM__
- Give feedback on pronunciation __LPS+indirect PA__
- Give lyrics with easy content words left out (in Shrek, Fiona, cookie) that students have to fill in __CPC+CPM+LPW__

### III. Follow up

- Students in groups representing different characters “dub” song __CPM__
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1 Foreign language contexts are those where the learner acquires another language which is not his/her mother tongue in a situation/context where that language is not spoken. I.e. Learning English in Spain. Second language contexts are those in which the learner acquires the target or second language in the context where that language is spoken. I.e. a Mexican in United States. This article refers to FOREIGN language contexts. Although the term L2 will be used throughout the paper in general terms, when we refer explicitly to the foreign language situation we will use the term FL.

2 This extract is at the end of the film ‘Shrek’. It is called ‘Shrek in the Swamp Karaoke Dance Party’. However, we assume the students have already seen the whole film, and include a previous session in which they watch a complete version.