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How far do age and learning conditions influence second language learning?

What this research was about and why it is important

Children are thought to learn a second language (L2) differently from adults. Adults appear to be better at ‘explicit’ learning (learning *with* awareness and conscious attention on specific language features and rules) while children seem to be better at ‘implicit’ learning (*without* awareness and simply through hearing and reading lots of the L2). Some argue that this apparent difference between children and adults is because children are unable to explicitly learn an L2 at their young age. An alternative view is that this reflects the type of teaching to which adults and children are usually exposed – adults, unlike children, normally receive explicit L2 instruction (e.g. focused practice of particular rules). This study taught children and adults an artificial mini-language (Sillyspeak) to compare the effects of explicit and implicit teaching. The results showed that both the children and the adults benefited in the same way from explicit teaching, suggesting that the type of instruction learners have experienced may also influence observed age differences in implicit versus explicit learning.

What the researcher did

- Forty children (aged 5-7) from US state schools and 40 adults were recruited for the study.
- Learners were taught Sillyspeak in seven 15-minute sessions over 10 days. The language had made-up nouns, verbs and grammar rules.
- The participants were randomly assigned to either an ‘explicit teaching’ or ‘implicit teaching’ group. The groups were balanced for variables such as participants’ age, gender, and foreign language experience.
- *Session 1.* Every participant received the same instruction. The researcher presented a list of the nouns, which the participant repeated. She also acted out the verbs, which the participant imitated while repeating them. Toys were then used to elicit the new words from learners.
Sessions 2-6. For the ‘explicit teaching’ group, cue cards and pictures were used to explain the new grammar rules. This group was also encouraged to focus on correct usage. The new vocabulary was also translated into their L1. The ‘implicit teaching’ group did not see or hear any grammar rules and had no translation. Practice with toys followed, as in session 1; both groups practiced with the same 12 sentences.
Session 7. Participants were tested for *language learning* and *grammar awareness*. For *language learning*, learners had to (1) recall as many nouns as possible; (2) say a full sentence in sillyspeak; (3) say a full sentence, but taking their time and paying attention to the grammar; (4) listen to 16 sentences (half correct, half incorrect) and judge whether they were grammatically correct or not. For *language awareness*, they answered debriefing questions and did a think-aloud task (verbalising their thought process) with a new noun to see if they could describe the rules and patterns of Sillyspeak.

What the researcher found

- *For language learning.* Overall, the adults performed better than the children on all tasks. However, both children and adults learned new words, produced new sentences, and correctly judged grammatical and ungrammatical sentences, regardless of whether they had been implicitly or explicitly taught. When asked to pay attention to grammar in oral production, both children and adults were more accurate, regardless of whether they had been implicitly or explicitly taught.
- *For grammar awareness.* Most explicitly taught children noticed, understood and applied the grammar rules in Sillyspeak, while most implicitly taught children did not. All explicitly taught adults noticed and understood the grammar rules of the language, while about half of the implicitly taught adults could voice their awareness of the rules during the think aloud task.
- For both children and adults, greater awareness of the mini-language’s rules and structures was associated with better performance when producing and judging Sillyspeak sentences.

Things to consider

- Evidence of child and adult learning in both teaching conditions suggested that age may influence learning less than commonly thought.
- Explicit teaching was effective in improving the children’s grammatical awareness. Greater awareness was associated with better performance on the tests for children and adults.
- The adults had more previous language learning experience than children, so it is unclear if their higher scores were due to age or previous language learning experience.

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