

REVIEW

AGE-RELATED ASPECTS IN SECOND LANGUAGE ACQUISITION. Cristián Abello-Contesse, Rubén Chacón-Beltrán, M. Dolores López-Jiménez, & M. Mar Torreblanca-López, eds. *Age in L2 Acquisition and Teaching*. Berlin: Peter Lang, 2006

This monograph is an essential contribution to the investigation of age-related aspects in second language acquisition. It presents eleven chapters by renowned researchers working in Spain, Great Britain, and the USA which explore the topic of age in L2 learning from different perspectives, ranging from psycholinguistics, to neurobiology, to L2 teaching methodology.

Among the many merits of this volume is its scientific rigour. The theoretical section is based on extensive empirical evidence and the practical part comprises seven solid investigations which shed light on various issues related to the question of age in L2 acquisition. This combination of theoretical and practical perspectives is another useful aspect of the book, as is the wealth of references and further readings it provides (cf., e.g., Chapter 8). Its practical implications for L2 teaching, curricular development, and language policy planning are yet another of its conspicuous strengths. These implications are particularly relevant for the Spanish reader, as the monograph primarily focuses on age-related aspects in the foreign language context.

To these positive aspects related to the book's content, we must add its sharp presentation: with its manageable length (just over 200 pages), handy size, and attractive layout, the volume is

extremely reader-friendly. The internal structure of each chapter also contributes to the latter trait: it is —with very few exceptions— consistent across the volume, as all chapters are of roughly the same length and systematically provide well-framed introductions and enlightening conclusions which greatly ease the reader's task. The overall structure of the book is also clear-cut and well-planned. An initial chapter by the editors skilfully sets the scene by framing the theme of the book against the backdrop of individual learner differences, establishing key terms and concepts, justifying the interest in the topic due to the controversy it has generated, and providing an overview of the remaining ten chapters. These are subdivided into three slightly arbitrary yet well-grouped sections: three chapters are devoted to theoretical issues; the next five deal with practical research in a formal school setting and in the family context; and the final two explore the question of aptitude and age in L2 learning.

The three manuscripts in the initial theoretical block all seem to sustain the critical period hypothesis (henceforth CPH) to a greater or lesser extent. Thomas Scovel, for instance, in his chapter on "Age, Acquisition, and Accent" argues for the premise that there is strong evidence for a critical period for human speech, if not for human language. Maintaining that foreign accents are pervasive, permanent, incorrigible, and epiphenomenal, this author vouches for a biologically-based critical period which makes it practically impossible to speak a foreign language without an accent if it is acquired after the age of 12.



Robert DeKeyser is also largely confident that the CPH is right, basing himself on the limited evidence against it and on the methodological flaws of the research conducted on the topic. As the title of his chapter indicates —“A Critique of Recent Arguments Against the Critical Period Hypothesis”— DeKeyser fosters a critical attitude towards the research carried out on the CPH and refutes the three main arguments which have recently been expounded against it.

In turn, Paul Michael Chandler posits the existence of multiple critical periods that vary according to individual factors. Bringing together two research strands —studies on L1 and FL learning difficulties and on the CPH— he explores the situation of two different types of what he dubs “non-traditional” FL learners. According to his findings, both would be affected by a gradual, age-related decline in FL abilities which would vary according to aptitude and age on onset. The pedagogical implications he presents at the end of the chapter involve adjusting teaching to the rate of such a decline and are based on multi-sensory techniques and on lowering the affective filter.

After this initial theoretical section, the reader is familiar with the main concepts under scrutiny and is well-equipped with a rich background of empirical evidence on the topic. (S)he is thus both ready and eager for the next part, comprising five practical studies. The first three are framed in a school setting and, interestingly, two of them —those by Carmen Muñoz, and Francisco Gallardo del Puerto and María Luisa García Lecumberri— have developed in the bilingual Catalonia and Basque Country, respectively. What is more, both these studies’ findings seem to make a case against current educational policies to introduce FL instruction at increasingly early stages.

Indeed, on the one hand, Muñoz describes the Barcelona Age Factor (BAF) Project —still ongoing— which reveals that children are superior at implicit learning and older learners, at explicit learning. It also disclaims the hypotheses that, in terms of FL learning, the younger, the better, confirming that older is faster initially, especially in morphosyntactic develop-

ment and with younger starters being superior in the long run.

And, on the other, after investigating English phoneme acquisition in a school context in the Basque Country, Gallardo del Puerto and García Lecumberri find that English segmental discrimination is not easier for younger learners, as early exposure in formal instructional contexts does not imply an advantage in the acquisition of FL phonemes. Their contention? That more exposure to the FL should be provided through content-based instruction.

The pedagogical implications of Christián Abello-Contesse’s study are different yet no less valuable. Seeking to investigate the use of the L2 in an immersion classroom setting with young learners, this author finds that the students’ use of the target language in interacting with peers is virtually non-existent and is limited to routines and formulae, being mainly employed at the level of lexical item. Thus, he concludes, in the context of homogeneous early partial immersion classrooms, whole-class grouping seems more conducive to L2 learning than group work, which should be used occasionally, albeit in a structured and monitored manner.

The final two studies in this second part of the volume are framed in a family context, nonetheless compared to the bilingual school setting in that the parents or school are the only sources of input in the target language, not spoken outside each of the afore-mentioned contexts. Both investigations are qualitative and reach a similar conclusion, namely, that in addition to a sufficient amount of input, parental discourse or pragmatic strategies are required to foster productive use of the FL in the family. Carmen Pérez Vidal insightfully explores three main concerns facing parents who seek to raise their children bilingually and provides research evidence from a case study of a child brought up in a bilingual English-Catalan home. The list she provides of “good practices” to follow and her account of the pragmatic strategies deployed to foster active use of the FL in the family are particularly interesting. In turn, Gloria Ruiz González describes another personal case study which involved a change of approach from one-person/one-language to one-language/one-context, to-

gether with the implementation of what she terms parental discourse strategies of insistence.

There is less of a coincidence between the results obtained by the final two studies included in the third part of the monograph. Although they explore the question of age, aptitude, and L2 learning from altogether different perspectives, both their outcomes focus on the CPH. Whereas the latter does not fully stand up to the test in James Milton's and Thomai Alexiou's chapter, it does appear to receive endorsement in Pedro Guijarro Fuentes' and Kimberly Geeslin's research.

The former authors are interested in testing language aptitude in young FL learners. To this end, they identify some of the cognitive abilities which contribute to language learning aptitude and conduct a study to determine which model can be applied to the language learning aptitude of young learners. Their outcomes point to the fact that aptitude is not a fixed entity in young children. It seems that as children grow up, some of the cognitive skills associated with FL learning also develop. Hence, since analytic skills seem to increase with age, older learners are likely to be better explicit FL learners, the assumption thus being that younger learners cannot be held to always be better FL learners.

Guijarro Fuentes and Geeslin, on the other hand, focus on adults. More specifically, they seek to determine whether L2 learners can

achieve native-like competence. To this end, they compare the interpretation of Spanish copula choice by an experimental group of Portuguese near-native speakers of Spanish with that of a native-speaking control group. Despite the similarities between Portuguese and Spanish, they detect statistically significant differences between both groups, which leads them to the conclusion that the experimental group has not acquired native-like competence. Furthermore, age of arrival, number of years living in Spain, and chronological age do not significantly correlate to the variation found in copula use. On the basis of these outcomes, the authors position themselves in favour of the existence of a critical/sensitive period after puberty.

In our opinion, this is a scientifically responsible, thought-provoking, and thoroughly enjoyable book which you will want to read in a single sitting. Potential audiences should take notice and not miss out on it. For the researcher and scholar, it is an essential resource to keep up to date with the latest developments on the topic. For the practitioner and parent, it is an invaluable source of insightful guidelines and pedagogical practices. For the policy-maker, it is an empirically sound point of departure for future educational decisions. And for anyone who is interested in the topic, it is a definite must-read.

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