Is There a Best Age to Learn a Foreign Language?

Anyone looking for a hard and fast answer to the question posed in the title will, I am afraid, be disappointed. The evidence is, to say the least, confusing and contradictory. There are, however, a few basic facts to hang on to and it is mainly with these that I want to deal. I propose to argue that age is a relevant factor in learning a second language, especially for the 40 plus age group, to take a rather arbitrary limit.

Let us begin, however, by discussing the language learning abilities of children. The first major point here is that it is generally agreed that pronunciation excellence is only achieved at an early age. Why should this be so? There seem to be three reasons: first, perfect pronunciation seems to be one of the primary language abilities which can only be achieved from fifteen months to puberty because of its coincidence with the physical maturation of the brain. Second, achieving good pronunciation is essentially an imitative process and after puberty, embarrassment and/or irritation about imitating foreigners increases, whereas imitation is a source of pleasure for the young child. So adults are inhibited; they have a psychological stumbling-block. Finally, Haugen (1965) said, rightly I believe, that to lose one's accent is to identify completely with another society and way of life and that a foreign accent is the last bastion of the foreigner's original identity.

We can see in this point again the problem of psychological adaptability which, in my opinion, is the greatest single barrier to older people in learning a second language.

Now I want to discuss the neurophysiological evidence for language acquisition, bearing in mind, of course, that this is not necessarily relevant for L2 learning. There is no doubt that there is a critical period, extending to puberty, when the child is in a state of readiness for first language learning. It is now that the brain mechanisms that acquire and control language are developed and if the child is not exposed to language then, the innate capacity will atrophy and the ability to learn a language will be lost for ever. The proof for this lies in the few recorded cases of so-called wolf children who never learnt to speak unless they were discovered before puberty and in the cases of the two modern American children, Isabelle and Genie. Isabelle was found when she was six and a half and she covered in two years the learning that normally occupies six years. Genie, on the other hand, was not found until she was nearly fourteen and she is progressing linguistically much more slowly than normal children. She has the ability to learn isolated lexical items but not, it appears, grammar.

Penfield and Roberts (1959) have collected an impressive body of evidence to show that the child's brain has a specialized capacity for learning language which decreases with time and which is innately connected with the plasticity of the brain when young. For instance, injury or a disorder like aphasia can destroy the speech areas in the dominant left-cerebral hemisphere and both child and adult will become speechless. However the child will always speak again while the adult usually won't since, in the child, the speech areas are simply transferred to the right-cerebral hemisphere. So the hardening of the speech centres is relevant.

Therefore language acquisition is certainly regulated by maturational phenomena, there being, for example, an observable synchrony between the motor and language milestones in cases of general retardation. Also variables such as the "mother's ability to cope", loss or absence of either parent, or socio-economic class do not change the age at which children speak. So it seems that "after puberty, the brain behaves as if it had become set in its ways and primary, basic language skills not acquired by that time, except for articulation, usually remain deficient for life" (Lenneburg, 1967, p. 152).

There is some evidence also from bilingual studies. When languages are in contact, the child either learns them simultaneously (infant bilingual) or sequentially (childhood bilingual). Both types  

1 Quoted in Torrey, 1971, p. 252.
attain accuracy and fluency in both languages. This is the natural situation but it does not prove that all children would attain such a level. Adults, however, never achieve the same success.

If we accept Penfield's thesis, then, as applying to L2 learning, we have to conclude that the younger we start the better. However, Burstall, in her report on Primary French (NFER, 1974), concludes from her massive study that there is no intrinsic advantage in starting young. She says that it is the time spent on learning, not age, which is the important factor. Stern (1976), however, in his critique of her report, points out that she herself stated that environmental conditions were vital and therefore that there is no reason to suppose that age had anything to do with it. He says, "A purely maturational explanation in favour of older learners would be reasonable only if environmental factors could not account for the relatively disappointing results of the experimental group. Many such environmental factors can, however, be found; they include: the quality of teaching, the rigidity of the teaching methodology, undifferentiated classes at the primary level, lack of transition from primary to secondary school, and inadequate arrangements for the Pilot scheme children at the secondary stage" (p. 291). If I might come down off the fence for a moment, I would suggest that second language learning at the primary level, in spite of the lack of hard evidence, is a worthwhile undertaking provided that Stern's environmental factors are borne in mind and compensated for.

I now want to turn to the differences between the child (L1) and the adult (L2) learner. It has been conclusively proved, first, that older learners have the better memories, a predictable but obviously important point. Second, the child depends on concrete experience, the adult on the ability to use abstractions and inductions so that reading, for example, is useful for the adult. Third, the young child treats language as sound, the adult as sense. And finally, language is not the child's primary conscious goal and he is not aware of the fact of learning. He has four advantages over the adult (L2) learner. He has strong motivation since he cannot play without language; his learning is realistic as opposed to the sterile classroom environment of the adult; he gets more practice in speaking (remember the limited amount of time an adult, or a schoolchild, can speak in a classroom) and his practice is spaced — in other words, he doesn't forget because he is constantly being reminded and reinforced. The differences, then, are fairly crucial but not so important that no spin-off accrues to the language teacher from studies of L1 acquisition.

I would like now to consider the problems adult learners have with an L2. My basic argument, which goes back to the beginning of this article, is that psychological and cultural barriers are crucial for older learners with the linguistic problem of interference also detracting from the adult's ability to use a foreign language successfully. Torrey (1971), in an interesting article, says first that learning a language means accepting a culture and therefore in some degree a personal identity. Or as Pit Corder (1973) says, "The teacher is attempting to extend, to a greater or lesser degree, the behavioural repertoire, set of rules or ways of thinking of the learner." (p. 113). Learning a language means aligning oneself with an alien pattern of thought, value and self-expression. There are positive values towards the other culture, for example, if the foreign country has prestige, and negative ones because the culture is not one's own. It is necessary to adopt mannerisms of speech, strange intonation patterns and non-vocal gestures of which many may seem ridiculous or arouse hostility. All these are problems, especially for the older learner. Incidentally, there are plenty of examples of research, carried out with university students, where identification with another culture through the language has either assisted the learner or caused a dangerous split in personality (Torrey, 1971, p. 251). Think how much harder it must be to adopt an alien culture and way of thinking for the first time in one's 50's or 60's.

There are several other factors which may play a part in inhibiting the older learner. These are the length of time the student has been out of a classroom, their feelings vis-a-vis the teacher (whether of superiority or inferiority) and the problem of inhibition when it comes to interaction with other members of the class. This list is certainly not exhaustive and experienced teachers of adults will probably be able to add other factors.

In all fairness I must add two final quotations which could be construed as going against my argument. Carroll (1971) found that with a group of learners mainly in their 30's, learning did decrease slightly with age, but he reports that aptitude was a far more significant variable than age. Finally Wilkins (1972) says, indisputably, "If learning a language is a more difficult thing for the adult, he has a far greater capacity for overcoming difficulties than the child" (p. 187).

As should by now be clear, the evidence is contradictory for the best age at which to study
an L2. Some things, however, are clear. There is plenty of evidence for a critical period of language acquisition and also for the child's phonological abilities. Likewise there is enough evidence to prove, I believe, that creating adult bilinguals can be a heartbreaking business. However, I agree with Jakobovits (1970) when he says that the question of the best age to learn a foreign language is not a real one. All ages have their advantages and disadvantages, even though I do believe that after a certain age, learning an L2 becomes increasingly difficult since the student is liable to become too deeply entrenched in his own system of values, his own conceptual prejudices. Finally on an anecdotal note, speaking from my own experience with some corroboration from other teachers, I would say that students in their late teens and early 20's are the fastest and most efficient learners.

References


