



Mariana Costa Rigo

## **The age factor in foreign language acquisition**

Monografia apresentada ao Programa de Pós-Graduação em Letras da PUC-RIO como requisito parcial para obtenção do título de Especialista em Língua Inglesa.

Profª Drª Mônica Spitalnik  
Departamento de Letras – PUC-Rio  
Orientadora

## **Acknowledgments**

Aos meus familiares, aos colegas de curso, aos professores e a todos aqueles que direta ou indiretamente contribuíram para esta conquista.

## Table of contents

|         |   |    |
|---------|---|----|
| 1.      | Introduction.....   | 4  |
| 2.      | <i>“The younger the better”</i> Myth or reality?.....                           | 6  |
| 2.1     | Perspectives on teaching and learning: teachers’ voices.....                    | 6  |
| 2.1.1   | Sharing my own experience.....  | 6  |
| 2.1.1.1 | School A.....   | 7  |
| 2.1.1.2 | School B (part 1).....  | 8  |
| 2.1.1.3 | School B (part 2).....  | 10 |
| 2.1.2   | Sharing my colleagues’ experiences.....   | 11 |
| 2.2     | The contributions of Academic Research.....                                     | 16 |
| 3.      | Theoretical Background.....   | 25 |
| 3.1     | The Lateralization of the brain and the Critical Period Hypothesis.....         | 25 |
| 3.2     | The Affective Filter Hypothesis.....  | 27 |
| 3.3     | The Universal Grammar Hypothesis and the Fundamental Difference Hypothesis..... | 31 |
| 4.      | Conclusion.....   | 34 |
| 5.      | References.....   | 38 |
| 6.      | Appendixes.....   | 41 |
| 6.1     | Appendix 1.....   | 41 |
| 6.2     | Appendix 2.....   | 43 |
| 6.3     | Appendix 3.....   | 45 |
| 6.4     | Appendix 4.....   | 46 |
| 6.5     | Appendix 5.....   | 48 |
| 6.6     | Appendix 6.....   | 49 |

## **Abstract**

The Second language acquisition area has been exhaustively explored. Several research studies have been conducted in an effort to better understand the process of acquiring a foreign language and the variables involved in it. One of the most popular variables is the age factor, which is the mainstream of this paper. In this study, I intend to offer the reader an emic point of view shared by language teachers, and an overview of the most important findings relating second language acquisition and age.

Keywords: second/foreign language acquisition, the age factor, motivation.

# 1.

## Introduction

The recent movement of offering young children opportunities to learn a foreign language is becoming popular in schools in Rio de Janeiro. The number of schools and language programs is rising and parents of young children are relying on the common belief that the sooner you introduce a child to a foreign language, the faster and easier it will be for the child to acquire it.

The general aim of this study is to: 1) question the importance of learning EFL from a very early age; and 2) raise awareness among teachers and administrators about the relationship between age and the acquisition of English as a foreign language (EFL).

I, being a teacher myself, have worked with different students with different age groups. My area of expertise, however, is childhood education. Over the years of practice, it has become clear that, when it comes to foreign language acquisition, it seems significantly easier for young children to develop it successfully, in comparison to more mature learners, such as adolescents and adults. Since sometimes they are too young to write and read, this phenomenon is mostly observed in the phonological area, with greater attention to their clear and easily acquired pronunciation.

This reflection led me to the two following questions: What is the role of age in second language acquisition? If age influences this process, what are the reasons for that?

This topic had been researched by many scholars such as Patkowski, Johnson & Newport, Omay, Penfield & Robert, Lenneberg, Lamandella, White & Genesee and Krashen, who theorize about the linguistic ability during childhood and who also claim that the sooner you offer an additional language to a child, the greater his chances to become fluent in it. However, this area has been extensively studied and characterized by several conflicting findings as well, such as the views of Ashor and Price, Olson and Samuel, Snow and Hoefnagel-Hohle.

In the second chapter, I address the first question in an attempt to understand the extent to which age can influence the success of foreign language acquisition. The myth “the younger, the better” is investigated through two perspectives.

The first part (2.1) presents English teachers’ reports of their experiences with foreign language learners at different age groups. Teachers describe the

acquisition process of their learners, analyzing their attitude along the classes and their learning abilities, comparing young and older learners. In this part, my own observations of the development of my young learners are also described. Issues like final attainment, pronunciation and motivation are explored in order to understand the common behavior and the success of the different age groups throughout the learning process.

In the second part (2.2), academic findings regarding this issue are presented. Several studies have been conducted in order to understand if age is a relevant variable in language acquisition. For that, learners at different ages have been tested and observed and their level of language achievement has been compared and analyzed with the purpose of comprehending which age group is more successful in this process.

In chapter three, the theoretical background is presented to understand the specifications of the different age groups in the language learning process. *The Lateralization of the brain* (Lenneberg, 1967), *The Critical Period Hypothesis* (Wilder Penfield and Lamar Roberts, 1959; Lenneberg, 1967), *The Universal Grammar Hypothesis* (Chomsky, 1975), *The Fundamental Difference Hypothesis* (Bley-Vroman, 1989) and *The Affective Filter Hypothesis* (Krashen, 1981) are described. Finally, we propose a dialogue between the theoretical background and the findings from chapter 2.

The aim of this research is to investigate: (a) if there is in fact a relation between age and foreign language acquisition; and (b) the specifications of the different age groups (young learners x older learners) that may influence the language learning process.

This study will lie on teachers' reports and on literature. Answering these questions may lead me to a deeper understanding of my students and my teaching practice.

## **2.**

### ***“The Younger The Better”***

#### **Myth Or Reality?**

The purpose of this paper is an attempt to understand the extent to which age can affect foreign language learning. There is a popular belief that says that “the younger the better”, which means that learning a foreign language as a child is easier and more successful and, therefore, advisable. Schools and language centers sell this idea to parents who seem to be enrolling their kids in language classes sooner than before. But is this a myth, a misconception, or is this assumption based on studies that demonstrate that, in fact, the childhood is the optimal period in life to learn a foreign language?

In order to understand the influences of age in foreign language learning, this chapter will rely on two different perspectives: on teachers’ reports and on academic studies. It is divided in two parts. The first part will present how some teachers analyze this issue. Their experiences in teaching both children and older learners (teenagers and adults) enable them to compare the learning abilities of the two age groups. Their impressions are based on class observations and on their reflections over their years of practice. This first part also contains the description of my own observations of the foreign language learning process in classes to young children. The second part of this chapter will present some researches and studies made on second language acquisition.

## **2.1.**

### **Perspectives on teaching and learning: Teachers’ voices**

In the first part of the chapter, the teachers’ experiences and mine regarding foreign language acquisition will be presented. Professionals who teach both young and older learners share their point of view about the issue based on observations of the learning development of their students.

## **2.1.1.**

### **Sharing my own experience**

This section begins with my own reflection about the topic. The wish to understand if in fact there are differences in language acquisition as a

consequence of variables related to age was motivated by the observation I made on my students' development. I have been teaching English to young children for the last eleven years. This period is divided into two different experiences, in two different schools.

#### **2.1.1.1**

##### **School A**

**Age of students: 2 years old**

**Number of classes per week: 2hs.30 min. daily**

During five years I worked with two-year-old learners, in a curriculum of two and half hours of English classes, five times a week. I must confess that in the beginning I doubted my ability to teach and the learners' abilities to acquire a second language, considering how young they were. I had limited expectations: teaching a few words and songs. My surprise was to realize that the possibilities were wider. I was amazed at their notable potential to learn a foreign language.

My students would easily memorize the vocabulary presented and by the end of the year they would acquire a vast range of words. The vocabulary was presented in small projects, such as animals, colors and toys and was carefully chosen to be closely related to their universe, bringing meaning to what they learned. The new vocabulary was always introduced and developed through concrete experiences, games and songs. Not only words, but expressions were also easily learned by the students. Everyday greetings and classroom commands were quickly internalized and it was common to see the kids playing make-believe using those familiar expressions and words in English.

In addition, I could notice their easiness to pronounce accurately any sound that was properly stimulated. Children do not face the pronunciation challenges described by older learners, such as the difficulty to place the tongue correctly to produce the *th* phoneme. It sounded natural coming from the younger students.

Furthermore, young learners do not feel anxiety when having to speaking in front of their classmates, a feeling largely experienced by older learners. Children, in general, are notably motivated to engage in classes and to participate actively, without worrying about the success of their performances or their mates' judgment. They would anxiously wait for their time to participate and truly seemed to enjoy the lessons. This positive attitude provides them with many potential moments for significant learning.



### 2.1.1.2

#### School B (part 1)

**Age of students: 3 years old**

**Number of classes per week: 4hs. daily**

The second part of my teaching practice was in another school with a different curriculum, where students had four hours of classes in English, five times a week. Differing from my previous experience where language development was the purpose of the lessons, in this new context teachers follow a curriculum guide provided by the school that includes three curricular areas to be explored, aiming to promote the development of the students as a whole, and not only their linguistic skills. Each one of the areas have their own expectations on concepts, behavior, attitudes, learning outcomes and benchmarks detailed and divided into the different ages, considering their specifications. See the curricular areas below.

| <b>Curricular Area 1</b><br>Knowledge of self and formation in social interaction and leadership  | <b>Curricular Area 2</b><br>Physical and Social world  | <b>Curricular Area 3</b><br>Communication, reasoning and artistic sensitivity           |
|---|--|---|
| -Physical development<br>- Health and hygiene<br>- Formation in social interaction and leadership (Formation in the Catholic-faith and formation in virtue) | - Exploration and knowledge of the natural world<br>- Exploration and knowledge of social life | - Verbal reasoning<br>- Mathematical reasoning<br>- Development of artistic sensitivity |

The program is based on projects (monthly, most of them), which have a theme appropriate to the age of the students, for example *Animals*. The teachers narrow down to contemplate all curricular areas using the theme as the background and English as the vehicle of communication. Although it happens in the target language, the major purpose is the development of the students; the

language learning is one of the skills to be stimulated. In this case, we are not talking about English classes, but classes taught in English instead, where the target language is at the same time content and vehicle of communication.

The students had a great ability to memorize the English vocabulary presented, such as the human body and English names for family members. The vocabulary was chosen according to their age and interests. Learning new words was not only limited to classroom activities; it was also common to learn new words and expressions during our daily activities outside the classroom environment. Snacktime was an excellent opportunity to expand food vocabulary; at hygiene time they learned expressions like “wash your hands” or “don’t forget to flush”; in the playground we could explore expressions of politeness such as “excuse me” and “I’m sorry”.

By the end of the year it was common to see them talking to each other during playtime using spontaneously the words and expressions they had learned in English, combining the mother tongue and target language in the same sentence, which was also commonly reported by their parents from home observations.

Three year olds also show easiness to accurately reproduce any sound that was properly stimulated. As observed in two year olds, they did not have problems in pronouncing the sounds that were specific to the target language, such as the *initial r* in *red*, the *th* in *mouth* and consonants not followed by vowel sounds, like the *k* in *pink*.

The students developed a deep familiarity with the language and by the end of the year they were able not only to reproduce familiar expressions, but also to produce short sentences in English, combining internalized knowledge. For example, they probably have heard many times the structure “*I have ...*” and they already knew family vocabulary and small numbers in English. So, after some months of lessons, they could say “*I have one brother and two sisters*”. They have never heard this specific sentence; they have not memorized it; so the only possible explanation is that they actually produced language.

At some point, they began to unconsciously internalize some specific syntactic rules, like the use of adjectives before nouns, and not after, like in Portuguese. My students did not have to think before saying “*blue car*” instead of “*car blue*”.

They were always enthusiastic about the news I used to bring to classes and seemed to enjoy the games and the activities proposed. They also used to feel very comfortable in performing in front of their classmates; actually many of

them would anxiously wait for their turn to participate, showing a positive attitude towards learning.

Although inserted in different curricula, I could observe lots of similarities between the two-year-old and the three-year-old students in terms of learning abilities, like the aspects previously described, such as easiness to memorize new vocabulary and positive attitude regarding the learning process. Furthermore, they had a great ability to properly reproduce any sound that was stimulated. After analyzing the two age groups from two distinct learning environments, we can conclude that young children who have at least two and half hours of English classes five times a week and who are exposed to meaningful content, can successfully learn English.

### **2.1.1.3**

#### **School B (part 2)**

**Age of students: 6 years old**

**Number of classes per week: 3hs.30min.daily**

Once they reach the First Grade, the curriculum goes through some changes: classes now are three and a half hours long and, although the target language is still the vehicle of communication, the content narrows down to English, with focus on literacy, and Science in English. They also have Art Class and Physical Education in the target language, but these are taught by different subject teachers. The other subjects (Portuguese, Math, Social Studies, Music and Religion) are part of the Brazilian curriculum which have the same amount of hours as the English curriculum and are taught by different subject teachers.

Teaching the six-years-old learners enriched my experience by enlarging the field of observation and providing new language-learner relations to analyze. The abilities observed in younger learners (seen in 2.1.1.1 and 2.1.1.2), are expanded now. At this point, the children who have been taking English classes since the age of two or three are now able to memorize faster a greater range of vocabulary. If the two or three year olds needed about a week to memorize a set of five or six new words, now at the age of six they needed a day or two to memorize the meaning, the pronunciation and spelling of the same amount of words. The literacy project guides the vocabulary choices. Every week a new sound is taught, mostly the vowel sounds (like *short a* in *cat* and *long a* in *make*) and ten new words containing this sound are presented. Besides this group of words, new vocabulary is also explored in texts and activities. Usually, on the first

day of the week new lexicon is presented, and on the next day, after reinforcement and exercises, the students are already familiar with them. At the end of the year, they have a considerable amount of words to resort to.

The children also show they have improved at the pronunciation level of the language and, at some point, they became familiar with deeper grammatical structures, such as the inflected ending –s for verbs on the third person or verbs with regular past tense form.

They amazingly developed the comprehension skill; if a word puzzled them, the teacher would simply come up with a synonym or a definition in English. For example, in a situation when we were discussing animals' needs, the word *shelter* was mentioned in the book. Students did not know its meaning, so I described it as "A safe place to protect animals from bad weather conditions and predators. A cave would be a shelter for a bear, a nest would be a shelter for a bird, a house would be a shelter for us." This definition was enough. They normally did not need translation or visual aids; most of the times the language itself was enough.

They are also very motivated to learn and, as observed among the three year olds, they anxiously wait for their turn to answer a question or read a sentence out loud, even though they are aware of their difficulties and limitations in some parts of the content. The children do not have problems in taking risks and tend to face mistakes and corrections in a very natural way. My students have the initiative to ask for help when needed and feel very good about themselves when a challenge is overcome.

All things considered, I could observe that children develop the ability to use and understand the sounds of language. They are also motivated, have positive attitudes and do not have difficulties with the set of parameters specific to the target language. Word order in a sentence would be an example of a difference between English and Portuguese grammatical aspects. With this in mind, I decided to investigate the effects of age on learners' foreign language achievement.

### **2.1.2.**

#### **Sharing my colleagues' experiences**

I have experience teaching English to young children, but I am not able to evaluate or describe the learning process of older learners, since I do not have

enough experience with this age group. In order to understand if the age of initial exposure to the target language is in fact a relevant factor in the language learning scenario, I asked Tatiana, Monique, Fernanda, Daniela, Carla and Andrea, who are my colleagues and who work or have worked with me at schools A and B and have large experience teaching both children and older learners(teenagers and adults),to share their impressions with me. This way I would have a more comprehensive understanding of the role of age in L2 learning.

The teachers invited to participate in this research shared their impressions over many years of practice in various learning contexts, such as language institutes, public schools, private tutoring and bilingual and non-bilingual private schools. Each one of these contexts diverged significantly in terms of programs, term plans, amount of language exposure, number of students, cultural background of the students, goals and teaching techniques. Surely, all these differences play an important role in the learners' process of learning the language and therefore, we see differences in the teachers' evaluations regarding divergence in performance and achievement between the age groups. However, for practical reasons they were not asked to describe in detail the experiences they had, but instead, they were asked to share an overall view of their impressions concerning age differences. The limitation of the data is due to the variables mentioned. However, the teachers' emic point of view is well-founded and relevant to the purpose of this paper.

| Name    | Years as an English teacher | Years teaching students under 12 | Years teaching students over 12 <sup>1</sup> | Teaching context   | Comments <sup>2</sup>  |
|---------|-----------------------------|----------------------------------|--|--|--|
| Tatiana | 17                          | 8                                | 17   | - private lessons: children, adolescents and adults<br>-bilingual schools: children<br>- private and public schools: adolescents | <i>"(...) if a student is introduced to English during the childhood, greater are his chances to become proficient."</i> |

<sup>1</sup>Students over 12 include teenagers and adults. The analysis expected to be done is between childhood (including toddlerhood, early childhood and middle childhood) and the stages from puberty on (including adolescence and adulthood). Since the beginning of puberty is a personal factor and varies from one individual to another, the age of 12 was chosen to separate the two groups and enable the comparison by the teachers.

<sup>2</sup>Find the full interview attached. (Chapter 6 – Appendix)

|          |    |    |    |   |  |
|----------|----|----|----|---|--|
| Monique  | 8  | 3  | 5  | <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>- language institutes: adolescents and adults</li> <li>- private lessons: children and adolescents</li> <li>- bilingual schools: children</li> </ul>                               | <i>"Children are usually more motivated during classes (...)"</i>  |
| Fernanda | 12 | 10 | 12 | <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>- language institutes: children, adolescents and adults</li> <li>- private lessons: adults</li> <li>- bilingual schools: children</li> <li>- public school: adolescents</li> </ul> | <i>"The younger the better to acquire a language, they learn faster and are able to memorize a huge number of new vocabulary and sentences."</i>   |
| Daniela  | 8  | 6  | 3  | <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>- language institutes: children and adults</li> <li>- bilingual schools: children</li> </ul>   | <i>"(...) children are more successful than adults regarding language learning."</i>   |
| Carla    | 6  | 4  | 3  | <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>- language institutes: children and adolescents</li> <li>- bilingual schools: children</li> </ul>  | <i>"Children find it easier to pronounce the sounds in English. (...) In terms of grammar, teenagers find it easier to produce more accurate sentences."</i>   |
| Andrea   | 11 | 5  | 11 | <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>- language institutes: children, adolescents and adults</li> <li>- private lessons: (adult</li> <li>- bilingual and regular private schools: children</li> </ul>                   | <i>"(...) children who start learning English at very young ages will probably achieve a native accent and develop great familiarity with the language. An adult learner is less probable to have the same success."</i> |

Motivation was mentioned by all six teachers involved in this research, as an aspect that distinguishes young learners from older ones (over 12 years old, including teenagers and adults). They state that children are usually more motivated to learn and enjoy classes as a pleasant activity. According to Monique, *“Adults, on the other hand, have less energy and are usually tired from the working routine. Learning is a duty for them, not an enjoyable moment. [...] From my point of view, motivation is the key-word when you compare the two age groups.”*

Andrea adds that it is easy to motivate children and to attract their attention to the subject. Regardless of their mood or of the difficulties in the content being taught, songs and stories are excellent resources to introduce the lessons and ensure their involvement in classes.

In relation to affective factors, Daniela observed that children feel more comfortable during language classes when compared to older learners, especially in activities in which students are asked to speak in front of the group. According to Carla, teenagers can feel very insecure during these moments, due to the fact that they want to avoid failure in front of their peers. This feeling may cause them to refuse to participate, which, in her opinion, is a problem. From her observations, children have a more positive attitude towards these sorts of activities:

Children do not care about their pronunciation or making up correct sentences. I mean, they try to, but they face mistakes in a very natural way. If it is not accurate, no problem. And they move on. They are not afraid of making mistakes; they are just happy to participate. (Carla)

Teachers also agree that children have an advantage regarding the phonological area. They are able to reproduce the sounds in the target language without difficulties and to achieve an accurate pronunciation. According to Fernanda, *“They produce the sentences exactly the way they listen to them (...)”*. The same ability is not observed in older learners, though. Carla says that adults and teenagers usually face difficulties in pronouncing some sounds in English: *“Teenagers usually struggle with one sound or another, like th, for example. Even the most hardworking students take a while to get it.”*

In terms of comprehending the foreign language, while Fernanda and Tatiana do not relate the success of this skill to age factors, Andrea observed that children's attitude may give them an advantage. Young learners try harder to understand the whole message, even if they do not master the meanings of all the words. According to her, older students, over 12 years old, feel the urgency of understanding each word in order to become confident about what they heard.

She associates this posture to the challenge faced to disconnect from their mother tongue. However, in her opinion it is not “(...) *a matter of who understands better; it is a matter of attitude towards learning.*”

In regards to linguistic transfer, Andrea adds that students who have started their language studies some time after seven or eight years of age, have difficulties in terms of grammatical structures, as they expect to find in the target language the same linguistic system used in their mother tongue. On the other hand, those students who started to learn English at an early age, are now familiarized with the language and have internalized the grammatical differences between them, such as the word-order patterns or the use of the auxiliary *do* in negative sentences and questions.

However, still regarding syntax, Fernanda argues that, from her observations, maturity may help in this process. According to her, learners over 12 tend to find it easier to learn the syntax exactly because they can convey the knowledge from their native language to English. Her opinion is supported by Tatiana and Carla, who state that children have problems in internalizing grammatical rules and this process may need more time when compared to teenagers or adults.

Altogether, teachers feel that young learners may have an advantage in many aspects of language learning. Children learn faster features of morphology and phonetics and seem more motivated during this process. Teachers also agree that the sooner you start learning a foreign language the better, since your chances to achieve proficiency increase: “(...) *children who start learning English from a very early age will probably achieve a native accent and develop familiarity with the language. An adult learner is less probable to have the same success.*” (Andrea)

The teachers' impressions were based on daily observations throughout their years of extensive practice; they represent a perspective from professionals who deal with language learning directly, characterizing an emic point of view.

The field of foreign language acquisition has been widely explored by specialists and researchers. In the next part of the chapter, I turn to a number of studies made in the field of foreign/second language acquisition in order to understand the relation between age and language learning.



## 2.2

### The contributions of Academic Research

The teachers interviewed in this study agree with the assumption that the sooner a child starts to learn a second language the greater his chances are to be successful in this process. According to the teachers who have worked with both early and late beginners (students who engage in language lessons later in life, as teenagers or adults), children seem to overcome older learners in foreign language acquisition. They agree that young learners are usually more motivated, which may lead to meaningful learning, have greater phonological abilities and more chances to master the language. They see in childhood a potential moment to learn languages successfully.

In the research field, experiments have been performed in order to check the legitimacy of the hypothesis “the younger the better”. Some of these studies will be presented so as to have an overview of the academic researches and findings.

Studies supporting the fact that young learners have indeed a greater capacity for language acquisition, and therefore validating the hypothesis that there is in fact an optimal period in life to learn languages easily and successfully are not few. Mark Patkowski (1982) examined the level of English pronunciation of 67 immigrants living in the U.S. His findings showed that puberty is actually a turning point in phonological abilities: pre-puberty learners acquired better pronunciation than post-puberty learners. Susan Omayya (1976) also examined immigrants in U.S. focusing their accent and proficiency in English listening. She concluded that age is a relevant factor; immigrants who arrived at earlier ages excelled in both skills. Johnson and Newport (1989) examined the level of proficiency of 46 Chinese and Korean in morphology and syntax and observed that those who began learning at earlier ages performed better, in comparison to those who started this process later.

Seliger, Krashen and Ladefoged (1975) conducted an experiment with immigrants from diverse birth countries in both Israel and the United States, with different ages of arrival in the foreign country: before puberty, during puberty and after puberty. The questions asked involved gathering information about time of exposure to the target language and native speakers' impressions about their fluency and accent. The immigrants were divided into three groups, according to their ages of arrival in the foreign country: 9 or before, between 10 and 15, 16 or older.

As shown in the table below, 77 of 91 immigrants who arrived at the age of 9 or younger reported that native speakers do not notice accent in their speeches, while only 12, in a universe of 173 immigrants who arrived at the age of 16 or older, state the same. According to the test results, the odds to maintain a definite accent increases as the learners' age of arrival in the country grow. On the other hand, the chances of losing the foreigner accent and, therefore, approximating to a native speech increase as the learners' age of arrival decreases.

| Self-Report of Foreign Accents in Immigrants to the United States and Israel |                |        |            |           |
|--|----------------|--------|------------|-----------|
| Target language  | Age of arrival | Accent | Don't know | No accent |
| English  | 9 and under    | 5      | 4          | 47        |
| Hebrew   |                | 2      | 3          | 30        |
| English  | 10 to 15       | 37     | 6          | 27        |
| Hebrew   |                | 9      | 1          | 20        |
| English  | 16 and over    | 106    | 4          | 7         |
| Hebrew   |                | 50     | 1          | 5         |

(SELIGER, KRASHEN and LADEFOGED, 1975. IN:KRASHEN and SCARCELLA Eds., 1982, p. 15)

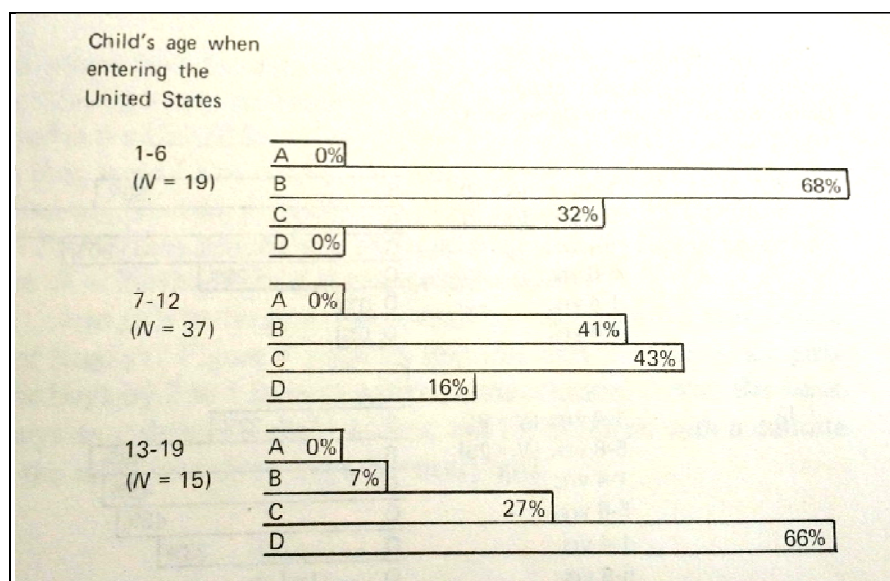
Seliger, Krashen and Ladefoged concluded after this experiment that there is in fact a difference between children and adult language learning abilities and that the reason for that seemed to be maturational, since from puberty on, the rate of pronunciation perfection falls. They do not exclude, however, the possibility of achieving a native-like pronunciation after this period.

An experiment was conducted by Asher and García (1969) in an attempt to understand if there is in fact a biological variable that acts upon language acquisition directly. For that purpose, they counted with 71 Cuban immigrants living in the United States, with ages between 7 and 19, most of who had been in the country for 5 years. These children were grouped according to their ages: 1-6, 7-12 and 13-19. The controlled group was formed by 30 American children. Children were tested considering their pronunciation of sentences in English and 19 American high school students were asked to judge the utterances and grade them using a scale:

**Fidelity of pronunciation:**

- A. native speaker                      B. near native
- C. slight accent                        D. definite accent

The results showed that none of the Cuban immigrants scored A, a native pronunciation. The youngest group had the best performance: 68% of the children under 6 years old had a near-native pronunciation, while 41% of the children between 7 and 12 and only 7% of children older than 13 had that same performance rate. The results also demonstrate that the older group (13-19) had the lowest scores, placing 66% of their members at the bottom of the scale, indicating a definite foreign accent, in comparison with children between 7 and 12 (16%) and to children between 1 and 6 (0%). See the results below.



(ASHER and GARCÍA, 1969. IN: KRASHEN and SCARCELLA Eds., 1982, p. 7)

Analyzing the results, Asher and García concluded that no matter the age the Cuban immigrants arrived to the United States, none of them achieved a native-like pronunciation. However, many immigrants achieved a near-native English pronunciation, and the success of their performance seemed to be related to the age when the child entered the country and started the exposure to the language. The sooner a person starts learning a foreign language, the greater his chances are to acquire a near-native pronunciation. However, Asher and García do not exclude the possibility of excellence in pronunciation for older learners:

“The data suggested that some variable within child development is a powerful determinant of pronunciation fidelity for second languages. This variable may indeed be biological. The curious puzzle is that although the probability of pronunciation fidelity is with the younger child, some older children – a small group to be sure – can also achieve an excellent pronunciation, which implies that biology does not completely determine the phenomenon.” (ASHER and GARCÍA, 1969. IN: KRASHEN and SCARCELLA Eds., 1982, p. 11)

These studies seem to move in the same direction as the teachers involved in this research. Like Mark Patkowski (1982), Susan Omayá (1976), Seliger, Krashen and Ladefoged (1975) and Asher and García (1969) the teachers interviewed also agree that young learners have greater potential to develop a native-like pronunciation.

Five of the six teachers said that children under 12 years old learn easier phonological aspects of language when compared to learners over 12. They state that young learners can pronounce any sound properly stimulated and that teenagers and adults find it more challenge to reproduce the same sounds with the same accuracy. See some of their comments bellow regarding pronunciation skills:

*"I have young students who started learning English at the age of 2 or 3 and have a native-like pronunciation today. They are able to reproduce sounds from English that most of my older students cannot." (Andrea)*

*"Teenagers usually struggle with one sound or another, like th, for example. Even the most hard working students, take a while to get it. Children find it easier to pronounce the sounds from English." (Carla)*

*"Older learners face some challenges regarding pronunciation (...)" (Daniela)*

*"Young learners can pronounce words with more accuracy because they are still developing their phonological system. They produce the sentences exactly the way they listen to them (...)" (Fernanda)*

*"Children have a better pronunciation. They reproduce what they listen to keeping the features of the target language. Adults usually are not that successful." (Tatiana)*

Regarding morphology and syntax, a study conducted by Johnson and Newport (1989) showed that those who started learning the foreign language at a very young age performed better in comparison to those who started out this process later in life. Among the teachers involved in this research, four of them made comments about the syntax. Three out of four disagree with Johnson and Newport's study, stating that they have observed that older learners have an

advantage considering this aspect of language learning. Fernanda argues that being already familiar with the structure of their native language can help to understand syntactic structures from the target language. Tatiana adds that children have more difficulties in internalizing the rules and Carla supports that point of view comparing both children and adolescents by giving examples from her classes:

They (teenagers) do not have problems in understanding simple present, for example, and they can produce questions or sentences in the negative form using the tense, once it has been taught. You tell them where the word “not” should be placed and they get it. Children find it more difficult to understand the structure of language. They usually produce very short sentences and, in most of the times, not correctly. You will probably spend the whole year correcting the word “not” from their sentences. (Carla)

Andrea, on the other hand, positions herself differently. She divides her students in two groups, according to their ages of initial foreign language studies: before 7 or 8 years of age and after that. The teacher says that the first group is already familiar with the language and therefore, is able to learn easily aspects of syntax. The second group, who has a greater awareness of the structures in their native language, has some problems with them because they apply the rules from the mother tongue to the target language, creating a new language system known as *interlanguage*. (SELINKER, 1972).

Johnson and Newport (1989) also mention the morphology as an aspect observed in which young learners have overcome older learners. Two of the teachers interviewed agree with them on this point. Fernanda and Tatiana say that children have greater capacity to memorize a large range of vocabulary in an effortless way.

As exposed above, many studies in SLA describe young learners outperforming learners over 12, which lead to the conclusion that early in life we do have a remarkable capacity for language learning. (PATKOWSKI, 1982; OMAJA, 1976; JOHNSON and NEWPORT, 1989; SELIGER, KRASHEN and LADEFOGED, 1975; ASHER and GARCÍA, 1969). However, at the same time, there are also several researches providing different results.

Some test results prove the younger the better myth to be untrue. Ekstrand (1982) carried out a research with 2400 subjects who were learning English as a second language and observed the effects of age and length of residence in the process of second language acquisition. He concluded that language learning ability increases with age and that the more developed the brain was, the greater capacity it had for second language learning. He also added that quality and

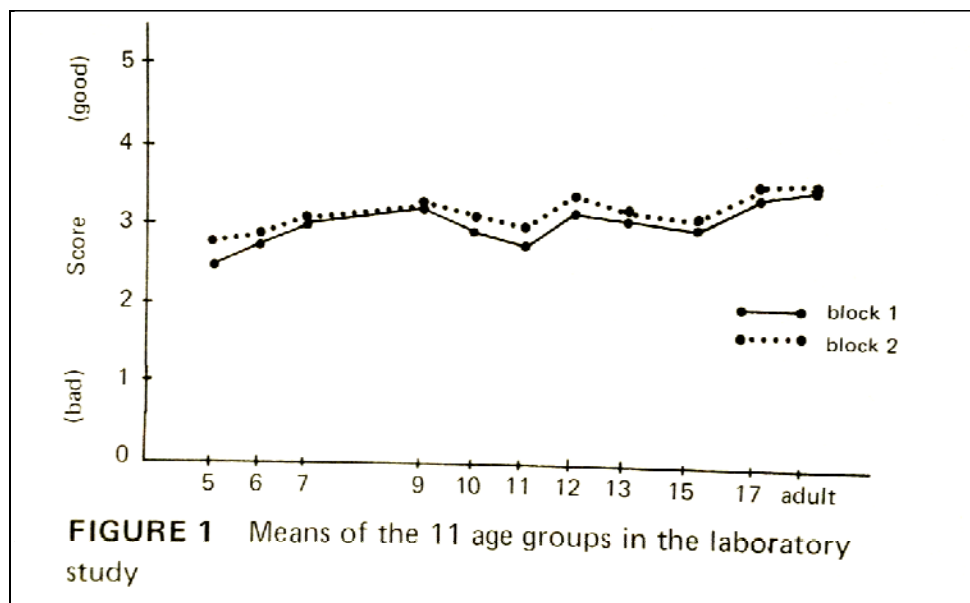
quantity of instruction is a relevant factor in this process. Olson and Samuel (1973) conducted an investigation among 60 native English speakers of three different age groups (elementary pupils, junior high school students and college students) who have been given identical instructions in German phonemes. The pronunciation tests results showed that the older groups performed significantly better than the younger groups. Robert Dekeyser (2000) carried out a replication of Johnson and Newport, 1989, with immigrants from Hungary living in the U.S. His results led to the conclusion that, on the contrary to Johnson and Newport's findings, adult learners are more successful in language learning.

A test was conducted by Snow and Hoefnagel-Höhle (1977) comparing the accuracy in pronunciation of foreign language of subjects from different age groups, including children, teenagers and adults. The data was compiled from two different studies: a strictly controlled laboratory dynamic and a naturalistic second language acquisition.

In the laboratory study, 136 British English speakers, ranging in age from 5 to 31 years, were asked to listen to and repeat some words in Dutch, language which they had no prior knowledge of. The subjects' reproductions of the words were recorded for later rating in a five points scale:

1. uninterpretable as target sound
2. correct target sound, very strong accent
3. correct target sound, noticeable accent
4. correct target sound, slight accent
5. indistinguishable from a native speaker's pronunciation

In this test, older subjects performed better, as shown in the table below. The authors explain the better performance of older subjects in two ways: either their initial pronunciations were closer to the expectations, or they had a greater progress during the activity. Although, the success in pronunciation increased together with age, as the results evidence, the differences are not very drastic here.

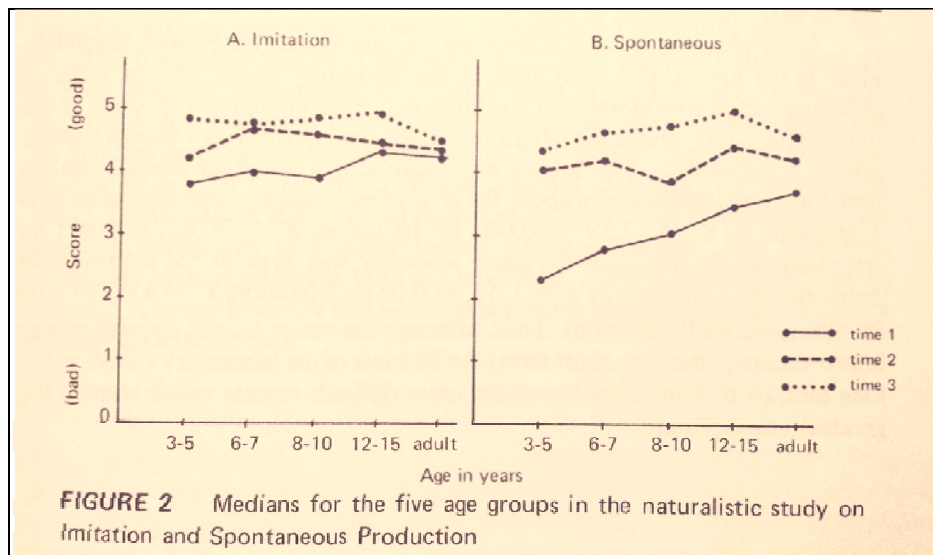


(SNOW and HOEFNAGEL-HÖHLE, 1977. IN: KRASHEN and SCARCELLA Eds., 1982, p.

87)

The naturalistic study counted with 47 English speakers, from different nationalities, ranging in age from 3 to 60 years. All subjects were learning Dutch while living in Holland. Learners were tested three times: after 6 weeks learning the language and again after 4 or 5 months, and finally the last testing after the same interval. The pronunciation testing consisted of two moments: a first moment when several words were pronounced to be repeated immediately (Imitation condition) and a second moment when the words should be pronounced by the subjects in response to a picture, without a model (Spontaneous Production condition). Their productions were recorded for later scoring, using the same scale of the laboratory test.

As the picture below evidences, excepting the *time 1* in Spontaneous condition, where older learners overcome younger learners, all the group ages had similar results. Their rates of improvement also grew simultaneously. From this test results, it is clear that age is not a relevant factor in the success of mastering a language.



(SNOW and HOEFNAGEL-HÖHLE, 1977. IN: KRASHEN and SCARCELLA Eds., 1982, p. 89)

However, the authors had a fourth moment of testing with some of the subjects about 18 months after their first contact with Dutch. In this moment, children had higher scores than adults. The authors also added that, in the period of testing, none of the subjects achieve an accent-free pronunciation.

Snow and Hoefnagel-Höhle concluded from these studies that young learners do not have an advantage in learning to pronounce foreign sounds. *"In short term, older subjects were considerably better than young subjects at pronunciation, and only after a period of about a year did the younger subjects begin to excel."*(SNOW and HOEFNAGEL-HÖHLE, 1977. IN: KRASHEN and SCARCELLA Eds., 1982, p. 91) Therefore, their findings do not support the "the younger, the better" assumption, at least not in the early stages of the learning process. *"The sort-term superiority of older speakers (...) is strong evidence that a critical period for language acquisition cannot provide the explanation."* (SNOW and HOEFNAGEL-HÖHLE, 1977. IN: KRASHEN and SCARCELLA Eds., 1982, p. 91)

Studies seem to contradict one another: some have demonstrated adults outperforming children in foreign language acquisition; some have supported the childhood superiority by describing children's better performances. However, it is worth mentioning that most of the researches that show an adult advantage are short-term studies, which means that they have examined just the initial stages of the learning process, like the studies of Asher & Price, 1967; Olson & Samuels, 1973; Snow & Hoefnagel-Höhle, 1977; Snow & Hoefnagel-Höhle, 1978. Older



learners seem to be more successful in early stages of acquisition, moving faster than younger learners.

On the other hand, studies which focused long-term attainment show a superior mastery of the language by learners who have been exposed to the target language earlier in life, like the ones described by Asher & Garcia, 1969; Seliger, Krashen, & Ladefoged, 1975; Oyama, 1976; Oyama, 1978; Patkowski, 1980. Individuals who have started the process of learning a foreign language in the childhood seem to overcome late beginners especially in phonological area, acquiring a native-like pronunciation.

In this second chapter, the assumption “the younger = the better” was investigated. Supported by teachers and researches, it was proved to be partially true, although controversies still exist in this area, characterizing it as polemic and inconclusive matter. Altogether, the tests reviewed and the comments from teachers presented led to some conclusions:

1. Young learners usually seem more motivated than older learners.
2. Young learners usually feel more comfortable during classes, showing a positive attitude.
3. Early foreign language instruction seems to enable learners to achieve a better pronunciation.
4. Older learners seem to outperform younger learners at the end of the short-term learning process.
5. Younger learners seem to outperform older learners at the end of the long-term learning process.

Admitting that young learners have an advantage in this process, the aim of Chapter 3 is to review the theories on language acquisition.

### **3.**

## **Theoretical Background**

The influence of age in the foreign language learning process has been widely explored in the SLA field. Many books and articles have been published, presenting different explanations based on diverse theoretical perspectives, such as the biological foundations of language acquisition and the influence of social and psychological factors in this process.

In this monograph I chose to discuss the influence of age according to distinct views of language learning: a mentalist or structural view, a psychological nativism approach and an input-oriented view of language acquisition. Studies in accordance with these orientations will be presented.

### **3.1**

#### **The Lateralization of the brain and the Critical Period Hypothesis**

A widespread and vastly accepted hypothesis to understand the relation between age and language acquisition is the Critical Period Hypothesis (CPH), which has its origin based on the Lateralization of the brain theory.

Biologically, the part of the brain which is responsible for one's ability to acquire a language is the left hemisphere. The division among skills and competences, when the brain specializes in two hemispheres with different functions, was called *lateralization* (Lenneberg, 1967). The beginning and ending of this process is still a matter of discussion. According to Lenneberg (1967), it begins at around the age of 2 and lasts until puberty. For Geschwind (1970), the maturation is completed much earlier and for Krashen (1973), at the age of 5. Scovel (1984) claims that it emerges at birth, becomes evident at 5 and is completed around puberty.

Based on the lateralization of the brain, Lenneberg (1967) suggests a Critical Period to language acquisition. The Critical Period Hypothesis (CPH) was first proposed by Wilder Penfield and Lamar Roberts (1959), but it was popularized by Lenneberg. This time-span when one's brain is still in the process of being lateralized would be the optimal moment to learn languages. The exchange of information between the two hemispheres of the brain is wide opened, which favors language learning. As the brain matures and certain functions are assigned to either the right or left hemisphere, this ability decreases.

The Critical Period is defined as *“the period during which a child can acquire language easily, rapidly, perfectly, and without instruction.”* (Richards & Schmidt, 2002, p.145). According to this hypothesis, after this period language acquisition becomes more difficult and effortful. Some aspects of language can still be learned, however, the full mastery is improbable to be achieved.

The CPH in its prior theory focus on the ability to learn the first language. However, it has been studied in SLA researches in an attempt to understand if this hypothesis can be applied to foreign languages learning as well. *“If so, it should be the case that young children are better second language learners than adults and should consequently reach higher levels of final proficiency in the second language.”* (JOHNSON and NEWPORT, 1989, IN: Cognitive Psychology, pp. 60)

Lenneberg supports the idea that there are differences between first and second language acquisition. However, he believes that not only learning a first language becomes problematic after puberty, but second language learning turns into a more challenge task later in life. For him, age is directly related to accent attainment and to the ability to learn a language from natural environmental exposure, without formal instruction.

(...) the incidence of “language learning blocks” rapidly increases after puberty. Also automatic acquisition from mere exposure to a given language seems to disappear after this age and foreign languages have to be taught and learned through a conscious and labored effort. Foreign accents cannot be overcome easily after puberty. (LENNEBERG, 1967, p. 176)

Concerning accent attainment, Lenneberg’s quote related to puberty can be closely related to the comments made by the teachers interviewed for this paper. They claim that from puberty on, students find it more difficult to pronounce the same sounds that are easily learned by children. Andrea says that she has young students who have started foreign language instruction at the ages of 2 or 3 and have a native-like accent today.

Andrea’s statement is reinforced by some of the researches presented in the second chapter. Mark Patkowski (1982), Susan Omay (1976), Seliger, Krashen and Ladefoged (1975), after closing their studies on pronunciation and accent comparing young and later beginners, concluded that after puberty the excellence in phonological skills decreases.

On the other hand, Snow and Hoefnagel-Höhle (1977) and Asher and García (1969) state that, even though young learners excelled in this area, none of the subjects tested achieved the level of accent-free pronunciation.

The validity of the CPH has been largely discussed and tests have been performed aiming to check whether there is in fact a greater language learning capacity during early ages.

Teachers agree that childhood is a crucial period to learn languages, since they observed in their language classrooms that children seem to be more successful in this process when compared to older learners. So, if in fact young learners have a greater ability to acquire languages, the reason for being so may be biological and the answer for that may lean on cognitive factors. Accepting the Critical Period Hypothesis means to support the theory that during early years in life we have a predisposition to acquire languages and, therefore, it would be the optimal moment to engage foreign language instruction.

### 3.2 The Affective Filter Hypothesis

The success of the foreign language acquisition does not rely only on cognitive or linguistic factors. Affect must also be considered when seeking for meaningful learning. (BROWN, 2001) Therefore, to understand the differences in acquisition by adults and children, emotional factors cannot be disregarded. *"Intellect and affect are fused in a unified whole."* (VYGOTSKY, 1934/1987, p.373) Emotional factors have an important contribution to the learning process. Certain emotions, such as anxiety, interfere in the acquisition process because they function as a filter between the speaker and the listener that undermine the amount of input<sup>3</sup> the learner is able to process. Learners who are not motivated, who lack self-esteem or who are full of fear and anxiety will not learn as effectively.

Affect is the combination of someone's internal perception of the environment or a situation – *feeling* – and the external response do this perception – *emotion*. Affective variables, such as anxiety, motivation and self-confidence will interfere directly in the learning process. (KRASHEN, 1981; ALLWRITE & BAILEY, 1991; ARNOLD and BROWN, 1999; BROWN, 2001)

The Affective Filter Hypothesis (KRASHEN, 1981) explains the association between emotional variables and the effectiveness of foreign language acquisition. Krashen suggests that we all possess an invisible psychological *filter* that can either facilitate or block the acquisition depending on the position it

---

<sup>3</sup>Comprehensible input is the language, either written or heard, that the second language learner is able to understand. (KRASHEN, 1977)

stands on. A low position of the affective filter means that the learner is confident and comfortable with the learning situation; in that case the learner can access the input and therefore have success in the acquisition. However, if the affective filter is high, the learner may be experiencing stress or anxiety, for instance, and it will function as a mental block, inhibiting the fully utilization of the input. It means, the learner may understand the input, but the input will not enter the LAD<sup>4</sup>. “People acquire second languages when they obtain comprehensible input and when their affective filters are low enough to allow the input in.” (KRASHEN, 1981, p. 73)

It is hypothesized here that affective variables effects progress in second language acquisition in at least two ways: First, performers with “optimal” attitudes [...] will simply obtain more input than performers with less than optimal attitudes – the former group will attempt to communicate more with speakers of the target language, and thereby obtain more of the input necessary for language acquisition. [...] Second, it is also hypothesized that performers with better attitudes will be more “open” to the input. (KRASHEN and SCARCELLA, 1979. IN: KRASHEN and SCARCELLA Eds., 1982, p. 212)

Krashen and Scarcella argue that learners with optimal attitudes will pursue and obtain more input and at the same time they have a lower affective filter, which will allow more input into the LAD. The optimal attitudes mentioned are related to the affective variables. Krashen and Scarcella list two affective variables that are directly related to second language acquisition: *Motivation* and *Self-confidence*.

They borrow the concepts of *integrative* and *instrumental motivation* by Gardner and Lambert (1972). Integratively motivated performers seek acquisition for integrative reasons, which means, the aim of belonging to that specific linguistic community. They will have a lower affective filter and will be more concerned with aspects of language that have social importance, such as morphology and pronunciation. Gardner (1960) states that integrative motivation is especially significant for the improvement of communicative skills.

Instrumentally motivated performers engage in the language acquisition process seeking to use the language as an instrument to reach a practical or utilitarian purpose. It is stronger when there is no interest in joining the linguistic community or when there is urgency about the language acquisition. Still according to Krashen and Scarcella's ideas, instrumentally motivated performers have higher affective filters.

---

<sup>4</sup> Language Acquisition Device (LAD) is an innate mental capacity which we all possess and that enables us to acquire language. Chomsky states that with the correct input, a learner can access the LAD for second language acquisition as well. (CHOMSKY, 1964)

The second affective variable described by the authors is Self-confidence, which is a personality factor that is associated with the success of language acquisition. It embraces outgoing personality, self-esteem and lack of anxiety. A self-confident person will have initiative to seek for input and will have a lower affective filter, a combination that foster effective acquisition.

Krashen (1981) suggests that adolescents and adults receive more input. However, they have higher affective filters and the large amount of the input do not all get in.

Teachers involved in this research agree that learners over 12 usually are less motivated than children. Monique says that adult students come to classes tired from the working day and do not face learning as a pleasant moment, but as an obligation instead. Fernanda and Andrea add that older learners usually engage in language classes for practical reasons, such as studying abroad or getting qualification for the job market. In Gardner and Lambert's concepts (1972) they would be referred to as instrumentally motivated learners and according to Krashen and Scarcella (1979), for that reason their affect filter would be standing on a high position, which compromises the success of the learning process.

Concerning the self-confidence variable, which includes having an outgoing personality, a healthy self-esteem and lack of anxiety (Krashen and Scarcella, 1979), Curran (1961) says that when adults try to communicate in the foreign language, their usual linguistic security is impaired and it can make them feel insecure and thereby, resistant.

The teachers interviewed in this study also observed that many older learners frequently experience feelings like anxiety and insecurity. Daniela agrees that her older students usually feel uncomfortable during speaking activities. Carla shares her own experience as a teenager student and reports that she used to feel insecure to speak in front of the group when she was not confident about her speaking skills. For that reason, today she understands how her students can feel during these situations: *"Saying it wrong, making mistakes is not ok if you are a teen. Teens are very insecure. So, in many times, they choose not to participate, which is awful, since they need practice."* Feeling insecure and fearful may hinder their willingness to engage in classes actively; threatened learners have high affective filters blocking part of the input and the acquisition is not as effective.

According to Krashen (1981), children, on the other hand, receive less input. However, they generally have a lower affective filter, it means, they usually feel more comfortable and motivated in learning situations, making meaningful

the input received. The filter rises during puberty due to biological and cognitive changes.

All the teachers involved in this research agree that children are usually more motivated to engage in the learning process when compared to adolescents and adults. Monique says that it is easy for them to have fun during classes and Fernanda adds that children get involved in activities effortlessly. According to Andrea, “(...) *children are naturally motivated. They can be tired, the subject may be difficult, but if you sing a song or tell a funny story, you easily get their attention and wake their curiosity.*”

Perhaps it is not a case of one being more motivated than the other. From their statements it seems that they are both motivated, but the motivations are not the same. While older learners are usually instrumentally motivated, children would fit in Gardner and Lambert's concepts (1972) as integratively motivated. Differing from older learners, young learners are not interested in practical or utilitarian benefits they may gain from learning a foreign language. But instead, they wish to belong to that specific community they are inserted in, the classroom community. Integratively motivated learners have lower affective filter and, therefore, more success during the learning process.

Curran (1961) claims that children learn more easily than adults for two reasons: they do not feel threatened by the new sounds of the target language and they expect to be supported during the process of learning. Daniela agrees that young learners usually do not feel anxious to speak in front of the group. Her comment is supported by Carla, who says that “*they face mistakes in a very natural way*” and for that reason they are not afraid of trying; the willing to participate, to be part of that community, is what pushes them forward. Young children are spontaneous and do not worry about being evaluated by others.

Based on teachers' comments and scholars' publications here reviewed, we can conclude that children have the optimal attitude mentioned by Krashen and Scarcella (1979. IN: KRASHEN and SCARCELLA Eds., 1982). They are usually integratively motivated and have healthy self-esteem, two variables that act upon learning directly. Learners with an optimal attitude have lower affective filters which enables the fully utilization of the input received and, consequently, foster language learning.

Considering the Affective Filter Hypothesis to be true is accepting that affect plays an important role in the development of meaningful learning. All things considered, it is possible to assume that early in life learners have a lower affective filter when compared to later stages of maturation. For that reason, the

Affective Filter Hypothesis may provide an explanation for children's success in language acquisition.

### 3.3

#### **The Universal Grammar Hypothesis and the Fundamental Difference Hypothesis**

The Universal Grammar Hypothesis(UGH) is the belief that all languages share some fundamental similarities, and it is due to innate principles unique to language abilities. UG is defined as *"system of principles, conditions and rules that are elements or properties of all human languages (...)"* (CHOMSKY 1975: 29; IN:HYLTENSTAM and OBLER, 1989: 117). For Chomsky, all human beings have the innate capacity for acquiring language.

"To say that language is not innate is to say that there is no difference between my granddaughter, a rock and a rabbit. In other words, if you take a rock, a rabbit and my granddaughter and put them in a community where people are talking English, they'll all learn English. If people believe that, then they believe that language is not innate. If they believe that there is a difference between my granddaughter, a rabbit, and a rock, then they believe that language is innate." (CHOMSKY 2000: 50)

The UG theory is based on the assumption that a native speaker of a language knows things he could not have learned from simply listening to the language; and if his knowledge is not a consequence of experiences alone, it must come from some property inside his own mind. A native speaker will not have problems in perceiving what is acceptable to his language and what is not. For example, the sentence "Is baseball a team sport?" will be easily recognized as fair to English. But the sentence "Is baseball is a team sport?" will not. Native speakers have probably encountered during their lives sentences such as "Baseball is a team sport." or "Is baseball a sport?". None of these sentences show what we cannot say; on the contrary, they show what we can say. Since native speakers find the sentence "Is baseball is a team sport?" ungrammatical, their knowledge must rely on something other than experiences of the world. It leaves space for the possibility of this knowledge being derived from some property of the human mind that we all share.

This language property which is inherent in the human mind is the Universal Grammar and it consists of a set of general principles that apply to all grammars and establishes the limits within which human language can vary. According to this hypothesis, we do not learn language, but instead, the language



grows as environmental stimuli are provided. Language acquisition is, therefore, the growth of the mental organ of language stimulated by certain language experiences.

When we transfer the UG theory to foreign language acquisition, there are two possibilities to be considered: the learners might access the UG either directly or indirectly through the first language, which means that the learner accesses the target language through valuable parameters of his mother tongue.

According to Bley-Vroman's (1989) Fundamental Difference Hypothesis, there are differences regarding child-adult foreign language acquisition in terms of accessibility to the UG. The hypothesis states that older foreign language learners do not have direct access to UG. Instead, their knowledge is constructed through their native language, which mediates the acquisition. Because the access to UG is indirect, they have to project the parameters of their native language onto the target language, being incapable of setting other parameters than those specific to their native language. Older learners, in that case, have to resort to problem solving skills to consciously structure the input received. This hypothesis also suggests that older learners will probably evolve only until a certain level of proficiency and the progress will eventually cease<sup>5</sup>.

Bley-Vroman (1989) concludes that older learners produce more transference from their mother tongue to the target language than young learners. Even though this phenomenon was also observed and mentioned by some of the teachers involved in this research, Tatiana, Carla and Fernanda state that teenagers and adults usually learn the syntax of the foreign language easily when compared to young learners. According to Fernanda, the fact that older learners have already internalized the parameters of their native language may give them an advantage: *"As they already know the structure of their native language, they can transfer this knowledge to the new language and understand the process better."*

On the other hand, Andrea reports that this transference may not be that helpful, supporting Bley-Vroman's theory. Unlike the teachers mentioned above, Andrea says that learners inserted in the acquisition process at very early ages learn the parameters of the new language very naturally. On the contrary, learners who engage in language learning later in life tend to struggle with specific features of the target language because they try to transfer the rules from their mother tongue to the new language. She adds that the dissociation from

---

<sup>5</sup>Fossilization Hypothesis (SELINKER, 1972)

native language also influences the comprehension skill: *“Older learners usually feel insecure if they do not understand every word. They need constant translation, while children naturally make an effort to understand the whole picture.”*

Still in accordance with the Fundamental Difference Hypothesis, children foreign language acquisition is regulated by principles and parameters of the Universal Grammar, which means that they can still directly access the UG for foreign language as well. The parametric values particular to the target language are first recognized by the children and then organized according to their internal grammatical representations.

Most of the teachers interviewed feel that adults have an advantage in terms of learning the syntactic elements of the foreign language, even though only one of them mentioned the native-target language transference as the reason for the easiness observed (Fernanda). Although Andrea’s observations led to a different conclusion, positioning young learners as more successful in this aspect, she also agrees that older learners use the transference resource. In that case, teachers’ reports sustain the Fundamental Difference Hypothesis in terms of accessibility to the Universal Grammar and age.

Whether the transference of linguistic parameters from a mother tongue to a foreign language is beneficial or not, cannot be concluded based on the teachers’ reports, since they present contrasting ideas. However, according to the Fundamental Difference Hypothesis, the fact that young learners have the ability to access the UG directly for foreign languages as well, gives them an advantage in the acquisition development. The sooner a child starts to learn a foreign second language, the more similar this process will be to their mother tongue acquisition process. On the other hand, older learners’ relation to the foreign language will always be mediated by their native language and they will probably never achieve native-like proficiency. Based on the Fundamental Difference Hypothesis and the Universal Grammar Hypothesis it is possible to state that early beginners will eventually excel late beginners.

## 4. Conclusion

Over my years of practice as an English teacher to young children, I had the opportunity to observe the language acquisition process in the early childhood. From my perspective, I could notice that they show a great ability for language development. For that reason, I have decided to investigate the extent to which age can influence the success of foreign language learning.

In chapter 2, the common belief “the younger, the better” was investigated in order to check if in fact children have an advantage in foreign language acquisition when compared to older learners. Teachers who work or have worked with both age groups (children x older learners) shared their impressions regarding this issue. Additionally, studies examining the differences in foreign language attainment between young and older learners were also described in order to help understand this issue.

Analyzing teachers’ comments and researches’ findings, the assumption “the younger, the better” was proved to be partly true. Altogether, the interpretation of the data led to some conclusions:

### **1. Young learners usually seem more motivated than older learners.**

Teachers feel that children are naturally motivated and involved in classes. They are interested in taking part of the activities proposed and are happy to please their teacher. Teachers add that it is easy for young children to have fun during classes. Adults, on the other hand, usually need a practical reason to engage language instruction and do not seem as motivated as children.

### **2. Young learners usually feel more comfortable during classes, showing a positive attitude.**

Teachers state that children do not feel insecure or anxious when having to perform in front of their mates and do not feel threatened by the challenges a foreign language communication may foster. Their positive attitude allows productive moments for meaningful learning. When compared to children, adults and teenagers usually seem not as comfortable with risk-taking moments and do not face mistakes as naturally as young learners. Insecurity may negatively affect the language acquisition process.

### **3. Early foreign language instruction seems to enable learner to achieve a better pronunciation.**

Teachers and most of the researches presented agree that starting the foreign language acquisition early in life may provide learners an advantage in the phonological area. Children seem to be able to easily reproduce the sounds from the target language, even though they are not present in their mother tongue. They show clearer pronunciation and a greater possibility to achieve an accent-free pronunciation. Older learners, on the hand, have difficulties to reproduce the sounds that are particular to the target language and struggle to lose their accent. Pronunciation seems to be the skill in which young learners significantly stand out.

### **4. Older learners seem to outperform young learners at the end of the short-term learning process.**

Short-term studies, comparing young and older learners' level of foreign language attainment, show that teenagers and adults have an advantage in the early stages of instruction. When they start language lessons or exposure simultaneously, older learners seem to move faster than young learners, showing better results.

### **5. Young learners seem to outperform older learners at the end of the short-term learning process.**

Long-term studies, on the other hand, show young learners exceeding older learners over the years of instruction. Even though, adults and teenagers seem more successful in early stages of language acquisition, learners who start the exposure to the target language earlier in life show superior mastery in the long run.

All things considered, it is right to affirm that young children have an advantage to develop language learning when compared to older learners, especially in phonological area. Starting foreign language instruction early in life offers the possibility of greater mastery of the language, which means that there is in fact a relation between age and foreign language attainment. Furthermore, it

seems effortlessly to young children to acquire the language and keep a positive attitude towards the learning process.

However, there were presented evidence that older learners outperformed young students in the first steps of language instruction. The reasons for that can be investigated in further researches. A hypothesis may be wondered, though: the superiority could be due to the fact that adults are mature and aware of the learning process itself. They probably set higher standards for themselves and are more conscious of their strengths and weaknesses, being able to intentionally work harder to improve. But, again, this is a matter for further investigation.

In final attainment evaluation, young learners still show better results, as evidenced in chapter 2. However, accepting this affirmative to be true is not enough for the purpose of this research. The reasons for childhood being such a unique period in life to acquire foreign languages were investigated in chapter 3.

Our discussion described three hypotheses that may account for the advantage evidenced in young learners regarding language acquisition. The Critical Period Hypothesis, popularized by Lenneberg (1967), argues that early in life we all have a predisposition to acquire languages because our brain is still in the process of being lateralized. Therefore, children have the ability to acquire languages rapidly, easily and more successfully than older learners. Together with the brain maturation this ability decreases and from puberty on this process is much more effortful and less successful.

The Critical Period Hypothesis has been largely discussed and adjacent studies try to validate or contradict it. However, there is no final answer for this matter. Based on teachers' statements and researches presented, we can assume that the CPH provides a reasonable explanation for the relevance of age in the language acquisition process.

Psychological and environmental factors also influence the process of learning a foreign language. According to the Affective Filter Hypothesis (KRASHEN, 1981), learners can only achieve meaningful learning if they are motivated and self-confident enough during language instruction, which is referred by Krashen as *optimal attitudes*. The fully utilization of the input received is only possible if learners are integratively motivated and have outgoing personality, self-esteem and lack of anxiety.

Reported by teachers and Krashen himself, older learners are usually less integratively motivated and self-confident. Children, on the other hand, normally have optimal attitudes, which provide them more moments for meaningful learning. The Affective Filter Hypothesis may account for the success of young

learners in language acquisition; at the same time the challenges faced by older learners can also be explained by psychological and environmental barriers.

According to Chomsky and The Universal Grammar Hypothesis all human beings have an innate predisposition to learn languages. Because of that, all languages share some fundamental similarities and can only vary from each other until a certain limit. In terms of accessibility of the UG, when someone learns a foreign language he can access the Universal Grammar either directly or indirectly, using the valuable parameters already known of his mother tongue. The Fundamental Difference Hypothesis (BLEY-VROMAN, 1989), based on The UG Hypothesis, proposes that there are differences concerning children and adults in the process of foreign language acquisition. He states that a child can still access the UG directly and learning a foreign language will be very similar to the process of learning his mother tongue. On the other hand, older learners need to resort to their native language to access the UG, characterizing an indirect accessibility. For that reason, their relation with the foreign language will always be mediated by their mother tongue and a native-like proficiency is less likely to happen.

According to The Universal Grammar Hypothesis and The Fundamental Difference Hypothesis, children may overcome older learners in terms of foreign language learning, since the process is more natural and similar to the native language acquisition.

Although the field has been largely studied, we are still moving forward toward answers. Informal observation and empirical studies show children to overcome adults in the mastery of a second language, proving that age plays an important role in this process. Biological and cognitive factors specific to early childhood enable young learners with the tools they need to learn languages successfully and effortlessly. In addition, psychological and environmental factors also conspire to ease the learning process. Therefore, it is right to affirm that during early years of life we have a predisposition to acquire languages and, consequently, it would be the optimal moment to engage foreign language instruction.

However, age cannot be interpreted as the single influencing element here. Second language acquisition depends on different factors and teaching/learning communities should not disregard them as part of the process. Variables like learning opportunities, degree of exposure, individual differences, methodologies and learning styles also affect the rate of second language acquisition.

## 5. References

- ALLWRIGHT, D., BAILEY, K. M. *Focus on the Language Learner*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1991.
- ARNOLD, J., BROWN, H.D. A map of the terrain. IN:ARNOLD, J. (Ed.). *Affect in Language Learning*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1999. (pp. 1-24)
- ASHER, J., GARCÍA, G. The optimal age to learn a foreign language. 1969. IN: KRASHEN, S. D., SCARCELLA, R. C. & LONG, M. H. (Eds.) *Child-adult differences in second language acquisition*. Rowley, Massachusetts: Newbury House Publishers, INC, 1982. (pp. 3-10).
- BIALYSTOK, E., HAKUTA, K. Confounded Age: Linguistic and Cognitive Factors in Age Differences for Second Language Acquisition. IN: D. BIRDSONG. *Second Language Acquisition and The Critical Period Hypothesis*. (pp. 161-181) Mahwah, New Jersey: Lawrence Erlbaum Associates, Publishers, 1999.
- BIRDSONG, D. (Ed.) *Second language acquisition and the critical period hypothesis*. Mahwah, NJ: Taylor & Francis e-Library, 2009.
- BISTA, K. Age as an Affective Factor in Second Language Acquisition. *Journal of English for Specific Purposes World*, 4 (20), 2009.
- BLEY-VROMAN, R. What is the logical problem of foreign language learning? 1989. IN: S. Gass & J. Schachter (eds.) *Linguistic Perspectives on Second Language Acquisition*. CUP New York: 41-68.
- BROWN, D. H. *Principles of language learning & teaching*. (4th ed.). New York: Longman, 2000.
- BROWN, D. *Teaching by Principles*. New York: Pearson Education, 2001.
- BROWN, H. D. *Principles of language learning and teaching*. White Plains, NY: Longman, 2007.
- CHOMSKY, N. *Reflections on Language*. London: Temple Smith, 1976.
- CHOMSKY, N. *New Horizons in the Study of Language and Mind*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2000.
- DEKEYSER, R. The robustness of critical period effects in second language acquisition. *Studies in Second Language Acquisition* 22, 2000. (pp. 499-533)
- DJIGUNOVIC, J., NIKOLOV, M. Recent research on age, second language acquisition, and early foreign language learning. *Annual Review of Applied Linguistics*, 26, 2006. (pp. 234-260).
- EKSTRAND, L. Age and length of residence as variables related to the adjustment of migrant children, with special reference to second language learning. 1976. IN: KRASHEN, S. D., SCARCELLA, R. C. & LONG, M. H. (Eds.) *Child-adult differences in second language acquisition*. Rowley, Massachusetts: Newbury House Publishers, INC, 1982. (pp. 123-135).
- ESCAMILLA, K., GRASSI, E. A brief description of second language acquisition. *Bueno center*, University of Colorado, Boulder, 2009.

GARDNER, R. C. Motivational Variables in Second-Language Acquisition. Unpublished Ph.D. Dissertation. McGill University, Montreal, Canada, 1960

GESCHWIND, N. The organization of language and the brain. *Science*, 170, 1970. (pp. 94-944)

JOHNSON, J., NEWPORT, E. Critical Period effects in second language learning: the influence of maturational state on the acquisition of English as a second language. *Cognitive Psychology*, 21 (pp. 60-99), 1989.

KRASHEN, S. D. Lateralization, language learning, and the critical period: some new evidence. *Language Learning*, Vol 23, Issue 1, June 1973. (pp. 63-74)

KRASHEN, S. D., SCARCELLA, R. C. Accounting for child-adult differences in second language rate and attainment. 1979. In: KRASHEN, S. D., SCARCELLA, R. C. & LONG, M. H. (Eds.) *Child-adult differences in second language acquisition*. Rowley, Massachusetts: Newbury House Publishers, INC, 1982. (pp. 202-212).

KRASHEN, S. D. *Second language acquisition and second language learning*. Oxford: Pergamon Press Inc, 1981.

KRASHEN, S. D., SCARCELLA, R. C. & LONG, M. H. (Eds.) *Child-adult differences in second language acquisition*. Rowley, Massachusetts: Newbury House Publishers, INC, 1982.

KRASHEN, S. D. *Principles and practice in second language acquisition*. Oxford: Pergamon, 1982.

KRASHEN, S. D. Bilingual Education and Second Language Acquisition Theory. In: *Schooling and language minority students: a theoretical framework*. (pp. 63-91) Office of Bilingual Bicultural Education. California State Department of Education: Sacramento, California, 1984.

Lambert, W.E. (1963b), Psychological approaches to the study of language Part II: On the second language learning and bilingualism. *Modern Language Journal* 14, 114-121

LECUMBERRI, M. L., GALLARDO, F. English foreign language sounds in school learners of different ages. IN: M. P. García Mayo & M. L. GarcíaLecumberri (Eds.), *Age and the acquisition of English as a foreign language* (pp. 115-135). Clevedon, Avon: Multilingual Matters, 2003.

LENNEBERG, E. H., *Biological Foundations of Language*. New York: Wiley & Sons, 1967.

LIGHTBOWN, P.M., SPADA, N. *How Languages are Learned*. Oxford University Press, 1993.

LIMA, A. P. Ensino de língua estrangeira para crianças: o papel do professor. *Cadernos da Pedagogia* - Ano 2, Vol.2, No.3 jan./jul 2008 (pp. 293-305)



OLSON, L., SAMUELS, S. J. The relationship between age and accuracy of foreign language pronunciation. 1973. IN: KRASHEN, S. D., SCARCELLA, R. C. & LONG, M. H. (Eds.) *Child-adult differences in second language acquisition*. Rowley, Massachusetts: Newbury House Publishers, INC, 1982. (pp. 67-75).

OMAYA, S. A sensitive period for the acquisition of a nonnative phonological system. 1976. IN: KRASHEN, S. D., SCARCELLA, R. C. & LONG, M. H. (Eds.) *Child-adult differences in second language acquisition*. Rowley, Massachusetts: Newbury House Publishers, INC, 1982. (pp. 20-38).

PARADIS, J. Individual differences in child English second language acquisition. Comparing child-internal and child-external factors. John Benjamins Publishing Company, 2001.

PATKOWSKI, M. The sensitive period for the acquisition of syntax in second language. 1973. IN: KRASHEN, S. D., SCARCELLA, R. C. & LONG, M. H. (Eds.) *Child-adult differences in second language acquisition*. Rowley, Massachusetts: Newbury House Publishers, INC, 1982. (pp. 52-64).

PENFIELD, W.; ROBERTS, L. *Speech and Brain Mechanisms*. Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1959.

RICHARD, J. C., SCHMIDT, R. (Eds.). *Longman dictionary of language teaching and applied linguistics* (3rd ed.). London: Longman, 2002.

SALIGHEH, M., SHAKOURI, N. Revisiting Age and Gender Influence in Second Language Acquisition. *Advances in English Linguistics (AEL)* Vol. 1, No. 1, 2012 (pp.1-6)

SCOVILL, T. *A time to speak: a psycholinguistic inquiry into the critical period for human speech*. Rowley, MA: Newbury House, 1988.

SELINGER, H., KRASHEN, S. & LADEFOGED, P. Maturational constraints in the acquisition of second languages. 1975. IN: KRASHEN, S. D., SCARCELLA, R. C. & LONG, M. H. (Eds.) *Child-adult differences in second language acquisition*. Rowley, Massachusetts: Newbury House Publishers, INC, 1982. (pp. 13-19).

SELINKER, L. Interlanguage. *International Review of Applied Linguistics*, 10, 1972 (pp. 209–241).

SNOW, C., HOEFNAGEL-HÖHLE, M. Age differences in the pronunciation of foreign sounds. 1977. IN: KRASHEN, S. D., SCARCELLA, R. C. & LONG, M. H. (Eds.) *Child-adult differences in second language acquisition*. Rowley, Massachusetts: Newbury House Publishers, INC, 1982. (pp. 84-92).

STEWART, J. Is there a Fundamental Difference? The availability of Universal Grammar in child versus adult second language acquisition. *Proceedings of the 6th Generative Approaches to Second Language Acquisition Conference (GASLA 2002)*, ed. Juana M. Liceras et al., 308-314. Somerville, MA: Cascadia Proceedings Project.

VYGOTSKY, L. S. The collected works of L. S. Vygotsky: Vol. 1. Problems of general psychology. New York: Plenum, 1934/1987.

WHITE, E. J., HUKTA, S. A., WILLIAMS, L. J., MORENO, S. Learning, neural plasticity and sensitive periods: implications for language acquisition, music training and transfer across the lifespan. *Frontiers in Systems Neuroscience*, vol 7, 2013.

## **6. Appendixes**

### **6.1 Appendix 1**

Teacher: Andrea

Date: 10/01/2015

Teaching contexts: language institutes (children, adolescents and adults), private lessons (adults), bilingual and regular schools (children)

#### **1- How long have you been teaching English to nonnative speakers?**

*I have been an English teacher for 11 years.*

#### **2- How long have you been teaching/taught English to children under 12 years old?**

*I have been teaching children between 7 and 10 years old for 5 years.*

#### **3- How long have you been teaching/taught English to learners over 12 years old?**

*I have been teaching adults and adolescents for 11 years.*

#### **4- Comment on your impressions comparing the two age groups, considering the following aspects:**

- **Motivation and other psychological aspects**
- **Learning speed**
- **Phonology (fluency, accent, pronunciation)**
- **Syntax (word order, grammatical structures)**
- **Comprehension**
- **Proficiency**

*Although I have had some adult students who were motivated, most of them take English classes for a purpose, usually focusing on the job market. On the other hand, children are naturally motivated. They can be tired, the subject may be difficult, but if you sing a song or tell a funny story, you easily get their attention and wake their curiosity.*

*Concerning speed of learning, I do not see a difference here. I think it depends on how much time the student invests in the learning process, including hours of tutoring and independent practice at home.*

*Regarding the phonological area, I have noticed that it seems easier for children to achieve a better pronunciation. I have young students who started learning English at the age of 2 or 3 and have a native-like pronunciation today. They are able to reproduce sounds from English that most of my older students cannot.*

*About syntax, I have observed that my younger students can be divided into two groups: the ones who started learning English very young and those who began this process later, somewhere after 7 or 8 years old. The first group learns syntax in a very natural way, they are already used to the language. The second group, tend to have more difficulties because they try to use the same rules from the mother tongue in the target language. It confuses them.*

*This difficulty to dissociate mother tongue from target language is also seen in the comprehension skill. Older learners usually feel insecure if they do not understand every word. They need constant translation, while children naturally make an effort to understand the whole picture. I do not think it is a matter of who understands better; it is a matter of attitude towards learning.*

*In terms of proficiency, children who start learning English from a very early age will probably achieve a native accent and develop great familiarity with the language. An adult learner is less probable to have the same success.*

## 6.2

### Appendix 2

Teacher: Carla

Date: 21/12/2014

Teaching contexts: language institutes (children and adolescents), bilingual schools (children)

#### **1- How long have you been teaching English to nonnative speakers?**

*For 6 years.*

#### **2- How long have you been teaching/taught English to children under 12 years old?**

*I have been teaching children under 6 years old for 4 years.*

#### **3- How long have you been teaching/taught English to learners over 12 years old?**

*I have taught teenagers from ages between 13 and 17 for 3 years.*

#### **4- Comment on your impressions comparing the two age groups, considering the following aspects:**

- **Motivation and other psychological aspects**
- **Learning speed**
- **Phonology (fluency, accent, pronunciation)**
- **Syntax (word order, grammatical structures)**
- **Comprehension**
- **Proficiency**

*My first experience teaching English was in a teenagers group. I, myself, started learning English when I was a teenager as well. So, I see myself in them, I understand their difficulties. I know it can be very hard to pronounce a word or a sentence you are not confident in front of the group. Saying it wrong, making mistakes is not ok if you are a teen. Teens are very insecure. So, in many times, they choose not to participate, which is awful, since they need practice. When I started to work with children, my whole teaching practice changed. Children do not care about their pronunciation or making up correct sentences. I mean, they try to, but they face mistakes in a very natural way. If it is not accurate, no problem. And they move on. They are not afraid of making mistakes; they are just happy to participate. This is the very first thing that called my attention.*

*The second one was the pronunciation. Teenagers usually struggle with one or sound or another, like th, for example. Even the most hard working students, take a while to get it. Children find it easier to pronounce the sounds in English. They have a native-like pronunciation. I always hear from their parents how amazed they are because of their children's pronunciation.*

*In terms of grammar, teenagers find it easier to produce more accurate sentences. They do not have problems in understanding simple present, for example, and they can produce questions or sentences in the negative form using the tense, once it has been taught. You tell them where the word “not” should be placed and they get it. Children find it more difficult to understand the structure of language. They usually produce very short sentences and, in most of the times, not correctly. You will probably spend the whole year correcting the word “not” from their sentences.*

*Teaching children changed my practice because I had to adjust to these differences between the audiences. Classes for children must be focused on listening and speaking, while classes for teenagers have space for grammar, writing and reading.*

### 6.3

#### Appendix 3

Teacher: Daniela

Date: 08/01/2015

Teaching contexts: language institutes (children and adults), bilingual schools (children)

#### **1- How long have you been teaching English to nonnative speakers?**

*For 8 years.*

#### **2- How long have you been teaching/taught English to children under 12 years old?**

*I have taught English to children for 6 years. I do not work with kids anymore.*

#### **3- How long have you been teaching/taught English to learners over 12 years old?**

*I have been teaching adults for 3 years now.*

#### **4- Comment on your impressions comparing the two age groups, considering the following aspects:**

- **Motivation and other psychological aspects**
- **Learning speed**
- **Phonology (fluency, accent, pronunciation)**
- **Syntax (word order, grammatical structures)**
- **Comprehension**
- **Proficiency**

*Teaching the two age groups made me notice that children are more successful than adults regarding language learning. They are more motivated during classes and acquire a better pronunciation at the end. Children learn faster and effortless and do not feel insecure to participate directly during classes. Older learners face some challenges regarding pronunciation and, unlike children, generally do not feel comfortable to speak in front of the group.*

## 6.4

### Appendix 4

Teacher: Fernanda

Date: 17/12/2014

Teaching contexts: language institutes (children, adolescents and adults), private lessons (adults), bilingual schools (children), public school (adolescents)

#### **1- How long have you been teaching English to nonnative speakers?**

*For 12 years*

#### **2- How long have you been teaching/taught English to children under 12 years old?**

*For 10 years*

#### **3- How long have you been teaching/taught English to learners over 12 years old?**

*For 12 years*

#### **4- Comment on your impressions comparing the two age groups, considering the following aspects:**

- **Motivation and other psychological aspects**
- **Learning speed**
- **Phonology (fluency, accent, pronunciation)**
- **Syntax (word order, grammatical structures)**
- **Comprehension**
- **Proficiency**

**Motivation and other psychological aspects:** *Learners under 12 years old are natural learners, they are easier to get involved, they are motivated by dynamic activities.*

*Learners over 12 must have a reason to learn, which could be defined as an intrinsic motivation such as the ability or the pleasure when learning a language or an extrinsic motivation, when they are learning a language to study abroad or to get qualified for a job.*

**Learning speed:** *The younger the better to acquire a language, they learn faster and are able to memorize a huge number of new vocabulary and sentences.*

**Phonology (fluency, accent, pronunciation):** *Young learners can pronounce words with more accuracy because they are still developing their phonological system. They produce the sentences exactly the way they listen to them, that's why it is so important that they have teachers who can speak the language correctly.*

**Syntax (word order, grammatical structures):** *Older learners have an advantage considering this aspect. As they already know the structure of their*

*native language, they can transfer this knowledge to the new language and understand the process better.*

**Comprehension and Proficiency:** *These two aspects can be evaluated according to what has been taught disregarding students age.*



## 6.5

### Appendix 5

Teacher: Monique

Date: 10/01/2015

Teaching contexts: language institutes (adolescents and adults), private lessons (children and adolescents), bilingual schools (children)

**1- How long have you been teaching English to nonnative speakers?**

*For 8 years.*

**2- How long have you been teaching/taught English to children under 12 years old?**

*For 3 years.*

**3- How long have you been teaching/taught English to learners over 12 years old?**

*For 5 years.*

**4- Comment on your impressions comparing the two age groups, considering the following aspects:**

- **Motivation and other psychological aspects**
- **Learning speed**
- **Phonology (fluency, accent, pronunciation)**
- **Syntax (word order, grammatical structures)**
- **Comprehension**
- **Proficiency**

*From my experience, I have noticed young learners find it natural to have fun during the learning process. Children are usually more motivated during classes and do everything they can to earn a golden star. Children are certainly easier to motivate. Adults, on the other hand, have less energy and are usually tired from the working routine. Learning is a duty for them, not an enjoyable moment. The classes tend to be slower, less fun and they are not dying to participate like children. From my point of view, motivation is the key-word when you compare the two age groups.*

## 6.6

### Appendix 6

Teacher: Tatiana

Date: 21/12/2014

Teaching contexts: private lessons (children, adolescents and adults), bilingual schools (children), private and public schools (adolescents)

#### 1- How long have you been teaching English to nonnative speakers?

*17 years*

#### 2- How long have you been teaching/taught English to children under 12 years old?

*8 years*

#### 3- How long have you been teaching/taught English to learners over 12 years old?

*17 years*

#### 4- Comment on your impressions comparing the two age groups, considering the following aspects:

- **Motivation and other psychological aspects:** *Children are certainly more motivated to learn.*
- **Learning speed:** *Children learn faster. They have an amazing ability to memorize new vocabulary.*
- **Phonology (fluency, accent, pronunciation):** *Children have a better pronunciation. They reproduce what they listen to keeping the features of the target language. Adults usually are not that successful.*
- **Syntax (word order, grammatical structures):** *It is easier for adults. They understand the rules of English with ease. Children usually find it complicated and difficult to internalize.*
- **Comprehension:** *The two age groups can be successful here. I do not see a difference among them concerning this aspect.*
- **Proficiency:** *I think it depends on time of exposure to the language. But if a student is introduced to English during the childhood, greater are his chances to become proficient.*