

How internal and external factors influence the development of children's second language

What this study was about

[The study](#) looked at how internal factors, such as chronological age, and the age at which children begin to learn a second language, and external factors, such as how long children are exposed to that language, affect the development of certain structures in the children's emerging second language.

What the researchers did

Data were collected from 20 children with German as their first language (L1) and from 60 children who were acquiring German as a second language (L2). All the children attended a Germany nursery school (Kindergarten) in Germany, and were aged between 3 years 6 months and 7 years. For some analyses, the children were classed as early-learners (began learning before age 3.7 years) and late-learners (began learning after age 3.7 years). The children taking part in the study had various L1s, including Arabic, and Turkish. They had been learning German for an average of two years. The non-German-born children included some whose first language did not include gender (nouns defined as masculine, feminine or neuter) and some whose L1 did distinguish by gender.

The study looked at when and how the non-German-born children learned certain structures in German, that is the gender of German nouns, gender agreement with adjectives, and the target agreement for both of these when the noun was in the accusative (object) and dative (used after some prepositions, for example) cases. To speak German correctly, all the children (both L1 and L2) had to acquire a three-way gender system which included masculine, feminine and neuter, and a case system which distinguished between the subject and object and the dative. The L2 children's development was compared to the language development of the L1 German children to see whether it was the same, or different. The researcher also looked at whether the age of onset, i.e. the beginning of learning German was a critical age for children's language development, e.g. at age four, as has sometimes been suggested. The children were tested twice, at an interval of 4 to 6 weeks.

Tests included, for example, checking whether children understood negative sentences, and asking them to describe pictures designed to encourage the use of the words and structures needed for the study. A blindfolded puppet asked for the descriptions. All tests had been used before in other studies, and took between 30 and 45 minutes. Children were tested individually, and the sessions recorded and transcribed. There were no differences between the data collected at first and second testing time, so the data were pooled.

What they found

The L2 German children performed as is typically expected of children whose first encounter with German is at nursery school. The children acquired the nominative case before the accusative case and the accusative case before the dative case, and their progress was dependent on the length of time they had been exposed to German, and not on the age at which they began learning the language. With regard to gender, the children had more success with the gender of nouns than they did with gender agreement. How well children managed this was also dependent on how long they had been exposed to German. There was little difference in how consistently the children managed to combine correct gender with correct case between children who had a gender marking in their own L1 and those who did not but were meeting it for the first time in German.

The way in which children were acquiring the complexities of the gender and case system was found to be largely the same as developmental language stages that had already been identified. In sum, length of exposure to German was the main factor in the development of the structures looked at by the researcher, and there was no difference between the earlier and later starters: 'Internal factors do not show significant effects, once the influence of external factors is controlled for ...' (p. 256). There was thus no critical development that occurred at age four. Gender distinction (i.e. deciding between masculine, feminine, and neuter) became established before case distinction (i.e. nominative, accusative, dative). In terms of how L2 children develop these distinctions, the researcher found that the pattern for the L2 children was similar to the pattern for the L1 children and that the complicated three-way system becomes established after only a few years of exposure.

Things to bear in mind

There was no independent test of proficiency, nor testing for any language disorders.