

The importance of explicit learning in the primary foreign language classroom

What this research was about and why it is important

The research looked at the role of language-analytic ability in primary-school children's foreign language learning. Language-analytic ability is the ability to treat language as an object of analysis and arrive at linguistic generalizations, and it is part of two other concepts that are important in language learning: language learning aptitude and metalinguistic awareness. It is often argued that children learn above all implicitly and mostly rely on the memory component of aptitude. This study is the first to look at the relationship and development of aptitude and metalinguistic awareness over the long term, and to examine the role of these two concepts in children's foreign language achievement in the primary classroom. The findings show that aptitude and metalinguistic awareness were still developing in the participating 8 to 9-year-old children. These abilities also predicted children's foreign language learning success. Language-analytic ability was most important in this context, suggesting that it may not be level of cognitive maturity alone that determines children's approach to language learning. Experiencing explicit, form-focused instruction may foster the role of language-analytic ability even in children as young as 8 to 9 years.

What the researchers did

- Intact Year 4 classes with a total of 111 monolingual English-speaking children aged 8-9 years at five English primary schools took part in the study.
- Children had 75 minutes of language input per week (20 teaching hours in total over 32 weeks).
- Children were divided into four groups and consecutively taught two languages over the school year.
- Phase 1: Each group was taught, respectively, German, Italian, Esperanto, or Esperanto with a focus-on-form element. Phase 2: All four groups were taught French with a focus-on-form element.
- Children completed tests of language learning aptitude and metalinguistic awareness at the beginning and end of Phase 1 and a test of French proficiency at the beginning and end of Phase 2.

What the researchers found

- Language learning aptitude and metalinguistic awareness were positively related in the children. The association grew from medium to strong over Phase 1 of the study (16 weeks).
- The children made improvements on the tests of aptitude and metalinguistic awareness over Phase 1 of the study (16 weeks) with a medium effect size.
- Scores at the two testing times (beginning and end of Phase 1) were strongly correlated.
- Aptitude test scores (at the beginning of Phase 2) and gains in French proficiency (with French instruction taking place during Phase 2) were positively related at a medium level of strength.
- Aptitude scores correlated with gains in French reading, grammar and listening, but not writing.
- Children's scores on aptitude subtests assessing grammatical sensitivity/language-analytic ability and phonetic coding ability/phonological awareness predicted achievement in French.

Things to consider

- Children's improvements over time show that language learning aptitude and metalinguistic awareness were still developing in the 8- to 9-year-olds.
- The correlation between scores at the two testing times mean that children scoring highly on the first occasion also scored highly on the second occasion, so although aptitude was still developing, it can still serve as a useful predictor.
- The findings about the predictive power of aptitude in relation to French gains more closely match an 'adult' pattern than a 'child' pattern. They are therefore not consistent with the argument that young learners primarily draw on memory ability.
- The type of instruction young learners experience may be as important as chronological age in determining the use of primarily implicit vs. primarily explicit learning. The more form-focused the instruction learners experience, the more relevant language-analytic ability seems to become. Thus, explicit learning can be important even at primary level.

Teaching and testing materials available at www.iris-database.org

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