

Young children can learn language explicitly if they are taught explicitly

What this research was about and why it is important

The research takes a closer look at the common argument that children learn languages implicitly, while adults learn languages explicitly. Implicit learning is non-conscious, slow and requires a lot of input over a long period of time, but it also results in knowledge that can be accessed quickly and easily. Explicit learning is conscious and fast, but it requires considerable effort. It results in knowledge that can be accessed if the learner focuses on accuracy and is not under time pressure. In practice, language learning typically involves both implicit and explicit processes. The researcher contrasts a maturational hypothesis with an instructional hypothesis. The maturational hypothesis posits that children primarily rely on implicit learning because of their young age, while adults primarily rely on explicit learning because of their greater maturity. The instructional hypothesis posits that children primarily rely on implicit learning because they are typically taught implicitly, while adults primarily rely on explicit learning because they are typically taught explicitly. The researcher sets out to test which hypothesis is correct. In other words: Is age or type of instruction more important?

What the researcher did

- 40 children aged 5-7 and 40 adults aged 18-51 participated in the study; all were native speakers of English.
- There were four experimental groups: 20 children and 20 adults were taught implicitly; 20 children and 20 adults were taught explicitly over seven 15-minute sessions.
- They learned an artificial mini-language called Sillyspeak. The language consists of 4 verbs, 2 determiners (masculine and feminine articles for 6 of the nouns each), 12 nouns; Sillyspeak has verb-subject-object word order.
- In the implicit groups, participants learned the vocabulary of Sillyspeak and repeated example sentences after the teacher. All sentences were acted out with toys.
- In the explicit groups, participants did the same, but they were also given translations of the vocabulary, taught the word order and article rules using pictures, and were encouraged to focus on accuracy.
- Language learning was assessed by means of two oral sentence production tests and a grammaticality judgement test. In the first production test, the researcher acted out sentences with toys and participants had to say the sentences in Sillyspeak. In the second production test, the same thing happened, but participants were asked to pay attention to correct word order and determiners.
- At the end of the experiment, participants' metalinguistic knowledge was tested and they were asked if they had observed any rules or patterns in the Sillyspeak sentences they had heard.

What the researcher found

- All participants were able to learn Sillyspeak; it did not matter whether they were taught implicitly or explicitly.
- Overall adults did better than children on all language tests.
- Participants did better on the second production test, where they were asked to pay attention to accuracy.
- Participants who were taught explicitly developed more metalinguistic awareness than participants who were taught implicitly.
- With regard to metalinguistic awareness, adults again did better than children, but type of instruction had a larger effect than age.
- Both child and adult participants who had more metalinguistic awareness did better on the language tests.

Things to consider

- The instructional hypothesis was supported: the study showed that if children are taught explicitly, they can learn explicitly.
- Children who were taught explicitly developed metalinguistic awareness, but children who were taught implicitly did not; this was different for adults, a number of whom developed metalinguistic awareness even if they were taught implicitly.
- Although it was a condition for participation in the study that participants could not have had more than two years of foreign language learning experience, the adults had more such experience than the children. This may have influenced the results.
- Future research should look at the learning of a natural language rather than an artificial mini-language.