

## Defining early child second language acquisition

### What this research was about and why it is important

To teach languages effectively to young learners, it is necessary to understand the different characteristics of second language development at different ages. The researchers examined the literature on second language acquisition from around age 2, when the first language is emerging, together with associated knowledge about how language works in general. They argue that two distinct (though overlapping) phases of child second language development can be distinguished, one from age 2-7, and another from age 7 onward, once aspects of literacy have become established in the first language (the L1), and are available as a learning tool in L2. (A third, adolescent/adult phase then follows.) They focus their discussion on the 2-7 year old learners among whom literacy is still emerging, and review teaching strategies which have been found to work effectively with this group.

### What the researchers did

- The researchers reviewed empirical research studies and theoretical literature on child second language acquisition, published from the 1970s up to 2007.
- They conducted a “narrative review”, meaning that they used their professional judgement rather than quantitative techniques (as in a “systematic review”), in selecting the research papers they discussed, and in evaluating the evidence.

### What the researchers found

- Children aged 2-7 bring to the L2 learning process much implicit knowledge of how language works in general, including its relationship with the social context, which they acquired along with their L1.
- At this age, children’s L2 learning is also largely implicit, “without instruction or intention”.
- As L2 learners, children skip the “protolanguage” stage typical of L1 acquisition, using recognizable words and fixed phrases from the beginning, even if their pronunciation and/or grammar are non-standard.
- To express concepts and speech acts which are important for them, children may make creative use of limited L2 resources, using L2 words and patterns in novel ways to make meanings.
- Children may also use their L1 knowledge to support L2, for example copying L1 sentence patterns or producing mixed utterances.
- Children may use L2 differently in different social contexts, e.g. they may be silent or monosyllabic in more formal settings, but they may use speech more freely/ambitiously e.g. when playing with other children.
- In rich L2 environments (as in the case e.g. of EAL children in places such as Australia, North America or the UK), they are likely to achieve native-level proficiency.
- For this age group, effective instructional strategies include:
  - Provision of a language-rich environment including free interaction and play with peers who are fluent speakers of L2
  - Consistent and predictable structuring of classroom routines
  - Contextualisation of language use, e.g. connection with actions, tasks and simple cognitive operations
  - Focus on oral/aural activities including repetition, chanting, singing
  - Some focus on form is helpful in shaping children’s L2 development in the direction of the target language.
- The further development of important aspects of literacy around age 7 brings about qualitative changes in L2 development and in L2 learning strategies.

### Things to consider

- This chapter makes a valuable contribution in its focus on the 2-7 age group, and concern to interpret the distinctive characteristics of L2 learning among children who have already gained insights into how language is organised, but who are still developing important aspects of literacy.
- Many of the studies reviewed by these researchers involved children in acquiring English, French and German in economically advantaged settings, and the detailed findings may be primarily relevant for this group.
- Findings may not be fully transferable to early years classroom foreign language learning.
- The studies on effective instructional strategies which were reviewed were limited, and the researchers’ views on pedagogy need testing and follow up in additional research.