

Re: Do children learn language more easily?

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- *From:* Aidan Kehoe <kehoea@xxxxxxxxxxxxxxx>
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Ar an chéad lá de mí na Nollaig, scríobh Nathan Sanders:

The UN calls people children up until the age of eighteen; even the US Army doesn't enlist people under 17.

The UN's definition of "children" is irrelevant when talking about language acquisition. Everything necessary for using a native language competently is learned within the first five years.

So you don't have the basic politeness to deal with what he writes as he writes it?

Also, I flat-out disagree that everything necessary for using a native language competently _as an adult_ is learned within the first five years. And if you're going to compare the two processes, you need to have the same desired result; and an adult learning a language wants an adult command of the language, not the command of a five-year-old.

[...] A three-year-old child is not only learning Spanish, but is also still in the stages of learning the very fundamentals of language (and of the nature of the world and society) that you now take for granted as an adult. You're free to learn things in a completely different order, while he is forced to progress through a certain set of developmental milestones. So there will certainly be pieces of language that you can pick up faster than he can.

That is, pieces of the language are easier for me.

I can say that a particular waitress looks androgynous, wonder what the Italians ate before the Spanish brought tomatoes from the New World in reaction to my conversation partner expressing a similar bemusement at potatoes in Germany, discuss things like political systems, what will

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happen in Cuba when Castro dies, not things a three-year-old can say anything useful about.

You're confusing content with ability to express content. I can't say anything useful about Dedekind domains or diophantine approximations, but that doesn't mean that my command of English is not "effective".

It's not effective in those contexts. But knowledge of those contexts is not a social expectation, whereas if you couldn't say anything useful or understand a conversation about democracy versus dictatorship, potatoes versus tomatoes, whether or not and why a woman is attractive, then your command of English would not be bad, it would not be effective to the level expected of a native speaker.

Once he reaches five years old, a child can say useful things about anything he comprehends (and some things that he can't). It's just that, as a five-year-old, he necessarily will have been exposed to fewer things than an adult has, and thus, will understand fewer things, so his language will *appear* to be less effective because he has fewer things to talk about (with adults).

And when a second language learner can't talk with adult native speakers about household vocabulary, about travel, about food, that second language learner's command of the language is bad, and needs to be improved. And?

Now, I and the three-year-old Spaniard have differing areas where our respective commands of the language fall down.

Which is why comparing adult and child language is exceedingly difficult and trickier than non-specialists appreciate. How do you compare native pronunciation with knowledge of technical vocabulary?

You say they're both important and need to be learned to have a good and effective command of the language. (If, by technical vocabulary, you mean that of the paragraph on ethics I posted.)

Which one is more "effective" for communication?

Once you're not confusing phonemes and people understand your pronunciations of words, you don't need native pronunciation to talk usefully about ethics. You do need the vocabulary of the area.

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Which one shows a deeper understanding of the language?

The technical vocabulary, because the learner is more self-aware when learning it and has some appreciation of the history and variety of meanings it has, and perhaps also is aware that it comes from another language and as such will have a slightly different construction to native vocabulary. While the child learner is never consciously aware of the relation and construction of phonemes, as every introductory phonetics course demonstrates.

[...] Situations are not language. Language can be used to describe situations, of course, and if you don't understand the situation, you will find it difficult, if not impossible, to accurately describe it. But that says nothing about your command of the language, only your knowledge of situations.

Knowledge of situations, and how to describe them, is a crucial part of knowing a language. Crucial. And it's not co-incidence that the constantly come up in language textbooks.

Now, if you do understand the situation, but still can't describe it, *then* it says something about your command of the language. And after three years, I'd expect a child to be much better than you at describing many mundane situations, like everyday household events.

In other words, you and the child both demonstrably fail to describe certain sets of situations, but in the child's case, it's from lack of knowledge of the world (not the language),

It can also be from lack of exposure to certain situations in a given language, for multilingual children. E.g. if a child is taken camping with its grandparents, and the camping expedition is conducted in the language of the grandparents, which differs from the language of its father and the community it grows up in, that child will have the same trouble describing camping in the language of its community as it will describing a situation it hasn't experienced.

The adult language learner's situation is similar, and can be remedied in a similar way; I'm reasonably certain that after a year living in a Spanish-speaking household through Spanish, seeing and talking about those household events, I would beat the three-year-old hands down at describing everyday household events.

[...] Who do you think is acquiring a first language? I know of no cases of someone successfully acquiring their first language starting after the

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age of five.

Mike Wright has a child you ll be interested in.

[...] So why should anyone think that embarrassment is any more useful for language acquisition? There simply is no evidence that embarrassment even exists during first language acquisition,

If you mean that window up to the age of five, you re not taking Rosenfelder in good faith, and that makes your point irrelevant in the context of discussing what he writes.

let alone that it is a motivating factor for acquiring native–proficiency in a language.

Consider second language acquisition, where embarrassment certainly abounds (just look at late night talk show jokes about Ahnuhld Schwarzenegger, numerous exaggerated mockery of stereotypical foreign accents in TV and film, etc.),

Do you get the impression that Schwarzenegger went to a playground every day in California where every single day someone he considered an equal ridiculed him? Or is it once every few months, on TV shows he typically doesn t watch, from people he has very little to do with, while his normal daily interaction is with people he respects who never mention it?

and yet, despite all of this constant, incredibly public embarrassment, adults still have difficulty achieving native–sounding fluency in second languages.

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Santa Maradona, priez pour moi!

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