

Winter School on Multilingualism across the Lifespan

6 – 8 February 2012, at the Institute of Multilingualism, Fribourg

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Age-related advantages vs maturational constraints in L2/L3 acquisition

This presentation will deal with the effects of age on additional language acquisition. It will present and discuss the findings from research focused on the existence of a critical period in naturalistic language learning settings, mainly the higher ultimate attainment of younger learners in the long term, but also the faster rate of older learners in the short term. Then, findings from research in second/third language acquisition in instructed language learning situations will be presented and contrasted. While the faster rate of older learners is an age-related advantage that has been consistently observed in research, younger learners have not been seen to surpass older learners in the long term. Because it has been argued that the “long term” in instructed language learning spans over a very long period of time, recent research has looked at (very) long term effects of age (longer than 10 years). This research has not shown an advantage on the part of early starters when amount and type of exposure are controlled for, either. In the end it will be argued that context mediates the role of age in a fundamental way.

Finally, evidence from the effects of age in second/third language acquisition in adulthood, and of aging in bilinguals and multilinguals will also be presented and discussed.

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