

# This Week's Citation Classic®

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Asher J J & García R. The optimal age to learn a foreign language.

*Mod. Lang. J.* 53:334-41, 1969.

[San Jose State College, and Prospect High School, Saratoga, CA]

The hypothesis tested was that puberty is a biological marker for the achievement of a near-native pronunciation in a second language. Cuban immigrants between the ages of 7 and 19 and American children (the control group) rehearsed four English sentences that contained phonemes troublesome to pronounce for Spanish speakers learning English. When each child was ready, the individual recited the sentences into a tape recorder for later rating by native speakers of English. [The *Social Sciences Citation Index*® (SSCI)® indicates that this paper has been cited in over 30 publications, making it the most-cited paper published in this journal.]

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The prevailing myth in language acquisition is that children have a special language-learning capacity that is absent in adults. The belief that children are superior to adults in second-language learning probably results from the common observation that children living in a foreign country seem rapidly to achieve native-like fluency in the alien language while their parents may lag far behind.

The superiority of children for second-language acquisition may be an illusion if children learn the new language synchronized with body movements, while adults attempt to learn language independent of body movement. For example, when children play, utterances are synchronized with physical movement (i.e., "Come on, Billy, let's run to the corner!"). In the context of play, utterances not only have instant meaning but also believability, since utterances "cause" immediate changes in observable behavior. Adults, functioning usually in non-play situations, encounter the new language when utterances are divorced from physical

movement ("Hello, it's a beautiful day, isn't it?").

Asher and Price<sup>1</sup> have tested the language-body movement hypothesis (which we call "The Total Physical Response"). Adults and children (ages 7, 11, and 14) all learned to understand a sample of Russian when the Russian utterances were synchronized with physical movement. The results demonstrated that when Russian utterances were synchronized with physical movements, adults vastly outperformed the children ( $p < .001$ ), and older children generally outperformed younger children. Still unanswered, however, was the puzzle of pronunciation. Immigrant adults seem to speak with a "thick tongue" while their children enjoy a near-native pronunciation.

Before the Asher and García paper, no one had demonstrated empirically that near-native pronunciation in a second language is an all-or-none phenomenon. That is, before puberty, a person has the highest probability of achieving a near-native pronunciation, but after puberty, the probability drops almost to zero no matter how many years an immigrant lives in the foreign country.

Ramiro García, who is a Cuban immigrant himself and was, at that time, my student in general psychology, collaborated with me in the design and follow-through of the data collection in the Cuban community of the San Francisco Bay Area. The project required García to drive 2,000 miles in a two-year search to locate about 100 Cuban immigrants who fit the profile of our target group. Once a person was located, García would visit a home and converse, perhaps for hours, with the family to establish rapport in a situation in which the immigrants were apprehensive and sensitive to any stranger coming into their home.

Our study has probably been cited frequently because it was a pioneering effort resulting in evidence that has been confirmed independently in many follow-up studies with other languages such as French and Japanese.<sup>2</sup> Incidentally, the original tapes have been carefully preserved by García in the event that future researchers may wish to conduct a further analysis to test other hypotheses.

1. Asher J J & Price B S. The learning strategy of the total physical response: some age differences.

*Child Develop.* 38:1219-27, 1967. (Cited 30 times.)

2. Krashen S D, Scarcella R C & Long M H, eds. *Child-adult differences in second language acquisition*. Rowley, MA: Newbury House, 1982. 226 p.

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