

INSTRUCTION AND AGE IN THE ACQUISITION OF NEGATION IN ENGLISH AS A THIRD LANGUAGE

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ABSTRACT

This paper reports the findings of a study that examined the relationship between the age of introduction of English as a foreign language in a formal instructional setting and the acquisition of negation in English. Participants were 81 bilingual (Basque/Spanish) students who had begun learning English at different ages but under conditions of equal exposure time to the foreign language. In both production tasks, younger students produced a high percentage of externally negated constructions and unanalysed negative particles, while older students made a better use of the full auxiliary system, including the ability to inflect correctly for number and time reference. These results may be accounted for considering age and cognitive maturity. The results indicate that age is positively related to the acquisition of the different developmental sequences in English.

1. THE AGE FACTOR IN SECOND LANGUAGE ACQUISITION

The role of age in language learning has long been a controversial area which has received a great deal of attention in second language (L2) acquisition. Scholarly attention has mainly focused on the effect of age on the rate of acquisition in a foreign language both in natural and formal contexts. Investigations of naturalistic L2 acquisition are mainly based on the experience of immigrants acquiring the language in the host country (Asher and García 1969; Flege et al. 1999; Hyltenstam 1992; Johnson and Newport 1989; Patkowski 1980, 1990). In general, these studies indicate a relationship between age of arrival in the host country and successful acquisition of its language. On the basis of a significant body of research findings, these immigrant studies support the opinion held by Krashen, Long, and Scarcella (1979) that, although there is evidence of an initial advantage for older learners, younger children eventually achieve higher levels of proficiency than those beginning to learn a second language as adults. Thus, children show an advantage in terms of ultimate attainment but adults learn faster. DeKeyser (2003) points out that children do better in terms of ultimate attainment because:

many elements of language are hard to learn explicitly (especially, of course, for those adults who have limited verbal ability); adults learn faster because their capacities for explicit learning let them take short cuts. As a result, given ample time in an unstructured environment, children come out on top. (DeKeyser 2003: 335)

Similarly, Cummins (1980, 1981) argues that older learners show an advantage in syntax, morphology and literacy-related skills due to their greater cognitive maturity which helps them to acquire more efficiently cognitively demanding skills, while that advantage diminishes in more communicative skills such as oral fluency, that are subject to interpersonal communicative differences.¹

Therefore, there is need to distinguish between the effects of age on rate of acquisition and the effects of age on ultimate attainment. Studies of subjects with limited naturalistic exposure show that older learners outperform younger ones. Ekstrand (1976) for example, investigated the proficiency of immigrant children in Sweden and showed how older learners performed better than young ones in all the tests, with the exception of free oral production tests. Ervin-Tripp (1974) also showed a positive correlation between age and proficiency in the case of English-speaking children learning French in Switzerland. Similarly, studies conducted in L2 immersion programmes, mainly Canada, have suggested on the whole a more rapid learning among students who have begun immersion programmes later. Late immersion groups tend to be cognitively more mature and show a faster acquisition rate than younger students (Genesee 1979; Harley 1986; Tremaine 1975, Turnbull et al. 1998). In general terms, late immersion students outperformed early or middle immersion students in all the tests involving literacy skills, with the exception of listening comprehension tests, where early beginners surpassed late immersion students (Turnbull et al. 1998). Nevertheless, other studies indicate that the advantage shown by older beginners tends to diminish after a certain period of time. In their naturalistic study, Snow and Hoefnagel-Höhle (1978) showed how older beginners outperformed younger ones in the early stages, but their advantage diminished after only a year. These findings could be attributed to the fact that older learners show an initial rate advantage with limited naturalistic exposure to the L2. Furthermore, there is also a progressive diminution of any advantage in the case of learners with greater amounts of exposure in early childhood. In general terms, these learners surpass those whose learning experience began later (Asher and García 1969; Oyama 1976, 1978). As mentioned above, the advantage conferred by early exposure is more evident in communicative skills, such as pronunciation or listening comprehension tasks, where early

¹ Singleton and Ryan (2004: 90–91) mention a large number of studies which seem to contradict Cummins's hypothesis that younger L2 learners acquire basic interpersonal communicative skills more readily than older learners. Some of these include Neufeld (1977, 1979) and Bongaerts et al. (1995, 1997, 2000), to mention just a few.

starters tend to outperform older starters.

However, in recent years there has been a growing attention to cases of older learners who attain native-like or near-native-like levels of L2 proficiency. Bongaerts, Planken and Schils (1995) found that Dutch learners of English in a formal setting attained pronunciation ratings which did not overlap with those of the native speaker controls. More recently Birdsong (2003) demonstrated that adult students of French exhibited native levels of phonological and phonetic performance. In these cases, motivation and a love for the language and culture were fundamental to reach levels of performance close to native norms.

Most studies mentioned so far have focused on the language outcomes of learners in naturalistic contexts, where there is extensive natural exposure to the language. But age-focused research has also been linked to formal settings, where the amount and intensity of exposure to the second language is much more limited. Nevertheless, even if there is a growing tendency to study the age factor in formal contexts (Blondin et al. 1998; Cenoz 2002; Muñoz 2000; Ruiz de Zarobe 2001, 2002), relatively few studies have still been concerned with school contexts, where learners have limited exposure to the target language that is studied in the different stages of the curriculum.

A number of studies on the effect of age in formal settings indicate that the benefits of an early start in natural settings do not appear in an instructional context (Celaya, Torras and Pérez Vidal 2001; Lasagabaster and Doiz 2003; Ruiz de Zarobe, *in press*), and there is evidence that indicates that L2 learners are more successful than younger ones as a whole in formal instructional settings. Nevertheless, as Singleton (1995) suggests, these results may be due to two factors; first, the differences in the exposure time between naturalistic and instructed learners, and, secondly, the blurring effect of mixing beginners and non-beginners in the same class. Therefore, it seems that the younger-older dichotomy encountered in such studies as L2 immersion programmes or immigrant studies mentioned before needs to be restated in a formal context of education, where the language learning environment is drastically different.

Using a cross-sectional approach, this study aims at exploring the effect of age on the acquisition of negation in a bilingual (Basque/Spanish) education programme, where English is taught as a third language in an instructional context. Specifically it analyses the behaviour of a morphosyntactic property: sentential negation. We will be interested primarily in how third language (L3) learners acquire it to be able to compare it to second language acquisition. It has been shown that second language learners of English acquire sentential negation systematically (Cancino et al. 1978). Furthermore, similar developmental stages have been found in the case of typologically different languages such as English, Spanish and Japanese (Stauble 1984). Thus, these studies provide a theoretical background that can be helpful to gain a clearer picture in the case of the acquisition of English as a third language: on the one hand, we will be able to compare second and third

language acquisition; on the other, we will apply this knowledge to typologically different languages such as English, Spanish and Basque. Therefore, the aim of our research will be to analyse the following:

- the development of negation in English as L3 compared to English as L2, and
- the rate of acquisition by learners who have begun at different ages but have received the same amount of instruction.

In the following section we will briefly introduce negation in the three languages under study. We will further offer a descriptive generalisation of the syntax of negation and the stages followed in its development.

2. NEGATION IN ENGLISH AS A FOREIGN LANGUAGE: A DESCRIPTIVE GENERALIZATION

2.1. Negation in Spanish, Basque and English

This study deals with the behaviour of negation by bilingual speakers of Spanish and Basque learning English in an instructional context. When we compare these three languages in relation to the location of the negator, we see that in Spanish, the negator is the form *no*, and precedes the verb, which is marked for tense and agreement. This applies to copula *be* (1a), auxiliary *be* (2b), modal verbs (3c), and thematic verbs (4d) (Hawkins 2001: 89).

- (1) a. Juana no es feliz.
 Joannæ -NOM no is-3sgPRES happy
 'Joanna is not happy.'
- b. Juana no est-á bailando.
 Joannæ -NOM no is-3sgPRES dancing
 'Joanna is not dancing.'
- c. Juana no pued-e abrir la ventana.
 Joannæ -NOM no can-3sgPRES open-INF the window
 'Joanna cannot open the window.'
- d. Juana no habl-a griego.
 Joannæ -NOM no speak-3sgPRES Greek
 'Joanna does not speak Greek.'

In Basque, the negative element *ez* precedes the tense- and agreement-marked verb or the auxiliary, when there is one. Furthermore, from a phonological point of view, the negator *ez* and the auxiliary in Basque form a single unit, and can seldom be separated.

- (2) a. Jone ez da zoriontsua.
 Joanna-NOM no is-3sgPRES happy
 'Joanna is not happy.'
- b. Jone ez da dantza-tzen ari.
 Joanna-NOM no AUX-3sgPRES dance-IMPF be-PROG
 'Joanna is not dancing.'
- c. Jone-k ezin du leiho-a zabaldu.
 Joanna-ERG cannot AUX-3sgPRES window-DET_{sing} open-PERF
 'Joanna cannot open the window.'
- d. Jone-k ez du Greco-z hitz egit-en.
 Joanna-ERG no AUX-3sgPRES Greek-INSTword make-IMPF
 'Joanna does not speak Greek.'

In English, *not* and the contracted form *n't* follow the copula *be*, the auxiliary *be* and modal verbs. Nevertheless, they precede thematic verbs, attached to the support verb *do*.

- (3) a. Joanna is not happy.
 Joanna isn't happy.
- b. Joanna is not dancing.
 Joanna isn't dancing.
- c. Joanna cannot open the window.
 Joanna can't open the window.
- d. Joanna does not speak Greek.
 Joanna doesn't speak Greek.

Basque has non-Indo-European roots and is described as an agglutinative and ergative language while Spanish is a Latin-based language and English is a Germanic language. In spite of having different origins, in both Spanish and Basque the negative element precedes the verb and the auxiliary. On the other hand, in English the negative auxiliary verb *don't* and its variants (*didn't*, *doesn't*) precede thematic verbs but the negator *no* follows auxiliary and modal verbs.

2.2. L2 acquisition of negation in English

In order to offer a structural and developmental contrast of the acquisition of negation in L3, we have followed previous studies on the stages of development in the acquisition of English negation. The study by Cancino et al. (1978), on the one hand, showed how second language learners of English acquire sentential negation systematically. These authors collected longitudinal data from six Spanish speakers and suggested there were several stages in the development of negation, which are illustrated in Table 1. Later on, Stauble (1984) established the criteria for determining three levels of proficiency in English as L2. The study by Stauble collected cross-sectional information of Spanish and Japanese learners of English. As regards sentential negation, the three proficiency levels established by Stauble are quite comparable with the developmental stages indicated by Cancino et al. At the low intermediate level the Spanish speakers display a predominant use of preverbal *no*,² and some use of unanalysed *don't*, that is, they do not distinguish tense and agreement when the auxiliary is used. Furthermore, the Japanese speakers in Stauble's study also make use of the form *no* preverbally, even though negation in Japanese is very different from English and Spanish. Japanese is a head-final language and, therefore, the negator follows the verb and affects its form phonologically. The fact that Japanese speakers use *no* as a preverbal negator cannot be due to the influence of the first language, which makes the data even more interesting. At the intermediate level, speakers use a high proportion of unanalysed *don't* and there is also an increase in the use of *not* after the copula *be*. At the advanced level *don't* is specified for tense and agreement and preverbal *no* is almost non-existent.

Based mainly on Cancino et al. (1978: 210-211), Hawkins (2001) illustrated the four stages of development in the acquisition of English negation by Spanish speakers (Table 2).

As can be seen, the form *no* is used as a sentential negator before any phrase in the early stages. Later on, the negator is placed before thematic verbs, and the unanalysed form *don't* starts to be used. At a later stage the form *not* begins to be used postverbally after a copula or an auxiliary verb. At the advanced level *don't* is specified for tense and agreement and the use of unanalysed *don't* is minimal.

In sum, these authors find some patterns of development which provide a descriptive generalization of the acquisition of sentential negation in English as a foreign language. This information will offer some theoretical background to compare the type of negative structures students of different ages use under similar instruction conditions.

²According to Hawkins (2001: 84), "the fact that the form *no* is used preverbally in the early stages may be linked to the absence or underspecification of I at this point of development in learners' mental grammars." He states that in the early stages of the acquisition of negation IP is absent. IP is established when learners acquire copula *be*, which moves from VP to I.

TABLE 1
Stages in the development of English negation (from Hawkins)

Stages	Type of negation
1	<i>no(t)</i> + XP <i>no(t)</i> + verb The frog no here He no come No speak
2	<i>no(t)</i> + thematic verb Unanalysed <i>don't</i> + verb He no see He dont't see the frog
3	Copula/auxiliary + <i>no(t)</i> The tin is not full He cannot speak
4	Analysed <i>don't</i> + verb (<i>no</i> + verb disappears) He doesnt't see the frog

3. ENGLISH AS A THIRD LANGUAGE IN THE BASQUE COUNTRY

This study deals with trilingual education, where English, as in other European contexts (the Basque Country, Catalonia, Friesland, etc.), is taught as part of the school curriculum. In 1993 the Spanish Educational Reform introduced some changes in relation to the study of foreign languages. After the reform was implemented, the study of foreign languages began at the age of eight, when the students are in the third year of primary education, while traditionally English had begun to be taught in the sixth year of primary school, when pupils are age eleven.

With regard to the Basque Country, some bilingual schools began to introduce the study of English in kindergarten, when the pupils are aged four. Basque schools also adopted a more dynamic methodology, using a communicative and oral-based approach, with drama, story-telling and other oral activities as the focus of interest. Therefore, formal instruction is basically communicative under the current curriculum, and notably with younger children, who are trained fundamentally on listening and speaking skills in sessions that last for two or three hours a week.

In sum, this situation gives us the opportunity in the Basque Country to compare the progress of students who began to learn English at different ages but within the same school curriculum to see the effect of age in language learning. Furthermore, the fact that these students are learning English as a third language can be interesting to see the plausible advantages of the early introduction of English as L3, without forgetting that that learning can be affected by different factors such as the knowledge of the other language (Hufeisen 2000; Klein 1995), the typology of these languages (Cenoz, Hufeisen and Jessner 2001; Singleton 1995) or the type of competence bilinguals exhibit as compared to monolinguals (Grosjean 1992; Jessner 1999).

4. THE STUDY

4.1. Subjects

Participants were 81 Basque-Spanish bilingual children who were studying in a Basque school in the Basque Country. This school is a model D school³ with Basque as the language of instruction and Spanish as a school subject. Basque was the first language for 44% of the students, Spanish was the first language for 24% of the students, and 32% had both Spanish and Basque as their first language. Nevertheless, Spanish is the majority language in the community and all the students in the study exhibited native levels in Spanish which did not overlap with those obtained by those students whose instruction had been conducted entirely in Spanish.

These students were divided into three groups according to their age; the first group consisted of 34 students in 4th grade of primary school (four years of schooling), the second group was composed of 29 students in 2nd grade of secondary school (eight years of schooling) and the third group, with 18 students, was in 4th grade of secondary education (twelve years of schooling). All the students were in their sixth year of English, but they had all begun to learn English at different ages: in kindergarten, when they are 4 years old, in the third year of primary school, when the pupils are aged eight, and in the sixth year of primary school, when pupils are 11 years old. The distribution of the participants in terms of their mean age, sex, and instruction years is presented in Table 2.

TABLE 2
Subjects in the study

	Group 1	Group 2	Group 3
Sex			
Male	54.5%	53.8%	38.9%
Female	45.5%	46.2%	61.1%
Mean age	9.2	13.2	16.3
Years of instruction	6	6	6

It needs to be said that the hours of instruction varied slightly in the groups; the students in primary school had had 476 hours of instruction when they were given the tests, while the rest had had approximately 564 hours of instruction in English. Nevertheless, these differences involve a period of six years (that is, 14 hours of

³There are three linguistic models in the Basque Country: In model A schools all curriculum instruction is conducted in Spanish with the exception of Basque; in model B schools half the instruction is conducted in Basque and the other half in Spanish. In model D schools Basque is the language of instruction except for Spanish and Spanish literature. There is no model C because that letter does not exist in the Basque alphabet.

difference per year between the youngest and the two other groups), which may not be considered significant. On the other hand, those students who had attended private lessons outside the classroom or had visited English-speaking countries were eliminated from the sample.

4.2. Procedure

In order to investigate the use that the students make of negation, our subjects were asked to complete two tasks: a speech production task and a written task. The speech production task consisted of elicited narratives of the *Frog, where are you?* story, created by Mercer Mayer (1969), which has been used in a large amount of research and with a large variety of languages (Berman and Slobin 1994; Stromqvist and Verhoever 2004). Our students were asked to narrate the frog story with the help of the 24 pictures that make up the story. On the other hand, they were also asked to write an imaginary composition to a host family, with whom they were going to spend a month in England. These compositions, which are considered a good measure to study overall written performance (Hughes 1989), were done in the natural classroom setting, within regularly scheduled classes, and were run by their instructor. These tests were tape- and video-recorded, transcribed and codified during the second term of the 1998–1999 academic year. Afterwards, the SPSS (Statistical Package for Social Sciences) statistical program was used to carry out the statistical analysis. Analyses were further conducted using the Childes Clan program for the elicited narrative test and SPSS.

5. RESULTS

In both the oral and the written material, every example of negation was taken from the texts and classified using the categories that were shown in the study by Cancino et al. (1978) and Stauble (1984), whenever possible. Even if the results were scarce in some cases, these were indicated for every single category to offer a detailed description of each negative construction used. Later on, in order to analyse which negative structures were used by the three different age groups, one-way Anova analyses were performed to compare the mean scores obtained.

5.1. Oral production test: The frog story

The results for the speech production task (shown in Table 3) indicate there are group differences in relation to the use of the different negators in English. The youngest group, Group 1, appears to remain at an elementary level of development, which is reflected in the predominant use of *no* as a preverbal or pre-XP negator. The analysis performed on the data reveals statistically significant differences between the learners who started at ages 8 and 11, on the one hand, and those who started at age 4, on the other, in the use of *no* + XP, a feature of the first stages of development. The Scheffé tests used to compare any two groups shows

TABLE 3
Age differences in relation to negation: Speech production task

	Group 1		Group 2		Group 3		Significance Level	
	Mean	SD	Mean	SD	Mean	SD	F	p
<i>no/not</i> + XP	0.26	0.66	0.03	0.18	0.00	0.00	2.95	.058
<i>no/not</i> + copula	0.35	0.77	0.14	0.35	0.00	0.00	2.73	.071
<i>no/not</i> + verb	0.18	0.57	0.00	0.00	0.11	0.32	1.50	.228
<i>no/not</i> + aux.	0.06	0.23	0.00	0.00	0.00	0.00	1.41	.249
copula + <i>no/not</i>	0.09	0.28	0.28	0.70	0.00	0.00	2.30	.106
aux. + <i>not</i>	0.00	0.00	0.34	0.67	0.83	1.46	6.54	.002
aux. + <i>nt't</i>	0.00	0.00	0.72	1.09	1.78	3.13	7.26	.001

$p < .05$

there are significant differences between the youngest and intermediate groups ($p < .045$) and the youngest and oldest groups ($p < .046$). Nevertheless, these differences do not turn out to be significant with the two oldest groups ($p < .798$). In the case of *no/not* + copula, the oldest group also performed significantly better than the youngest group ($p < .029$), but these differences were not significant with the other groups. In the two other cases of preverbal negation, *no/not* + verb and *no/not* + aux., the mean scores obtained do not provide statistically significant differences.

However, there is a clear-cut trend as regards the auxiliary system. As the age of the students increases, we appreciate a better command of the auxiliary system and the introduction of the contracted negative marker *n't*. Our data show how the oldest students performed significantly better than the youngest ($p < .001$) and intermediate groups ($p < .043$) in their use of the auxiliary and modal system. On the other hand, the differences between group 1 and group 2 neared significance ($p < .089$). Similarly the performance of the oldest group was also superior in the case of the contracted negative marker *n't*, with statistically significant results between the youngest and oldest group ($p < .000$) and the intermediate and oldest group ($p < .032$), and marginal results between the two youngest groups ($p < .078$).

In the case of the youngest group the few instances that we have, only two, involve the auxiliary *don't* and always in the expression *I don't know*. The fact that this was the only form collected and there was no alternation with any other auxiliary leads us to consider it more as an unanalysed routine than a proper use of the verb, a fact which was accounted for in previous studies (Schumann 1978). Therefore, apart from these marginal cases, we appreciate how there is a growth in the use of the contracted negator replacing *not*, which is accompanied by an increase in the use of auxiliary and modal verbs, including the ability to inflect

TABLE 4
Age differences in relation to negation: Written production task

	Group 1		Group 2		Group 3		Significance Level	
	Mean	SD	Mean	SD	Mean	SD	F	p
<i>no/not</i> + XP	—	—	—	—	—	—	—	—
<i>no/not</i> + copula	0.03	0.17	0.00	0.00	0.00	0.00	0.68	.507
<i>no/not</i> + verb	0.03	0.17	0.00	0.00	0.00	0.00	0.68	.507
<i>no/not</i> + aux.	—	—	—	—	—	—	—	—
copula + <i>no/not</i>	0.03	0.17	0.03	0.18	0.00	0.00	0.29	.747
aux. + <i>not</i>	0.00	0.00	0.45	0.73	0.17	0.51	6.27	.003
aux. + <i>n't</i>	0.00	0.00	0.10	0.40	0.28	0.95	1.74	.181

correctly for number and time reference.

5.2. Written production test: Composition

In the case of the written production task, the results are exhibited in Table 4. As can be seen, there are very few instances of negative constructions, perhaps due to the fact that the composition was a free production task. But even if data are limited, we see a tendency for a similar behaviour as in the case of the speech production task: the early starters, Group 1, exhibit features of being in the initial stages of acquisition, while late starters show a more sophisticated use of negation. In relation to the auxiliary and modal systems, these differences are statistically significant between the youngest and intermediate groups ($p < .001$), and near significance in the case of the two oldest groups ($p < .065$), as happens with the contracted negative marker *n't* ($p < .066$). Thus, as in the case of the speech production task, the use of the different types of negative constructions is closely related to the age of the participants.

6. DISCUSSION AND CONCLUSIONS

The results of this study suggest that older learners outperform younger ones when the number of hours of instruction are held constant. The available evidence indicates that the youngest students are still in the early stages of development, displaying a predominant use of preverbal negation, while the oldest students are more advanced in the acquisition of negation. These students appear to have acquired some of the basic properties of negation, showing a more systematic use of the auxiliary and modal system, which implies they are in a later developmental stage. This tendency is maintained in both production tasks, although the age-related advantage can be appreciated more thoroughly in the case of the speech production task, where more instances are provided.

The explanation for these results may lie in cognitive maturity, as older students show higher correlations between aptitude and the learning of a foreign language (DeKeyser 2000; Sasaki 1993; Skehan 1998). Older students can take advantage of the learning experience more explicitly and can benefit from these explicit language learning mechanisms, while younger students would require a much larger exposure to the language to be able to use implicit language learning mechanisms and attain higher levels of proficiency in the foreign language. Evidently, there is need for an increase in exposure time and a more content-based teaching in the foreign language if better results are expected in a formal institutional setting. Therefore, this study further confirms the results obtained in previous studies in school settings. In immersion programmes in Canada (Harley 1986; Tremaine 1975; Turnbull et al. 1998), for example, most studies indicate that older learners show a faster acquisition rate in an L2 immersion situation. Other studies conducted in Spain (Cenoz 2002; Muñoz 2003; Ruiz de Zarobe 2002) have also revealed that older beginners significantly outperform younger ones under conditions of equal exposure time to the foreign language.

Concerning the trilingual condition of these learners, our results suggest a similar developmental pattern of negation both in L2 and in L3, perhaps due to the fact that both Spanish and Basque show similar means of expressing negation. One of the plausible cross-linguistic interactions we have found relates to the predominant use of preverbal negation at the early stages of acquisition. As in Spanish the sentential negator is the form *no*, there may have been some transfer from one of the source languages into English. As mentioned in the introduction, Spanish and Basque are similar in terms of negation, because sentential negation is used preverbally in both languages. Nevertheless, students may perceive the Spanish negator *no* as being closer to the English *no/not* due to their phonological similarity, and may find it more "transferable" than the Basque negator *ez*. Furthermore, linguistic distance may also be playing a role in linguistic transfer. Since both English and Spanish are more typologically related than Basque, there may be a closer influence of Spanish over English than Basque, which is perceived typologically as a more distant language (Singleton 1987; Lasagabaster 1999). However, this fact, which would confirm previous studies on language distance in multilingual acquisition (Bartelt 1989; Ringbom 1987), must not be overestimated. Other studies, notably Stauble (1984), have shown how *no* is used as a sentential negator in the initial stages of L2 acquisition in typologically different languages such as Japanese, a head-final language, which casts doubt on the assumption that students transfer L1 Spanish forms into English. The extensive use of the preverbal negator at the lower intermediate levels may be more a pattern of development than a case of transfer.

Turning now to the methodology followed, we mentioned in the introduction how under the current curriculum established by the Ministry of Education, more emphasis is given to communicative skills in the classroom. This oral-based ap-

proach has been mainly implemented in the case of younger students while older students still receive more training in reading and writing skills and in the learning of grammar. Nevertheless the difference in instructional styles does not seem to have had a major effect in both production tasks. On the one hand, older students show a more advanced knowledge of negation in oral proficiency, even though the teaching methodology used in the classroom follows a more traditional approach. On the other hand, younger students do not seem to have benefited from the type of input they have received, as they still exhibit a very basic knowledge of negation. In the case of the written test, similar patterns of behaviour have been found, regardless of the type of input used in the classroom.

In sum, this study indicates that neither an earlier start nor the type of input received has a positive effect in the acquisition of negation in English as a third language in a situation of formal instruction. Older learners outperform younger beginners and show a superior rate of performance under the same number of hours of instruction, which leads us to conclude that age at the time of the testing will be a predictor of proficiency in formal contexts of acquisition, at least with regards to production tasks.

There is still much to be done in relation to the age factor in instructed foreign language acquisition. One of the age-related issues to be considered in future research involves the effect of age on ultimate attainment. The results observed in this study may also have been affected by the fact that the subjects' length of exposure to the language was short. It may be that older students show superior results because younger learners are still in the early stages of acquisition and require more time to be able to catch up and/or overtake older learners, as some studies have already suggested in natural settings (DeKeyser 2000; Snow 1983; Snow and Hoefnagel-Höhle 1978). The results presented here are part of a longitudinal research project on the effect of age in the acquisition of English as a third language in the Basque Country. Further longitudinal research should provide more information about the influence of age in the learning of a foreign language in formal instructional settings to offer a detailed picture of the age factor.

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