

What is the best age to learn a second/foreign language?

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The answer to the question about the best age to learn a second/foreign language is 'it depends'. It depends on who, where, in what teaching/learning conditions, and with what aims. Here are outlined advantages and challenges at different stages of the lifespan.

The best age is early childhood if the learning conditions provide rich, plentiful and continued exposure to the language because children seem to be favoured when they can learn the language in similar ways as when learning the first language. But without massive exposure to the language their learning pace will be very slow and they will be deprived of their potential advantage. The benefit of learning in early childhood lies mainly in the achievement of near-native pronunciation and intonation, and for that children need to have appropriate phonetic models to imitate and need to have (and take) plenty of opportunities for fluent and significant interaction in the target language. Starting at an early age also provides more time for learning, though this comes not without challenges for learners and for the school system. For learners, more time means they may become frustrated by the slow progress typical of foreign language learning when there is no real contact with the language outside the classroom. For the school system, more time means more attention needs to be paid to continuity in the curriculum.

The best age is late childhood and adolescence if the learning conditions are those typical of regular school programs (e.g. three sessions of 50 minutes per week) and there is no real contact with the language outside the classroom. In this type of situation older children and adolescents bring with them literacy skills acquired in their first or other previously learned languages, which, together with their superior cognitive maturity, help them learn the language at a faster rate. This renders them more efficient learners – with the same amount of instructional time they make more progress than younger learners. Thus, older children and adolescents may very quickly catch up with younger starters and can avoid being demotivated by a long and slow teaching/learning

experience. A challenge for this age group is that, if the teaching is not appropriate, these learners may be more language anxious than younger learners.

The best age is younger adulthood if the learning conditions capitalize on young adults' superior cognitive maturity and they can use the strategies they will have previously acquired as (language) learners. This age group may be the most efficient group in instructed settings, achieving comparable levels of proficiency to younger learners in a much shorter time. They may outperform younger groups in learning autonomy and self-regulation and may search and benefit from out-of-class learning opportunities to a higher degree. The main challenge for young adults lies in achieving near-native pronunciation and intonation, if this is seen as a desirable goal, because of the stronger entrenchment of their first language.

The best age is older adulthood if learners have a lot of time and a positive predisposition to engage in individual work and in seeking opportunities for practice. For older adults, learning a language may bring benefits in terms of delayed cognitive declines and it may be a fulfilling lifelong-learning experience. The challenge for older ages is that learning may be slowed by, for example, a decline in working memory capacity and poorer aural abilities.

Additional reading:

Muñoz, C. (2008). Symmetries and asymmetries of age effects in naturalistic and instructed L2 learning. *Applied Linguistics*, 29, 578–596.

Muñoz, C. & Singleton, D. (2011). A critical review of age-related research on L2 ultimate attainment. *Language Teaching*, 44(1), 1–35.