

What's the best way to teach children a second language? New research produces surprising results

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People often assume that children learn new languages easily and without effort, regardless of the situation they find themselves in. But is

it really true that children soak up language like sponges?

Research [has shown](#) that [children](#) are highly successful learners if they have a lot of exposure to a new language over a long time, such as in the case of child immigrants who are surrounded by the new language all day, every day. In such a scenario, children become much more proficient in the new language over the long term than adults.

But if the amount of language children are exposed to is limited, as in classroom language learning, [children are slow learners](#) and overall less successful than teenagers or adults. How can we explain this apparent contrast?

[Researchers have argued](#) that children learn implicitly, that is, without conscious thought, reflection or effort. And implicit learning requires a large amount of language input over a long period of time.

As we get older, we develop the ability to [learn explicitly](#) – that is, analytically and with deliberate effort. Put differently, adults approach the learning task like scientists. This explains why more mature classroom learners have greater success: they can draw on more highly developed, efficient, explicit learning processes which also require more effort.

Which is best?

When it comes to learning a language, however, it is not a question of either implicit or explicit learning. They can coexist, so it is more often a question of how much of each approach is used.

[In our new study](#), we asked whether [younger children](#) who are generally thought to learn implicitly had already developed some ability to learn explicitly as well. What's more, we looked at whether the ability to

analyse language can predict [foreign language](#) learning success in the classroom.

We worked with over 100 Year 4 children, aged eight to nine, in five [primary schools](#) in England. The children took a number of tests, including a measure of their language learning aptitude, which assessed their ability to analyse language (language-analytic ability), to memorise language material (memory ability) and to handle language sounds (phonological awareness).

Over one [school](#) year, the children participated in language classes for 75 minutes per week. For this purpose, they were divided into four groups.

In the first half of the school year, each group was taught, respectively, German, Italian, Esperanto or Esperanto with a "focus-on-form method". This method involved the teacher drawing the children's attention to regular patterns in the language, asked them to think about what particular parts of words might mean or how sentences are put together in the language, for example. In other words, the children were encouraged to use their language-analytic ability, taking an explicit approach.

In the other groups, language was taught in a way that is typically used at primary school, that is, entirely playfully with games, songs and worksheets. This method is more likely to result in implicit learning.

In the second half of the school year, all groups experienced the same type of language class: they all learned French, taught with a focus-on-form method. For our study, we assessed the children's progress in French over the second half of the [school year](#) and then looked at whether any components of their aptitude—language-analytic ability, memory ability, phonological awareness—would predict their success in learning French.

If children learn implicitly, we would expect that memory ability would be most important. In other words, the ability to pick up language material as you hear and see it is most relevant. If children learn above all explicitly, we would expect that language-analytic ability would be most important.

The results

Differently to what people might expect, we found that the children's language-analytic ability was most important, followed by phonological awareness. These two abilities contributed to predicting the children's achievement in French, while memory ability was only marginally relevant. This suggests that children as young as eight or nine years can indeed learn explicitly to some extent, if the teaching method they experience encourages them to engage in analysis of the language to be learned.

Our results are in line with a [previous study](#) which directly compared children and adults experiencing different teaching methods. Here the researcher also found that learners' use of an explicit approach in the foreign language classroom did not exclusively depend on age, but on how learners were taught. This means that even younger children can approach a learning task like scientists.

Of course, it is important to note that children of primary school age are still developing their ability to learn explicitly. Therefore, we cannot expect to teach them languages in exactly the same way as we would teach teenagers or adults. But some activities that encourage children to consciously reflect on and analyse the language material to be learned can be introduced to make best use of the limited class time that is available for foreign [language](#) teaching.

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