

LEARNING A SECOND LANGUAGE...

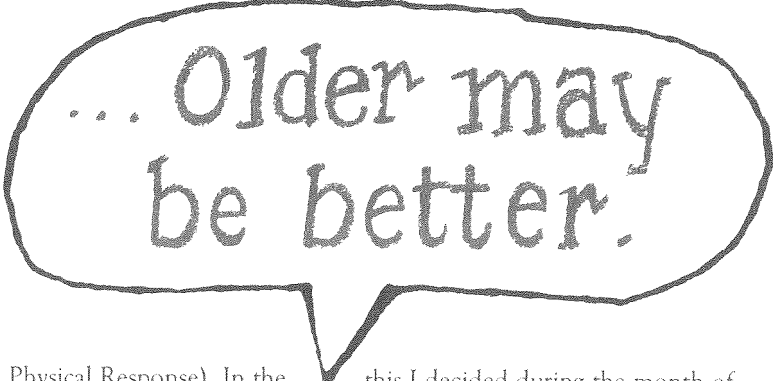


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For as many years as I have been studying and teaching Spanish I have been intrigued by the debate among teachers of second languages concerning children versus adult learning strategies. Coming from programs which emphasized a traditional literary approach to the study of a second language, I never had the opportunity in undergraduate or graduate school to study the issue in the classroom. This particular issue was left for informal discussion outside of the classroom. Very little hard evidence was presented in such settings, but fellow graduate students or teachers would recount success stories of one or two children which would then lead to the general conclusion that children learn second languages more easily than adults.

My years of teaching adults at Kennesaw State College and my years of studying Spanish with other adults caused me seriously to question the speculation regarding children success stories in foreign language study. Both in graduate school and at Kennesaw I have seen many adults who have successfully and rather quickly learned to communicate in Spanish. Also, during my years of teaching I thought that teachers should pay more attention to methodology and how different teaching methods affect children and adult learning strategies.

Last Spring when I read about the Teaching the Adult Learner Grant being offered through the Continuing Education Office at Kennesaw I knew that such a grant would give me the opportunity to investigate seriously the issue of child versus adult learning strategies in a second language. Fortunately my proposal was accepted and I was able to devote the past summer



... Older may
be better.

to research in an area which had concerned me all of my professional life. The research over the summer gave me enough material to write two papers: "Older May Be Better" and "Foreign Language Anxiety and Learner Beliefs in Adult Foreign Language Learning."

The first part of my project was devoted to a comprehensive search of the literature. This search proved to be essential to my work, and also offered some surprises. One particular surprise was that very little concrete research on this issue has been done by foreign language teachers. Most of the research has been done by English as a Second Language professionals and many articles dealing with this area appear in *TESOL*, the professional journal for teachers of English as a second language. When I questioned colleagues at other colleges and universities about the failure of those in my discipline to contribute to this area of research, I was reminded that most foreign language programs, both undergraduate and graduate, still continue to emphasize the traditional literary approach to the study of second languages. In fact, many foreign language departments in the United States fail to regard research in the area of learning as legitimate to their field. This seems to me, as well as to my colleagues at Kennesaw, to be a prejudice which has done a great deal to hurt our discipline. Therefore, we have resolved as a department to continue the research which the TAL grant allowed me to begin.

Shortly after I finished the search of the literature in early July, I began one of the most interesting, and for me the most difficult, parts of the project, a hands-on teaching experience with one group of children and one group of adults. For both groups I had designed a series of lessons which would allow me to test development of two skill areas (comprehension and speaking). The particular teaching method chosen for this part of the project was

TPR (Total Physical Response). In the future I hope to continue the project in order to test other teaching methods.

With the help of Mr. Greg Duncan, State Coordinator of Foreign Languages and Dr. Elaine McAllister, Coordinator of Foreign Languages at Kennesaw, I was able to participate in a program which allowed me, during the last two weeks of July, to teach fifteen five-year-old students for one hour daily. This proved to be the most terrifying and rewarding experience of my professional life. I had never before taught children and I must admit that I was unprepared for some of the spontaneity that this group brought to the classroom. During the same period of time I was able to convince fifteen adult students who had never before studied Spanish to participate in my project by allowing me to teach the same material to them.

At the end of the two-week period, both groups were given an oral test. This test proved to me that, at least in terms of the Total Physical Response Method the adult group, on some items, did just as well as the children, and on other items did better. The test results are recorded in my paper, "Older May Be Better." I chose this title because I realized that I have tested only one method on a small number of students for a short period of time. However, it is a beginning of an area of research which we must deal with if we are to strengthen adult foreign language programs in this country.

One unexpected result of the first study was an increased awareness on my part as a teacher of the important role of anxiety and learner beliefs in second language learners. My adult students sometimes let anxiety prohibit performance, and they would often tell me, without really knowing why, that "children learn more easily than I do." Or often times I would hear the adults say, "Oh, I wish I had started this when I was younger." Because of

this I decided during the month of August to investigate these two particular issues.

With a second group of adult learners (34) I administered two tests. To measure foreign language anxiety I used the *Foreign Language Anxiety Scale* developed by Horwitz, Horwitz, and Cope at the University of Texas. The second test, the *BALLI (Beliefs About Language Learning Inventory)* was used to survey student opinion on a variety of issues and controversies related to language learning including: (1) difficulty of language learning; (2) foreign language aptitude; (3) the nature of language learning; (4) learning and communication strategies; and (5) motivations and expectations. My goal was to determine if any of the beliefs inventoried by the *BALLI* were associated with higher levels of student anxiety. I sent my findings to Dr. Elaine Horwitz at the University of Texas because she was running similar experiments throughout the United States. We found several significant relationships between the two tests. For example, students who disagreed with the statement, "I have foreign language aptitude" were significantly more anxious than students who agreed with it. The tests revealed that anxious students would seem to believe that only some people are inherently able to learn a language and that they were not part of this group. Such information could be very valuable when teaching adults and could alter teaching strategies.

The TAL grant opened for me a rich area for research. My search of the literature revealed that we have much to do in this area. My pilot classes of children and adults may in some small way help to dispel the notion that children always learn a second language more easily. The unexpected insight into anxiety and learner beliefs will enrich my teaching of adults for many years. ●