

**Age Effects in a Minimal Input Setting on the Acquisition
of English Morpho-Syntactic and Semantic Properties
by L1 Speakers of Arabic**

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Abstract

This thesis reports a study of the effects on long-term proficiency of starting to learn English in a minimal input setting (the classroom) at different ages. A total of 132 Saudi Arabian college students participated in the study, 50 of whom started learning English in elementary school (3-11 years) and 82 in middle school (12-13 years), along with a control group of 11 native speakers. Previous research has generally found no significant starting age effect on long-term proficiency in minimal input settings (although Larson-Hall (2008) is an exception). The focus of the present study was on five linguistic properties that differ between English and Saudi Arabic: vP ellipsis, the use of ‘resumptive’ pronouns, adverb placement, the contrast in meaning between progressive/habitual forms, and the contrast in meaning between preterite/present perfect forms. Data relating to knowledge of these properties and relevant individual factors were collected through an Acceptability Judgment Task, Aspectual Interpretation Task, Gap-Filling Task, Cloze test, and background questionnaire.

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Results showed no statistically significant effect of starting age on second language (L2) performance, but clear effects of property type. Across varying ages of L2 learning, vP ellipsis, the use of resumptives and the interpretation of the preterite/present perfect contrast emerge as the most problematic, whereas adverb placement and the interpretation of the progressive/habitual contrast appear as the least problematic for L2 learners.

The implications of these findings for claims about a possible 'critical period' for language acquisition, for the causes of persistent L2 speaker divergence from native speakers, and for the best age to introduce foreign language learning in a classroom setting are discussed.