

Individual Paper Session 19
Phonology
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Age and the degree of foreign accent in English: the case of children and adults

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Growing research evidence is showing that there are some adult learners who achieve native-like proficiency in their L2 and emphasizes the necessity to study these learners in greater detail (Marinova-Todd et al., 2000). Here I present my research on the pronunciation outcomes of highly proficient adult learners in order to highlight their often-neglected achievements and to explore the effect of age of first exposure to the L2 on their L2 performance.

The sample consisted of 30 adult native speakers of English and 30 adult highly proficient L2 learners of English. The subjects' pronunciation was rated by native-speakers on a 5-point scale, and comparisons were made between the two groups. Similarly, the degree of foreign accent of young L2 learning children (5 to 6 year olds) was compared to the pronunciation of native English-speaking children of the same age. Results revealed that across both age groups, the L2 learners rated below the level of native speakers on pronunciation. Therefore, opposite to the commonly-held belief that children lose their accents in the L2 much faster than adults, this study shows that achieving native-like pronunciation in the L2 for kids is a laborious and time-consuming process, a finding also confirmed in a recent study by Flege et al. (in press). Moreover, among children, the monolingual group showed a lot more variation in their accent ratings than the adult monolingual group. In addition, at least 30% to 40% of L2 learners of both age groups scored within the native range on accent ratings.

These findings are inconsistent with the notion of a critical period for L2 acquisition and are explained with the contexts in which the L2 is learned and the different types of L2 input provided to children and adults.