Dissertation Title:
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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Summary:
This dissertation 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: verb phrase 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.

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, verb phrase
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.
References


