

INDIVIDUAL LEARNER FACTORS

AGE

Age is a significant individual learner factor because a person's stage of development affects their learning processes, cognitive abilities, and even their motivation. Learning is not a uniform process across a lifespan; it changes as we move from childhood through adulthood and into old age.

Childhood and Adolescence

This is often considered the **critical or sensitive period** for language acquisition. Young children's brains are highly plastic, meaning they are more flexible and can form new neural connections easily. This allows them to acquire a first language (and often a second) naturally and effortlessly through exposure, with native-like pronunciation.

- **Implicit Learning:** Children are excellent implicit learners, meaning they can absorb new information, especially complex systems like grammar, without conscious effort. This is why they learn language so quickly without formal instruction.
 - **Rapid Cognitive Growth:** During these years, cognitive abilities like working memory, attention span, and processing speed are developing, which impacts how they learn.
 - **The "Age Advantage" in Language:** The brain's plasticity, particularly in phonology (sound systems), gradually decreases after early childhood and into adolescence. This is why it's more challenging for adults to achieve a native-like accent in a new language.
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Adulthood and Older Age

As we get older, our learning abilities change but don't necessarily decline overall. While some abilities may slow, others improve.

- **Explicit Learning:** Adults are more effective at **explicit learning**. They can consciously analyze rules, use problem-solving skills, and apply logical reasoning to learn new things. This is an advantage in formal educational settings.
- **Prior Knowledge:** Adults have a vast amount of accumulated knowledge and experience. They can connect new information to what they already know, leading to deeper understanding and more meaningful learning.
- **Physiological Changes:** The aging brain undergoes changes, which can lead to a decline in processing speed and some aspects of memory (like short-term memory). However, other skills, like crystallized intelligence (accumulated knowledge and wisdom), remain stable or even improve.
- **Motivation and Social Factors:** Adult learners are often more motivated by specific goals (e.g., career advancement or personal interest). However, they may also face more challenges due to external factors like work and family commitments, and may be more anxious about making mistakes.

In summary, age doesn't determine a person's ability to learn, but it does affect **how** they learn and what their strengths and weaknesses are at different life stages.

