

Pronunciationforteachers.com/ Key Concepts

The Window of Maximal Opportunity for Pronunciation Learning

The Window of Maximal Opportunity (WMO) is a term coined by Derwing and Munro (2015) to refer to a period of time during which adult second-language learners show maximal growth in pronunciation skills. On the basis of their own longitudinal research and prior cross-sectional studies, they proposed that the largest gains in many aspects of pronunciation generally occur during the first 6 to 8 months of massive exposure to a new language. After that time, pronunciation learning continues to be possible. However, acquisition trajectories vary considerably across individual learners, and specific intervention may be required for useful change to occur in some L2 speakers.

Age, experience and pronunciation learning

A long-standing discussion in second-language acquisition concerns the best time for learning pronunciation. There are two facets to this issue. One concerns the optimal *age* for learning; the second has to do with the *time frame*, after acquisition has begun, during which the learner is most likely to benefit from instruction and L2 experience. To ensure clarity, both these dimensions are considered below; however, it is the issue of time frame that pertains directly to the WMO.

Numerous research studies have explored the relationship between age of L2 learning (AOL) and achievement in pronunciation. In most of these investigations AOL is considered to be the age at which massive exposure to the new language first occurs; achievement is measured in terms of strength of foreign accent. The current consensus is that AOL correlates highly with foreign accentedness: the older the learner, the stronger the accent tends to be. This relationship is important for understanding language learning processes and is often summed up by the phrase “younger is better.” However, the usefulness of this maxim in language teaching and communicative learning is minimal. As recent research has shown, accentedness is an unsatisfactory metric for pronunciation success because speaking with even a strong accent does not necessarily block successful communication (Munro & Derwing, 1995). Moreover, AOL is not a variable that either a teacher or a learner can control. In pedagogical research, then, the role of AOL must be set aside, and the focus must instead be placed on the ways in which instruction can improve comprehensibility and intelligibility when those aspects of their speech hold L2 speakers back. It is here that the role of the WMO comes into play.

Pedagogy and the WMO

Three long-standing questions are directly pertinent to WMO research:

- Does pronunciation learning occur in adults through L2 experience alone (without explicit instruction), and if so, to what degree and over what time interval?
- Should pronunciation be taught right from the beginning of L2 instruction or is it better to wait until other aspects of the language have been partially acquired?

- Can pronunciation instruction still be effective even after many years of residence in a new country?

Although researchers are still gathering evidence on these issues, findings from several studies have provided a number of useful clues. When Flege (1988) explored accentedness he found no difference in the ratings assigned to speakers who had resided in the US for 1 year and those with 5 years of residence. He interpreted this outcome as evidence that “unaided” language experience may not assist pronunciation learning after an initial brief period shortly after arrival. His proposal led Piske, MacKay and Flege (2001) to call for longitudinal research to probe the phenomenon more deeply.

In several published papers, Derwing and colleagues (e.g., Derwing & Munro, 2013; Derwing, Munro & Thomson, 2008) reported on a longitudinal study of naturalistic learning in two groups of adult immigrants to Canada, beginning shortly after their arrival and continuing for 10 years. At the outset of the study the learners (25 Mandarin, 25 Slavic language) were young adults with beginner-level oral language skills. Although all were registered in ESL classes, none received systematic pronunciation instruction.

An illustration of a key finding of the research is shown in Figure 1. In this part of the investigation (Munro & Derwing, 2008), vowel intelligibility was assessed over several intervals between the outset and year 10. While both groups showed improved vowel production during the first year, the largest changes were by 6 months for the Slavic group and by 8 months for the Mandarin group. The figure illustrates findings for the Slavic group only, with continued, but less improvement after the first year (improvement is indicated by the size of the arrow), slight improvement after the second year, and no measurable improvement after the seventh. These findings point to a WMO for vowel learning during about the first 6 to 8 months of uninstructed experience.

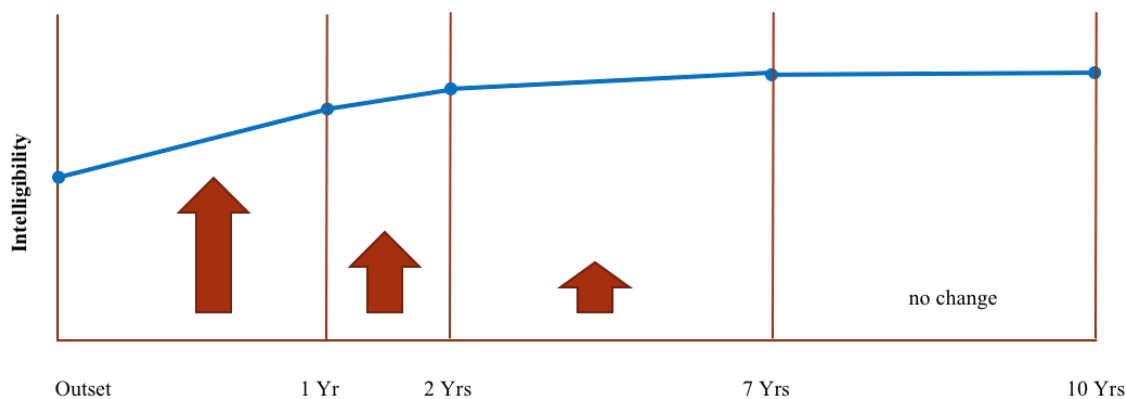


Figure 1: Slavic speakers' vowel intelligibility as a function of years in Canada

Evaluations were also carried out on other aspects of the learners' speech, including the global dimensions of accentedness, comprehensibility, and fluency. While the Slavic group generally improved more than the Mandarin group, neither group showed changes in accentedness after year 2. On the other hand, the Slavic group alone continued to become more comprehensible and more fluent after year 2, long after they had left their ESL classes. In one further part of the

study, it was found that Slavic productions of aspirated word-initial /p/ improved substantially during the first 10 months, but did not change thereafter.

Taken together, these research findings confirm that pronunciation learning can indeed occur through L2 experience alone, although it is not guaranteed, since the Mandarin group did not show the same changes as the Slavic group. In general, the largest improvements occur relatively soon after arrival, with less change after the first several months.

Although we cannot draw conclusions about teaching directly from naturalistic data, the evidence supporting learners' amenability to acquiring pronunciation skills soon after arrival suggests that teachers should begin pronunciation instruction as early as possible on those aspects of their speech that interfere with intelligibility and comprehensibility. That interpretation is consistent with the position of Zielinski and Yates (2014), who argued that early intervention is more beneficial and easier to carry out than delayed instruction. Nonetheless, even when the opportunity to exploit the WMO has been missed, comprehensibility and intelligibility can improve as a result of instruction, as demonstrated in a number of studies in which so-called "fossilized" learners have received focused interventions (Derwing, Munro, Foote, Waugh, & Fleming, 2014; Derwing, Munro & Wiebe, 1997). Ultimately, though, it would be much preferable for learners to get instruction early on, so that they will not need remediation for serious pronunciation difficulties in the future.

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