

## **Can't I do Pronunciation Later? or Why Children are Different**

Seems such a pain. Not only do you have to struggle with new words, genders, lenition, prepositions you can conjugate, irregular verbs, question particles and two ways of saying my dog, two ways of counting, a new way of looking at the world and so little time.

So why add pronunciation to all that when you could happily ignore it until later? Or can you? Depending on how well you know Akerbeltz by now, you will probably have guessed the answer is a resounding you can't. Unfortunately. Believe me, I'm not taking some kind of obscene pleasure in telling you this, because it will initially make your life more complicated. But lying to you would be counterproductive.

There are two things you need to understand about this. The first one is about native speaker acceptance, levels of tolerance and what YOU want. The second is about pimples, puberty and phonology.

### **Tolerance and What YOU Want**

Why you are learning Gaelic. Do you want to be able to hold a small conversation? Do you want to use it for trading and simply need some stock phrases and numbers? Are you going on a holiday and want to be able to read road signs? Do you want to become fairly fluent or fully fluent so you can communicate in a different language? Or do you want to work or live in a different language community and want to integrate better? Are you "chasing your roots"? Do you have children in Gaelic medium Education and want to help/understand them? Are you trying to prove your Scottishness?

There are many reasons why people learn languages, probably as many as there are people. So far, so good. It is also true that for very basic communication you do not need much more than a smattering of words and phrases and can ignore things like grammar and phonology for the most part.

But as soon as your aim is a medium to high level of fluency, both grammar and phonology (the way the sounds of a language work together) become far more important. At this point, it begins to influence the way people perceive you as a language learner. The degree of accuracy you achieve will directly raise or lower your "linguistic standing". A friend of mine for example still recalls the day he was having a conversation with a number of people who kept asking him "how deep?" every time he said "I think" – because being a native German speaker he kept saying "I sink". We have all heard jokes like that, people everywhere on the planet make them. Not necessarily because they are mean or vicious about other people speaking their language - in most cases people will be very pleased you are trying to speak in their language - but there are those times when the words coming out of the foreigners mouth are just plain and simply funny. As the poor European who tried to say "one year has four seasons" in Cantonese and had the whole room laughing. He got the oh-so-important tones wrong and as it turns out he had actually said that "one lotus has a dead turtle". When they explained this to him, he had to laugh himself.

But there is even more to it. Speakers of English are accustomed to hearing a huge number of different accents of English since it is the Lingua Franca of the 21st century. So in a way it doesn't matter that much. But speakers of minoritised languages generally are not accustomed to hearing anything but native speakers – languages like Gaelic are generally not learned by adults or at haven't been in the past.

So while making grammatical mistakes is something we all do – even in our native language – people very rarely produce sounds that are not permissible in their native language. No matter how drunk you get, you will still be obeying the sound laws for your language (in this case, the rules for slurred English).

So while many native Gaels are lax about their grammar in some respects they all intuitively have correct pronunciation. *Thuit an dà bhròg air an t-sràid nuair a bha 'dol dhachaigh* is perfectly good Gaelic, never mind the lack of the dual number slenderisation in bròg and dropping vowels, this is spoken language we're talking. If they now come across a learner who has perfect pronunciation and slightly shaky grammar, they feel "at home" and will communicate with you in relative comfort. On the other hand, you can cause our poor native speaker no end of pain if your grammar is 100% perfect but your pronunciation ghastly. And as a result you are immediately identified as an "alien invader".

While this shouldn't encourage you to ignore correct grammar, on balance it is the lesser evil of the two. It really pays to drill yourself in correct Gaelic pronunciation even if it slows you down initially. In some cases, your ears may never learn to hear the difference between the 3 Gaelic L sounds, but at least you can learn to make them correctly so they will "sound right" to a native speaker.

Incidentally, there is another subtle difference between your average German learning English and your average Scot learning Gaelic. Hardly any German is learning English to "recover their ancestral tongue" if you pardon the flamboyant expression. But most learners of Gaelic have some sense that they are re-learning a language they ought to have learnt as children - so the aims is totally different. The German is acquiring a tool to travel, work etc. Your average Gaelic learner is trying to achieve fluency in his or her "native" tongue ... so bad mistakes take on yet another dimension.

### **Why Children are Different**

We all know intuitively that children are so much better at learning languages. Or have experienced this ourselves, after all, we all speak our native language fluently without being able to explain what a low falling tone is, what an ergative is and why English has irregular plurals.

This unfortunately has led some people to deduce that adults are so much worse at learning languages because we do not learn them the "natural" way children learn. By listening, emulating, jabbering a lot, no pens, papers, vocabulary lists and declension tables. Erm ... isn't that a bit like saying that the lawn is wet because the sprinkler was on in the morning and deduce that because the lawn is wet now, the sprinkler had been on? Not really, it could have been raining ...

Children do learn their native language(s) in the said way, even if you can't get two linguists to actually agree how exactly they do it. But whatever this mechanism is, unfortunately for us, it operates within a very short time window. Remember the bit about pimples, puberty and phonology? In a nutshell, we lose the ability to learn languages as native languages, perfectly and without needing formal instruction, around the time we reach puberty.

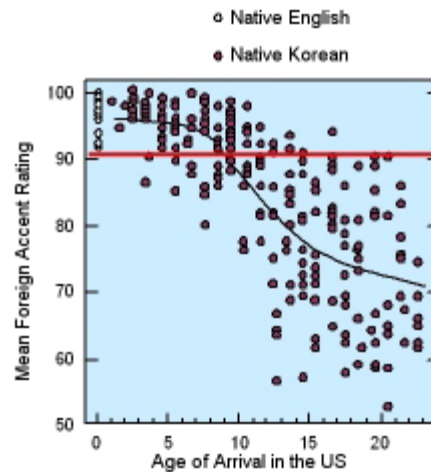
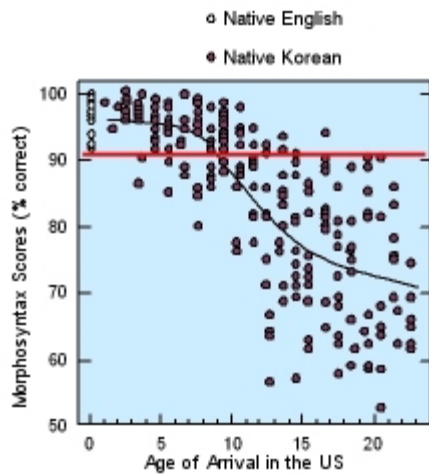
But at the same time we gain something lovingly referred to as Cognitive Skills. Powers of analysing, structuring, ordering, seeing patterns, memorising in a structured way and suchlike. This doesn't mean that children are stupid, we just get that much better at it during puberty and beyond. Which is why people in many parts of this world, from the Sanskrit grammarians to the first Chinese dictionary written in 100AD, from ESL programmes to Adult Immersion Courses in New Zealand have used tables, pen and paper to hammer something into our heads that would have been best learned when we were 4, but for whatever reason are trying to learn now. Through necessity in a different way, not because language teachers are sadists (although some might well be!)

This time window affects every aspect of language, grammar, vocabulary, phonology and phonetics. And this is why we have to drill ourselves when we come to learn a new language, because we don't just pick it up anymore the way we used to when we were 4. But this still doesn't explain why you can't leave it till later, or does it? In a way it does. Think of Gaelic as an empty database in your brain which you gradually fill with data. Words, sounds, how to make them and how to put it all together. Now if you start building your database and fill it full of words with the wrong pronunciation because you have decided to leave it until later, what do you think will happen later when you decide to improve your pronunciation? It gets tricky. Your brain has already stored hundreds if not thousands of entries by then - you need to edit them all, and the editing we are talking of here isn't as straightforward as going into the MS Office Custom Dictionary and amending the entries. It's not impossible perhaps, but near enough. Wouldn't that be so much easier? I'll leave you to decide that.

### **"Older is Faster but Younger is Better"**

This is just an addendum if you want to know more about this puberty cutoff. There is a lot of research out there to prove all this, but one of the best ones I have come across so far is by Snow, Hoefnagel-Höhle (1982) The Critical Period for Language Acquisition (in Krashen, Scarcella & Long (eds.) Child-Adult Differences in Second Language Acquisition. Rowley, Newbury House).

Basically what happens in the first stage of adult vs child language learning (if both are faced with a new language) is that adults initially outperform children on almost all accounts, from pronunciation over comprehension to production. But just after this period children and adolescents suddenly make the jump to lightspeed and literally leave their adult counterparts lightyears behind. Here's two graphs that show this quite clearly (re-created after Flege & Yeni-Komshian & Liu (1999) Age Constraints on Second Language Acquisition. Journal of Memory and Language 41):



The white dots in the top left corner are the native speakers. The fact that they are all clustered up there tells us that all the native speakers score between ~90-100% in tests on pronunciation and grammaticality. The spread of the brown dots shows that depending on when you get immersed in a language, you have a good chance of scoring as highly as a native speaker - or not. The red line represents the lowest score achieved by native speakers, the cutoff line if you so will. Anyone below that line makes more ungrammatical sentences or has a recognisably foreign accent. This means ...

... that the first thing to go is correct acquisition of the sound system. If you expose young children under the age of 5 to a non-native language, almost all of them will not have much of a foreign accent. But this percentage drops rapidly and children exposed at the age of ten will not acquire the sound system as perfectly as native children. Once you hit 12-15, you basically end up with a mild foreign accent, start after 20 and you definitely will.

"Grammar" has a bit more of a window. Here essentially any child exposed to a new language before the age of 12 will acquire native like skills, Wait until you're 15 and you lose.

And strangely enough (or maybe not) for most adults the length of their exposure does little to affect their perceived foreign accent - it seems to stick. So, train your tongue. And don't believe anyone who tells you that as an adult you can pick up a language "naturally" like a child does. It just doesn't work. Not if you want to be good at it.