The acquisition of the Spanish personal preposition *a* by adult English learners of Spanish
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The issue of Critical Period (Lenneberg, 1967) in adult second language (L2) acquisition has been the focus of a wealth of research. The idea behind the Critical Period is that there exists a cut-off threshold (i.e., onset of puberty) by which it becomes virtually impossible to acquire the parameterized forms of a language (Johnson and Newport, 1989, 1991). To that end, this paper focuses on age effects on L2 acquisition of a phenomenon which lies at the semantic-syntax interface, with the aim of addressing the Critical Period Hypothesis.

This paper draws amongst others on Sorace’s (2004) and Serratrice et al.’s (2004) claim that structures involving linguistic phenomena at the interface of syntax with other linguistic domains (e.g., semantic, pragmatics and discourse) are difficult to acquire and more vulnerable than the ones involving only syntax proper. We address this issue by inspecting the acquisition of the personal preposition *a* in English L2 learners of Spanish. We hypothesise that in L2 Spanish acquisition, learners who have been first exposed to their L2 before puberty can successfully acquire it, whilst learners who have been first exposed to their L2 only after puberty will have persistent problems with the acquisition of this interface phenomenon.

The distribution of *a* in direct object NPs in Spanish relates to the syntax-semantics interface: definiteness/specificity of the NP, animacy/agentivity of the subject, and verb semantics (Torrego 1998; Zagona 2002). For instance, *a* is obligatory when the direct object is [+human], as in (1), and [+specific], as in (2).

(1) Ayer vi *a* los vecinos. vs. Ayer visité el hospital.
    yesterday I-saw the neighbours vs. yesterday I-visited the hospital

(2) Busco *a* una secretaria. vs. Busco una secretaria.
   I-am-looking for a (specific) secretary vs. I-am-looking-for some secretary

In addition, with stative and activity verbs, *a* is required only when the subject is animate, but verbs of accomplishment and achievement require *a* with animate direct objects, regardless of whether or not the subject is animate, as shown in (3) and (4).

(3) Inés conoce *a* varios artistas vs. El cine conoce varios artistas.
    Inés knows various artists vs. the cinema knows various artists

(4) El vino emborracho *a* varios invitados
   the wine made-drunk *a* several guests

We hypothesize that learners who were exposed to their L2 before puberty can successfully acquire the preposition *a*, whilst learners who were exposed to their L2 after puberty will show persistent problems with the acquisition of this interface phenomenon.

To address this issue, 40 English L2 learners of Spanish with the same proficiency level participated in this study; half were exposed to Spanish before puberty, and the other half after puberty. 20 age-matched Spanish L1 speakers participated as a control group. All participants carried out an oral story-retelling, an elicitation, and a written gap-filling task. Preliminary results show omission of *a* and individual variation in L2 learners, but the pre-puberty L2 learners were closer to the native speakers than the post-puberty ones. This indicates their difficulty in acquiring structures involving the syntax-semantics interface and supports Sorace’s and Serratrice et al.’s view.
References