

## Second Language Acquisition

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### Introduction

There is a general consensus amongst critics that age plays a significant role in second language acquisition, however, there is great debate over what exactly this role is. The common belief is that as we age our ability to attain language successfully gradually declines. This is explained by the Critical Period Hypothesis (Penfield and Roberts, 1959) which suggests that before puberty our linguistic functions become lateralized, forcing language acquisition to occur via an alternative route. Before the offset of the Critical Period it is believed that learning occurs through our implicit learning mechanisms; that is, ‘we acquire new knowledge without intending to do so’ (Cleeremans et al., 1998: 406). This is contrasted with the post-pubertal acquisition of language in which we must consciously employ our explicit learning mechanisms in order to learn a language.

This is important as it implies that successful acquisition is determined by the environment we learn in. For children to capitalize on their strong implicit learning mechanisms they should be placed in a naturalistic environment where they are surrounded by the target language. In opposition, adults prove more successful when in an instructed environment as they can apply their developed learning strategies to promote faster attainment.

I will be interviewing Barbara Nielsen, a woman who has learnt several foreign languages throughout her lifetime, in order to investigate whether her age has affected her ability to acquire foreign languages over time and whether she has had to adapt her learning strategies to enable greater success. The various arguments proposed by different critics has prevented us from gaining a clear insight into the age issue, therefore, I will conduct my own investigation in the hope of obtaining greater clarity. It is important to establish whether age affects language acquisition, and if so in what ways, so that we can shape future educational policies, and promote the successful acquisition of foreign languages.

### Literature Review

The effect of age in second language acquisition has typically been explored through the notion of a ‘critical period.’ Penfield and Roberts’ Critical Period Hypothesis (1959) proposes that there is a biologically determined phase in which we can acquire a second language, after which, any attempt to acquire native-like proficiency becomes more difficult and, consequently, less probable. The offset of this period has been greatly debated and a wide range of ages have been suggested, with Hyltenstam and Abrahamsson (2003) believing it to begin immediately after birth and Lenneberg (1967) claiming it to be at the end of puberty. There is, however, biological evidence for Lenneberg’s assertion that the terminus of the critical period occurs at the end of puberty, as by this stage lateralization of linguistic functions in the left hemisphere has occurred, which decreases the brain’s plasticity (Penfield and Roberts, 1959), and by association, its ability to adapt and acquire a new language. After lateralization ‘foreign languages have to be...learned through a conscious and laborious

effort,' thus implying a transition has occurred from the learner's reliance upon implicit mechanisms in language acquisition to a dependence upon explicit mechanisms (Lenneberg, 1967: 176).

This change in the mechanisms the brain uses for second language acquisition after puberty has been proposed by both the Fundamental Difference Hypothesis (Bley-Vroman, 1988) and by Dekeyser (2000). The Fundamental Difference Hypothesis explores how children obtain a foreign language by using their implicit learning mechanisms, whilst adults must consciously employ the problem-solving strategies they have acquired with age. The cognitive maturity that adults are perceived as possessing explains the tenet the older the better, which suggests that older learners perform better in formal, instructed learning environments as they can utilize their pre-existing learning strategies to maximise their potential, something children appear incapable of doing. This hypothesis works alongside the notion the younger the better which predicts that in naturalistic environments children will have greater success in acquiring language than adults as they can capitalize on the rich interactions they are subjected to. This is supported by observational studies which discovered that children outperformed adults in second language acquisition when immersed into a foreign country.

There are certain areas within foreign language acquisition in which children appear to have superior skills to adults. According to Munoz (2006: 12) 'younger learners usually show an advantage on oral comprehension and pronunciation tests', which Harley (1986: 8) believes is down to the 'maturational turning point' that occurs at puberty and prevents adult learners from easily acquiring a second language. The fact that native-like pronunciation is normally an unobtainable skill for adult learners is explained by the localisation of our linguistic functions, which suggests that aspects of language develop independently and as such occur at different rates, thus implying the existence of multiple critical periods. As pronunciation has a neuromuscular basis it is deemed as a 'low-level function' and is consequently believed to become completely lateralized before the 'first year of life' (Molfese, 1977: 206). This suggests that a failure to be exposed to the target language before the age of one will have a negative effect on overall language acquisition.

This was supported by Seliger who proposed the existence of multiple critical periods: Because localization does not take place at once, but affects different aspects of language at different periods of life, one would expect a different timetable to evolve in terms of different language abilities. That is, there would be many critical periods, successive and perhaps overlapping, lasting probably throughout one's lifetime, each closing off different acquisition abilities. (Seliger, 1978:16)

And yet there are some people who are deemed as outside the critical period who still manage to acquire native-like proficiency in all aspects of second language acquisition, implying that it is not always a reliable predictor for successful learning. This has given rise to the concept of a 'sensitive period' which is a softer alternative to the 'critical period' (Knudsen, 2004). The sensitive period suggests that our brain undergoes a period of heightened sensitivity in which it is more susceptible to a certain type of stimulus. As a consequence, upon being presented with such a stimulus the brain responds more effectively than one would normally expect.

In addition to the cognitive explanations for age effects already mentioned, there are several other cognitive factors which also affect language acquisition. Confidence is an important factor as children are typically less inhibited than adults when it comes to adopting a persona and practising foreign accents, which inevitably effects overall performance. Furthermore, we can regard the success that children obtain in naturalistic environments as due to the fact they are more highly motivated to interact with the other children they encounter at school than their parents are. As well as this they have fewer attachments to their

first language and have a weaker sense of identity, enabling them to fully embrace the language and culture of the host environment.

## **Methodology**

### **The Participating Learner**

The language learner who participated in my study is Barbara Nielsen, a British National who has acquired numerous languages throughout her lifetime. Barbara's L1 is, and has always been, English, despite the subsequent languages she has obtained. From birth she was raised in a bilingual household, where her mother spoke English and her father a mixture of English and Danish. Regardless of this bilingual environment, Barbara is not fluent in Danish, but is able to produce a native-like Danish accent and comprehend a substantial amount of the language.

Upon starting grammar school (age 11) Barbara was taught French, which she continued to study at university level and gained native-like proficiency in it after living in France for a year. Whilst also at school Barbara studied German between the ages of 13 and 18 and Latin between the ages of 12 and 16, demonstrating how she was exposed to several languages from a young age. Whilst studying French at university Barbara undertook a subsidiary module in Swedish (age 18) which she later became quite proficient in after living in Sweden for three months.

After spending an immersion week in Spain, Barbara, now in her fifties, has started to acquire Spanish with relative ease. I decided to interview Barbara because of her diverse linguistic background and the aptitude she appears to have for language learning. Furthermore, her occupation as a Primary School Languages Consultant in Nottingham- where she trains classroom teachers how to teach students a foreign language- means that she is able to reflect on her own language learning experiences which is an essential criteria for an interviewee as it will allow me to obtain rich, meaningful data.

### **The Interview Schedule**

The questions I selected for the interview were influenced by my knowledge of Barbara's unusual language learning background. I was aware that she had gained proficiency in French at quite a young age and that she had recently started learning Spanish; so I felt she would be an ideal candidate as I could compare her learning experiences in both languages. I wanted to ascertain whether or not her linguistic abilities had changed over time, and if so in what areas or ways. I also wanted to know if she had adapted her learning techniques and/or environment in any way. I wanted to establish whether age had affected either Barbara's motivation or confidence in foreign language acquisition, which would, consequently, affect her success rate. I did not, however, want Barbara to feel that I was influencing her answers and so I tried to generate questions which were neutral in tone. The last question I asked assured Barbara a freedom to speak and allowed her to contribute anything she considered to be of importance.

### **The Procedures I used**

The learner was my friend's mother, so I telephoned her and enquired further about her experiences with foreign language acquisition. As a languages consultant the topic was of great interest to Barbara and so she agreed to be interviewed. Before I conducted the interview I asked Barbara to reflect upon her own linguistic experiences and to consider how she had approached learning each language. We then arranged a suitable date for the interview. I recorded the interview using a Dictaphone and did not encounter any problems.

In fact, Barbara was able to provide a lot of rich information with very little prompting which consequently made the interview process a lot easier.

### **Analysis**

#### Introduction

The Critical Period Hypothesis indicates a clear terminus, normally considered as puberty, after which, native-like proficiency in a foreign language becomes highly improbable. Beyond this offset point, any attempt to learn a foreign language requires a ‘conscious or laboured effort’ (Lenneberg, 1967: 176). Nonetheless, my interviewee, Barbara Nielsen, contradicts such research studies by describing her experiences learning Spanish, more than thirty years after the terminus of the critical period, as ‘quite easy.’ For this reason it is important to examine Barbara’s linguistic history so that we can determine whether age has affected her ability to acquire foreign languages.

#### Learning Spanish in an naturalistic environment

Barbara’s acquisition of Spanish is extraordinary because of her ability to become relatively proficient after only one week of immersion. Due to Barbara’s age, we would have expected any proficiency in a foreign language to be obtained in an instructed environment. This is because the Critical Period is supposed to affect our implicit learning mechanisms (DeKeyser: 2000), forcing subsequent language acquisition to occur via an alternate route. Bley-Vroman’s Fundamental Difference Hypothesis (1990) proposes that after the offset of the critical period, we no longer have access to Universal Grammar, obliging us to employ our external learning mechanisms in order to acquire language. Nonetheless, Barbara’s week of immersion proved her ability to rely upon her implicit learning mechanisms, suggesting that they had not been affected by the offset of the critical period.

#### Barbara’s reliance upon her implicit learning mechanisms

Barbara’s dependence upon her implicit learning mechanisms is apparent by her comment: ‘my brain knows what it has to do; it knows to pick out key phrases.’ This statement proves Barbara’s ability to acquire language without conscious awareness, thus contradicting Lenneberg’s statement that language learning after the offset of the critical period requires ‘a conscious and laboured effort’ (1976: 176). It also opposes DeKeyser’s statement that:

Somewhere between the ages of 6-7 and 16-17, everybody loses the mental equipment required for the implicit induction of the abstract patterns underlying a human language (2000: 518).

DeKeyser’s report is somewhat limited as it proposes that the critical period affects all individuals in the same way. Despite this, Barbara clearly demonstrates that language acquisition is subject to individual differences. Her ability to acquire language implies that the terminus of the critical period does not always cause the brain to become progressively rigid, suggesting it affects some people more than others.

#### Barbara’s reliance upon her explicit learning mechanisms

Nevertheless, Barbara also illustrated a reliance upon her explicit learning mechanisms, claiming to ‘listen for intonation’ in order to help her extract meaning. According to N. Ellis explicit learning ‘is a conscious operation whereby the individual makes and tests hypotheses in search of structure’ (1994:1); this is something Barbara appeared to do, as is apparent by her admission that ‘[she] can replace nouns for nouns.’ This demonstrates how Barbara purposefully focuses upon the abstract patterns underlying language, a skill enhanced by the ‘very developed learning strategies’ she possesses.

Barbara's profession as a languages consultant means that she understands the most effective ways to learn language. This is evident by the fact she believes that in the future her attempt to learn Spanish will be 'easy' as it will just require some 'swatting' and 'grammar-bashing.' This illustrates how efficiently Barbara can learn a new language as she is aware of the most effective means which enable acquisition. Consequently, she is capable of employing such explicit strategies when in a naturalistic environment, as is apparent from her immersion in Spain, and thus benefits from the rich input available to her.

#### The co-operation of both of Barbara's explicit and implicit learning mechanisms

What this suggests is that Barbara is able to utilise both her advanced implicit and explicit learning mechanisms in conjunction with one another in order to promote successful language acquisition. The advantage of combining both of these mechanisms was highlighted by Cleeremans et al., (1998) who discovered that if you focus a learner's attention upon the explicit underlying rules, performance in implicit learning improved. This suggests that successful language acquisition after puberty, the proposed age of the offset of the critical period, must depend upon the adult employing both of these mechanisms. This was supported firstly by R. Ellis (1994) who believed that explicit knowledge, if unaccompanied, would not enable successful acquisition of a second language, and secondly by DeKeyser (2000) who believed that adults lose their capacity to learn implicitly after the terminus of the critical period. Therefore, foreign language acquisition depends upon both our explicit and implicit learning mechanisms working efficiently.

#### Barbara's unaccented pronunciation in Swedish is due to both of these mechanisms

The importance of the co-operation of both mechanisms was highlighted by Barbara's acquisition of a native-like accent. Barbara explained that her attempt to produce a Swedish accent was inhibited by the interference of her Danish accent. However, she overcame this because her implicit mechanisms enabled her to differentiate between the tones being produced and she consciously watched the oral production of native Spanish speakers and then replicated the way they formed speech. This is significant as most people lose the ability to differentiate between accentual tones after lateralization of our linguistic functions occurs. This implies that Barbara has not been affected by the offset of the critical period. We must, therefore, attribute Barbara's success to her highly advanced explicit and implicit learning mechanisms and their ability to work in conjunction with one another.

#### Barbara's native-like accents are remarkable as they undermine the CPH

The fundamental means by which Barbara appears to defy the Critical Period Hypothesis is most apparent in her ability to produce native-like accents in all her languages. The Critical Period Hypothesis suggests that:

Puberty represents a maturational turning point in the ability to master a native-like accent in a second language, after which foreign accents cannot be overcome easily (Harley, 1986: 8).

Research reveals that native-like pronunciation should be one of the hardest areas to gain proficiency in because it is a low-level function and as such probably becomes lateralized 'within the first year of life' (Molfese, 1977: 206). Despite this, Barbara was mistaken for a native of France, Spain and Sweden whilst staying in each of these countries, even though she had not had any previous exposure to any of these languages before the offset of the critical period. This suggests that lateralization of linguistic functions is either reversible or it is not as rigid as initially supposed. Whilst one might argue that Barbara's exposure to Danish

from birth has enabled her to obtain native-like proficiency in all subsequent languages, it is important to remember that the majority of people are bilingual yet demonstrate no such ability to overcome accents. This indicates that there are some people who simply have an aptitude for language acquisition; this aptitude can be defined as advanced explicit and implicit learning mechanisms.

### **Learner Characteristics**

Some of the characteristics displayed by Barbara when learning a foreign language appeared to defy those typically apparent in adults, thus implying that her subjective qualities facilitate successful language acquisition.

#### **Motivation**

Barbara's high motivation to learn a foreign language undoubtedly enhanced her acquisition. As is apparent by her profession, Barbara is incredibly interested in languages and the most effective means by which they can be learnt. This is significant as it suggests that she has a greater drive than most adults to obtain native-like proficiency. This would support research studies which have discovered that:

All the post-puberty learners who were frequently mistaken for native-speakers definitely strived for unaccented proficiency (Nikolov and Djigunovic, 2006: 239)

We can perceive this as applicable to Barbara as she consciously observes native speakers in order to ascertain how their mouths move to produce specific sounds. Furthermore, her incredibly fast rate of attainment in Spain can be explained in terms of high levels of motivation. Barbara commented that 'all apart from [her] were fluent Spanish speakers,' suggesting that she was highly motivated to learn the language in order to interact with her colleagues and understand the conference she was attending. This type of motivation Barbara possesses appears more identifiable with that experienced by a child, who feels motivated to fully integrate into their host community, implying it contributes greatly to successful acquisition.

#### **Identity**

Furthermore, one could also argue that because Barbara was raised in a bilingual household (English and Danish) she had a weakened sense of identity, which lessened her ties to her L1, consequently providing her with greater flexibility to acquire subsequent languages. The desire to learn an L2 is usually affected by the ties the learner has to their L1. Young children typically have fewer attachments to their L1 and the culture from which it is produced than adults, consequently they have a greater desire to grasp the L2 and integrate into the host community. Nonetheless, one could argue that Barbara's mixed ancestry reduced her attachment to English and the British culture, giving her greater freedom to immerse herself into host environments and learn the language. This is visible by her ability to take on different roles whilst abroad. Barbara commented: 'when I fully get into French mode my posture changes, it's like a different persona', highlighting her ability to detach from her L1, thereby enabling her to achieve native-like proficiency.

### **Conclusion**

Overall I think Barbara demonstrates how age does not always negatively affect our acquisition of language. Barbara's linguistic history revealed that she is still capable of

relying upon her implicit learning mechanisms, thereby undermining Lenneberg's assertion that acquisition after the critical period requires the employment of our explicit mechanisms. Furthermore, time, instead of having a damaging effect, has enhanced her learning strategies making her on the whole a more efficient language learner. Barbara's ability to teem her effective implicit and explicit learning mechanisms, combined with her individual learner characteristics is a winning combination; consequently we can perceive Barbara as an ideal language learner.

Barbara's experiences also suggest that the term 'critical period' is too strong and suggests that the softer alternative, 'sensitive period' (Knudsen, 2004), is much more appropriate. As a highly proficient language learner I think we must consider Barbara as an exception to the rule when looking to formulate a pattern on language acquisition. Consequently, in line with various other literature, when acquisition occurs in a naturalistic setting the younger the better whereas, in an instructed environment the converse is true.

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### **Appendix 1- Interview Questions**

1. I just wanted to confirm with you that whilst your first language is English, you are also capable of speaking several other languages as well?
2. Can you tell me about your language learning history? When you were first exposed to each language, when you first started learning them, in what type of environment and for how long?
3. Would you ever consider yourself to have native-life proficiency in any of your languages, if so in which ones?
4. I understand you grew up in a bilingual environment, in your opinion has this affected your capacity to learn a foreign language?
5. In your opinion, in what type of language environment are you most successful or do you consider yourself to be equally successful in all environments?
6. Over time have you been consistent in your approach to learning languages or have you adapted/ altered your methodology for any reason?
7. In general, how do you find language learning? Are there any areas within language learning (e.g. reading, writing, speaking, listening) that you deem yourself to be better or worse, or do you perform consistently in all aspects?
8. If there is a difference in your ability within a language, has this always been the case, or have you become better or worse within an area over time?
9. Are you a motivated language learner? Has your motivation ever changed?
10. Do you have any inhibitions in learning a new language? Or are you confident?
11. Has this always been the case?
12. Before we finish the interview, is there anything important you want to add that you feel I have overlooked?

## Appendix 2- Language Interview Transcript

### Interviewee's Details

Name: Miss Barbara Anne Nielsen

Gender: Female

Age: 53

Nationality: British

Current Status: Primary School Languages Consultant in Nottingham

Target Languages: [age in brackets indicates when Barbara first started learning the language] French (11); Latin (12); German (13); Swedish (18) and Spanish (51)

### The Interview

Me: Hi Barbara. I just wanted to confirm with you that whilst your first language is English you are also capable of speaking several other languages as well?

Barbara: Yes, that's right.

Me: Good. Can you tell me a little bit about your language learning history, for example when you learned each language and for approximately how long you studied them?

Barbara: Well, as you said I grew up speaking English but my dad was Danish and so from birth I was used to hearing a language other than English. I did French from year 7, Latin from year 8, German from year 9; all at Grammar School. Did French and German to A Level. Hated German; was useless at it. And then at university I did a degree in French and decided to do Swedish as a subsidiary model.

Me: You've had a really interesting and varied linguistic background. You say you started learning Swedish at University; did you ever acquire native-like proficiency in it?

Barbara: No. Well I could speak within a certain range of topics as I went and lived in Sweden for three months after university. And I was totally proficient in shopping and doing the basic things, within the various limited contexts. I could do what I wanted to do and be taken for a native because I have a very good accent. In all my languages, I have a good accent. I have got a musical ear so it happens. But in French I used to be fluent, I mean I used to dream in French and think in French and whatever else.

Me: You used to dream in French? That's amazing. How did you go about learning it?

Barbara: Well, I started it at school in Year 7. Carried on studying it at university. Absolutely loved it and found it pretty easy. I had to spend a year abroad as part of the course and I guess that makes you fluent as you properly get to grips with the language by using it in so many different contexts. I think it's about the role you adopt as well, when I do French I become a different person, I start waving my arms around a lot more, my tone of voice changes, if I fully get into French mode my posture changes, it's like a different persona. Most adults aren't prepared to do it and so they never fulfil their learning potential, even the ones who are capable never do as they are a lot more reserved in what they do. Children love role-play though, they love the acting element and taking on the new identity, which is why they are normally better at language learning.

Me: You said you had a bilingual background. Did you hear or interact with any other languages aside from Danish and English before you started learning them?

Barbara: No. I didn't hear French until I was 11. But as I said, I had exposure to Danish until I was eighteen months old and so I was in a bilingual household, although I was never taught to speak it. I just used to hear it around the place and it still sounds right, if I hear Danish now I think "Oh that sounds nice", well it doesn't actually, it sounds horrible, but it's very comforting, it feels natural. It just gives you a lot more sounds in your repertoire, it makes your brain realise there are other sounds than the ones in English and opens your mind a lot more.

Me: Do you think that hearing Danish from birth is an important contributor in your ability to replicate accents?

Barbara: Yes. That said my Swedish learning at university was very, well I am a very audio-visual learner and it was like language-lab, put the headphones on, do the stuff, so I was hearing proper Swedish but I was reproducing it with a heavy Danish accent, which is interesting because I didn't even know I was doing it and normally what I hear I replicate quite authentically. When they told me what I was doing I was able to change it, but at first I was completely oblivious to it. You know like learning Spanish now, I have been working with some Spanish speakers so my Spanish sounds really good. It sounds like proper Spanish. It's very limited, but it sounds good. And it is because of the daily exposure I had from 0-18 months, which got my ear into any sounds, and you know gets your brain to recognise there are different sounds out there.

Me: How have you got about learning Spanish?

Barbara: That's quite interesting as it's been mainly on-the-job. I have been training other people in Spanish, would you believe it? I don't have any Spanish, but I've been training class-teachers how to teach Spanish, because that's what I do with Primary School teachers. You give cds to the children and tell them every time they hear a certain sound to react, so you see you don't really need to know Spanish, but I have been exposed to a lot of genuine Spanish from both native speakers and authentic materials and so I have picked up quite a bit.

Me: Can you elaborate on your Spanish learning a little bit more?

Barbara: It's been quite easy. Well you see that's because it's very much like French. I'm at the place now where I haven't done any grammar-bashing in Spanish. It's really interesting because I have picked up structures of language and sentences from hearing it. So I can replace nouns for nouns; "I would like a cup of tea, I would like some pyjamas", I have got that structure in my head, but I have never learnt it as a grammar exercise as like I did with my first language, French. That was pure grammar-bashing. Whereas now I've got all sorts of bits and bobs that I have just acquired. I went to Spain last year for an immersion week, at the beginning of the week I was struggling. I could feel myself working out sentences. I am in the position now where I can understand most Spanish within a given context. I can say very little because I am not quick enough at generating sentences, but I can understand most of what is going on. I got to the point after a week's immersion; at the beginning of the week I bought a radio, I could pick out odd words at the beginning of the week, by the end of the week I could understand the gist of the news in Spanish. I just get the sound of the language in my head and it sounds right and because I have got quite developed language learning strategies because I have the French background and German and Danish. I have spent time learning languages and I also teach people how to learn languages so I have developed the strategies for comprehension which makes learning easier.

Me: So for you is learning a conscious process or is it a subconscious thing, or a combination of the two?

Barbara: Well, the way I started learning Spanish was I ended up doing a Spanish course, well it was supposed to be conducted in English but all apart from me were fluent Spanish speakers. It was a native Spanish speaker doing it so they ended up just doing it in Spanish and people kept saying to me "say that in Spanish" when I was making contributions and I would always say "I can't" and they'd say "but you understand everything that's going on, you must be able to speak it" but no I can do the comprehension but not the speaking. The production always comes afterwards as you have to have the bulk of language that you take on as a model first. But I am a bit ahead of the game, my brain knows what it has to do, it knows to pick out key phrases, I listen very much for intonation and that is key because you can determine that that's a question or if somebody's cross, so you pick up the meaning without actually knowing the words and you get a lot by lip-reading as even if you don't

quite hear a word you can remember how it was said and can work it out and think it must be this. People subconsciously watch the mouth to help determine what's being said. Now I ought to learn how to speak and write it properly, it's just about applying myself, it's quite straightforward, I don't think it'd be that hard. The thing I lack in Spanish is vocabulary because I haven't done the swatting but when I get some time I'll learn it properly.

Me: Have you noticed a difference within your ability to grasp different aspects of language, say for example are you better or worse in one area e.g. reading, writing, speaking or listening, or are you equally competent?

Barbara: How do you mean? Like the fact that I can write in Swedish but can't in Spanish.

Me: I mean more within areas of one language. Does your ability within areas of say French vary or are you consistent?

Barbara: Not really, I mean I am really good at speaking out of everything. I'm an audio-visual learner so actual communication, speak, listening, is what I'm probably best at. I've probably always learnt best from just being around people who speak the language, it's like osmosis, you start to absorb it.

Me: Have you noticed any differences in how you've learned over time? Have you changed your strategies or have you always taken the same approach to learning languages?

Barbara: Well over time it has changed in some ways. I mean, I can't write Spanish as I have no need to. Because I haven't been doing it as part of a course, I have been doing it in terms of talking with people; it has been very much aural/oral. Whereas Swedish I had to write. But Swedish was dead easy; the grammar is very much like German grammar with English vocabulary, so that is easy and in terms of pronunciation when I write things I hear it in my head and it is very straight forward. Whereas if you think of a word in Spanish a lot of the words you think are spelt with a 'y' are actually spelt with a 'j' so it's phonetically different. So it depends on the language really, but I guess I've always learned best in audio-visual ways, that hasn't really changed.

Me: I think that's everything I was going to ask. Before we finish, do you have anything that you want to add, anything you consider important that you think I have left out?

Barbara: No, nothing I can think of.