

Language Aptitude in Young Learners: The Elementary Modern Language Aptitude Test in Spanish and Catalan

Maria del Mar Suárez Vilagran

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**LANGUAGE APTITUDE IN YOUNG LEARNERS:
THE ELEMENTARY MODERN LANGUAGE
APTITUDE TEST IN SPANISH AND CATALAN**

Tesi doctoral presentada per

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ABSTRACT

The purpose of this dissertation is to explore how the Modern Language Aptitude Test in Spanish (MLAT-ES) and the new version of the same test in Catalan (MLAT-EC) work in a bilingual Catalan/Spanish context. The MLAT-ES was normed with mainly monolingual test takers, so the objective is to see if the reliability, validity and statistical information available in the *Manual* published of the norming study is similar to the same information obtained in Catalonia. The MLAT-EC is a brand new aptitude test. Therefore, the second objective of this study is to see if the functioning of this test is comparable to that of the MLAT-ES. First of all, the literature on aptitude is reviewed. Aptitude is explored in relation to L1 acquisition and to other individual differences present in language acquisition processes. Several definitions of aptitude are presented together with the main components of which it consists. The first section finishes with an overview of how aptitude is related to other factors relevant to FL acquisition, such as one's L1, age, the instructional context, sex, bilingualism and intelligence. Secondly, several aptitude measures are described in detail. The first one is the Modern Language Aptitude Test (MLAT), the most widely used aptitude test for adults. The second test described is the Elementary version of the MLAT (MLAT-E), an aptitude test for young learners which derives from the MLAT. The third test is the MLAT-ES, the Spanish version of the MLAT-E. Lastly, other aptitude measures for young learners are presented.

The present dearth of aptitude measures for Catalan/Spanish young learners is the driving force of this study. In order to make up for this lack, the Catalan version of the MLAT-E was devised. Before using it for research purposes, it had to be validated. Another of the few aptitude measures for young learners available, the MLAT-ES, had been validated in a context rather different from the context of this study. Thus, a follow-up validation study of the MLAT-ES is provided as well in order to see if it had different item functioning depending on the context of administration. The statistical information, including the content validity, reliability, intercorrelation of parts and descriptive statistics of both tests are provided along with a qualitative description of the items flagged in these analyses. This made it possible to remove the deficient items flagged in the statistical analyses. A comparison of the resulting tests with the published norming studies of the MLAT-E and the MLAT-ES reveals that both the MLAT-ES and the MLAT-EC are fairly comparable measures.

Three research questions are proposed. The first one asks whether both aptitude measures are equally suitable for young learners in grades 3 to 7. The results reveal that significant differences in the mean scores are found between grade 3 and 4 in the total mean scores but not between the other grades. These results are discussed in relation to the learners' age, cognitive development stage, information-processing theory, literacy and metalinguistic awareness. With the second research question, this study aims to see whether significant differences are found between the mean scores of girls and boys. The results obtained are not conclusive, as no clear advantage of one sex over the other is consistently found in any of the part tests or grades. The third research question is aimed at checking whether the MLAT-ES

and the MLAT-EC are effective predictors of concurrent FL proficiency. If they are, their construct validity would be confirmed. Teacher criterion measures, participants' self-assessment grades and proficiency measures are used. No direct relationship is found in grade 3 and, up to a certain extent, in grade 4 using the teacher criterion measures and the participants' self-assessment grades. However, the construct validity of the test seems to be confirmed by the significant moderate correlations obtained with the proficiency measures, mainly the cloze passage in all grades and the dictation, and only up to a certain extent with the listening task. The results are discussed while the low reliability of the criterion measures are highlighted and compared with the construct validity data available in the norming studies.

This study concludes by stating that some improvement needs to be applied to both aptitude measures so that they are fully valid measures in the context of administration of this study, although the way in which they have been rendered after the validation process makes it possible to already consider them valid aptitude measures for Catalan/Spanish young learners, at least for grades 4 to 7.

RESUM

En aquesta tesi doctoral s'investiga el funcionament de la versió en castellà del Modern Language Aptitude Test (MLAT-ES) i de la nova versió del mateix test en català (MLAT-EC) en un context bilingüe català/espanyol. El procés de validació de l'MLAT-ES es va dur a terme principalment amb subjectes monolingües de castellà, per tant, un dels objectius és veure si la fiabilitat, la validesa i la informació estadística del *Manual* publicat sobre l'estudi de validació és similar a la informació que s'obtingui a Catalunya. L' MLAT-EC és una nova versió d'aquest test d'aptitud. Per tant, el segon objectiu d'aquest estudi és veure si l'MLAT-EC és comparable a l'MLAT-ES. En primer lloc, es fa una revisió dels principals estudis publicats sobre aptitud en relació amb l'adquisició de l'L1 i amb altres diferències individuals presents en els processos d'adquisició de llengües. Es presenten diverses definicions d'aptitud juntament amb els components de què consta. El primer capítol acaba amb una revisió de com influeix l'aptitud en conjunció amb altres factors rellevants en l'adquisició de llengües estrangeres com, per exemple, l'L1 del parlant, l'edat, el context d'aprenentatge, el sexe, el bilingüisme i la intel·ligència. En segon lloc, es descriuen diversos tests d'aptitud en detall. El primer d'ells és el Modern Language Aptitude Test (MLAT), el test d'aptitud que més s'ha utilitzat per mesurar l'aptitud en adults. El segon test que es descriu és la versió Elemental de l'MLAT (MLAT-E), un test d'aptitud per a aprenents en edat escolar que deriva de l'MLAT. El tercer test descrit és l'MLAT-ES, la versió en espanyol de l'MLAT-E. Finalment, es presenten altres mesures d'aptitud per a nens i nenes en edat escolar.

L'escassetat de tests d'aptitud per a aprenents catalans en edat escolar és el que motiva aquesta tesi. Per tal d'atenuar aquesta manca de tests, es va crear la versió en català de l'MLAT-E, però per utilitzar-lo en recerca abans havia de passar un procés de validació. Una altra de les poques mesures disponibles per a aprenents joves, l'MLAT-ES, es va validar en un

context força diferent al d'aquest estudi. Per tant, aquesta tesi presenta també el complement a l'estudi principal de validació per tal de veure si l'MLAT-ES presenta un funcionament diferent segons el context on s'utilitza. Així doncs, s'inclou també la informació estadística, incloent la validació del contingut, fiabilitat, intercorrelació de les parts del test i els estadístics descriptius d'ambdós tests juntament amb una descripció qualitativa dels ítems que van resultar defectuosos en algun aspecte de les anàlisis esmentades. Aquest procés va facilitar l'elecció dels ítems que s'haurien d'eliminar dels tests. La comparació dels tests resultants amb la versió dels tests publicats indica que l'MLAT-ES i l'MLAT-EC són mesures força comparables.

Es proposen, a més, tres preguntes de recerca. La primera tracta sobre si ambdós tests d'aptitud són igualment adequats per a aprenents entre 3r de primària i 1r d'ESO. Els resultats indiquen que hi ha diferències significatives en les mitjanes dels resultats obtinguts pels aprenents de 3r i 4t de primària però no pas als altres cursos. Aquests resultats es comenten en relació a l'edat dels aprenents, l'estadi de desenvolupament cognitiu en què es troben, la teoria del processament de la informació, l'alfabetització i el seu grau de consciència metalingüística. La segona pregunta de recerca fa referència a la presència de diferències significatives en les mitjanes obtingudes pels nois i per les noies. Els resultats obtinguts no són conclusius, ja que no s'observa cap clar avantatge d'un sexe respecte de l'altre consistentment. La tercera pregunta de recerca pretén comprovar si tant l'MLAT-ES com l'MLAT-EC són predictors vàlids de les habilitats lingüístiques dels aprenents en el moment de contestar el test. Si ho són, la validesa referent al constructe que mesuren els tests es confirmaria. Per resoldre aquesta pregunta de recerca, s'utilitzen les notes proporcionades pels professors dels participants, les notes que els mateixos participants es posen sobre el seu nivell en llengua estrangera i altres proves de competència lingüística que els participants van fer. No es troba cap relació directa entre els resultats obtinguts en els tests i les notes proporcionades pels professors i pels participants de 3r de primària i, parcialment, també pels participants de 4t de primària. La validesa dels tests referent al constructe es confirma, però, amb les mesures de competència lingüística administrades als participants del test, principalment amb el test de tipus *cloze* i el dictat, i fins a cert punt amb la tasca de comprensió auditiva. Els resultats s'argumenten destacant la baixa fiabilitat de les mesures aportades pels professors i pels alumnes i comparant-les amb les dades sobre la validesa de constructe disponibles en els manuals dels tests

Les conclusions d'aquest estudi són que, tot i que els tests haurien de millorar-se per tal que siguin mesures totalment vàlides en el context d'administració d'aquest estudi, després d'haver-ne tret els ítems defectuosos, és possible considerar-los mesures d'aptitud vàlides per al seu ús amb aprenents en edat escolar bilingües català/espanyol que estan entre 4t de primària i 1r d'ESO.

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