ABSTRACT: Compulsory teaching of the English language in Portugal has been recently introduced at the elementary school level. This decision stems from a widespread belief that young children learn languages better and more easily than older children. The present study addressed this controversial issue by analysing the ability of 40 third and fifth-grade Portuguese children to learn English nonwords. Home literacy, phonological memory and productive vocabulary knowledge were evaluated as predictor factors in the learning of new phonological sequences. Results showed that older children could memorize more nonwords with a similar phonotactic structure to English words than the younger children. These results highly correlate with data from the naming test that measured productive vocabulary knowledge, suggesting that previously acquired long-term phonological representations contribute in a decisive manner to the memorization of words or nonwords that share the same patterns. The implications of these findings for foreign language teaching are also discussed.