

Age in Acquiring First Language

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Abstract: This article gives you important data about the sociolinguistic factor of Age in acquiring a first language. Major theories of language acquisition exist in the development, which include linguistic nativism, behaviourism, and social interactionism. It also discusses the process of first language acquisition and highlights the importance of the critical period of language acquisition. It includes a study of oral language development of 84 children and its influences.

Keywords: Sociolinguistic factor, Age in acquiring.

I. INTRODUCTION

Age plays a necessary role in influencing the acquisition of first language. Language includes a system of signs and words used by a group of people to express their feelings and thoughts. It facilitates communication, which plays an important role in ensuring the transmission of messages between individuals. Culture defines language, dictating phonological and semantic rules related to the specific language. Language also unites individuals who speak the same language providing them with a sense of belonging. Human beings flourish when associated with a specific group. Society classifies individuals who speak the same language in a single group. In light of this, it is critical for one to understand the acquisition process and the relevance of the critical period in language acquisition.

There are major theories of language acquisition exist in the development, which include linguistic nativism, behaviourism, and social interactionism. Linguistic nativism infers that language acquisition is a predetermined process. Nativists hypothesize that children are innately able in acquiring language. Supporters of behaviourism inferred that nurture played a main role in children's acquisition of language. According to them, the environment through different agents such as parents taught children how to comprehend and speak a specific language. The focus of these theorists was on two major processes, operant and classical conditioning.

II. MAJOR THEORIES OF LANGUAGE ACQUISITION

A. *The social-interactionism theory:*

The social-interactionism perspective asserts that both innate biological and social factors predispose children's acquisition of language. According to them innate/biological factors such as a slowly maturing brain capable of assimilating new information and social factors such as parents, teachers influence language development in children. These theorists acknowledge the role of adults in supporting children's language acquisition through child-directed speech. In addition, they acknowledge children's personal intentional participation in language acquisition through their reliance on their innate nature.

Before learning the rules that govern language, children communicate through crying and non-verbal communication (gestures). Later, interaction with parents enables them to develop oral language specific to their society and prepares them for the acquisition of other literacy skills. This shows that literacy development is a systematic gradual process. Children move from first stage of communicating (crying and non-verbal communication) to an intermediary stage (oral language development) and finally to a complex, advanced stage (literacy skills such as reading). The process of language

acquisition would be as following; birth-1 month, 2-3 months, 6-9 months, 9-12 months, 12-18 months, 24-36 months and 3-5 years where a child become a proficient language user.

B. Theory of mind:

Language acquisition has a connection to the theory of mind. It can be illustrated by the main stages that each child must go through to acquire a language. The first stages (birth – first year) show that a child’s language can be characterized as “recognition and production of the sounds of their mother tongue” (Zufferey 28).

An infant’s language from birth to 1 month, characterized as a stage of “crying”. It represents the means by which the infant communicates his or her needs to his/her parents. At this age, parents struggle to comprehend the subtle variations in the infant’s cries.

A child’s language from 2-3months classifies as (baby talk). It becomes the parents’ primary mode of communicating with the infant. At this age, the infant listens and watches the parents’ actions intensely. Scholars remain conflicted on the usefulness of “baby talk” on helping infants acquire language. Those against its use infer that it fosters immature communication forms in infants. Supporters for its use negate this claiming that it’s the high-pitched, slowed-down, repetitive speech matches infant’s auditory processing speed. It also, facilitates language acquisition.

A child’s language from 4-6 months, cooing repetitively occurs at this age. The infant discovers their vocal range, which encourages them to experiment with phonemic variations, volume and pitch. Often, they imitate or mimic their parents’ phonemic variations, pitch and volume.

A child’s language from 6-9 months, babbling increases profoundly at this age. The infant is able to move around; therefore, explore the environment. The babbled words begin to sound like coherent word. However, these words have no cognitive meaning or connection. This soon changes during the ninth month whereby, the infant becomes capable of speaking coherent words. At the age of eight, a child has the ability to understand up to 15 words (Zufferey 28).

A child’ language from 9-12 months shows the stage where the infant experiences an exponential growth in receptive and expressive language. Their use of a wide range of non-verbal communication such as facial expressions and gestures increases. At this age, they are also able to comprehend simple requests and instructions. As such, they are able to say “no” or “yes”.

A child’s language from 12-18 months is the stage when fast mapping occurs. The infant is able to relate newly learnt words with preexisting internalized concepts and recall these words after only a single exposure. In addition, telegraphic speech develops at this age, which is characterized by the use of two or three-worded sentences. Parents rely on the contextual situation to interpret and understand the short, often incomplete sentences. The quantity of the child’s vocabulary increased (Zufferey 28).

The theory of mind development appears during the period of 15-24 months. The child has the ability to “understand the concept of false belief” (Zufferey 31). At the age of 18, a child acquires the concepts of pretending and desiring. A child has the ability to pretend and understand other people who pretend.

A child’s language from 24-36 months shows that the toddler is more aware of linguistic rules. Therefore, they express themselves better as compared to how they expressed themselves when they were younger. However, they are still unable to pronounce words well; therefore, parents are cautioned against developing a concentration with correcting the toddlers often when they mispronounce words. They are syntactically developing at this age. It is known as “two -word utterances” where Questions and requesting clearly appear for example, a child would ask as “want cake”. At the end of this stage, a child’s sentences would become more complex and longer (Zufferey 28).

A child’s language from 3-5 years, the toddler becomes a proficient language user whereby they are able to make simple requests based on her motivation or moods. In addition, they develop an interest in engaging in dramatic play. They might choose to engage in pretend communication where they assume the role of a character and express themselves using speech and actions. On the other hand, they might decide to engage in meta-communication where they stop the dramatic play and proposed on the character’s actions.

Based on the suggested levels of development, parents can observe their children’s progression concerning language acquisition. In the event that they discover any irregularity, they can consult a specialist before the problem worsens.

C. The critical period of language acquisition:

The critical period of language acquisition is birth-five years. Infants are able to learn different languages with ease during this developmental phase. Research shows that infants (0-6months) have the ability to distinguish between phonetic contracts of different languages. They lack any fixed cognitive associations pertaining to a specific language. As a result, they are able to learn multiple languages simultaneously. It is important to note that this ability does not persist into adulthood. Due to the fixed cognitive connections and other conflicting cognitive biases, adults struggle to learn new languages.

Linguistic nativism infers that language acquisition is a predetermined process. Nativists hypothesize that children are innately predisposed to acquire language. A major supporter of this school of thought was Noam Chomsky, who inferred that children had an innate capacity to learn language. He referred to this capacity as the Language Acquisition Device (LAD). LAD allowed children to interpret linguistic rules, word meanings and phoneme meanings. Generally, nativists negate the role played by the environment in language acquisition whereby they only credit environmental factors for activating innate/physiological structures or programs responsible for language acquisition. For example, children who are knowledgeable about tense rules frequently refer to these rules when constructing past tense words regardless of whether they heard people around them pronounce these words; as a result, they sometimes make mistakes such as “goed” to refer to “went”. Unfortunately, nativists failed to account for the critical period of language development. The critical period (sensitive period) enables children to acquire language at an exponential rate. Children who miss this period fall behind in their acquisition of language.

The Critical Period Hypothesis infers that implicit learning governs the acquisition of linguistic competence in the learning of one’s native or first language. This is far from the case in second language acquisition, which predominantly relies on explicit learning. A study by Paradis in 2004 infers that a decline in mainly memory push late second-language learners to depend on explicit learning in the acquisition of the language. This requires the use of a cognitive system that is contrasts the one used in the acquisition of the native or first language (Paradis 59). In light of this, it is apparent that age affects acquisition of implicit competence in two ways. From a biological standpoint, the procedural memory’s plasticity decreases after age five (Paradis, 59-60). On the other hand, from a cognitive standpoint, there is an increase in the reliance of conscious declarative memory, which affects both language acquisition and learning in general from the age of seven (Paradis 60). From the above studies, one can conclude that first language acquisition occurs at an accelerated rate in children during the critical period; however, this is not the case in second language acquisition. The latter occurs at a slower rate compared to the process in adolescents and adults; however, there is heightened development of proficiency in children.

D. A case study of 84 children:

Research findings indicate that oral language development in children influences their ability to read. In Paula J. Clarke’s study of 84 children based in England perceived to be afflicted by reading disabilities, results showed that children exposed to vocabulary training geared towards improving their oral language comprehension skills experienced significant improvement in their reading capabilities. The results of this study further reinforced the proposition that oral language is crucial to children’s development of reading skills. Moreover, it further explains teachers’ pre-occupation with developing oral language skills among their students (Guernsey). Vocabulary training is not limited to teachers in a classroom setting. Parents can carry on with vocabulary training at home by participating in activities such as reading story books to their children, keeping a journal of their child’s learning progress and using songs and play activities such as “I spy...” to expand the child’s vocabulary.

III. CONCLUSION

Language acquisition is a complex process. Based on the different assumptions proposed by the different theories of language acquisition, one can conclude that the process is not predisposed by a single factor such as innate/physiological predispositions. Innate factors that predispose language acquisition include specific brain structures. Recent findings by proponents of neurobiological perspective show the existence of specific brain structures (Broca’s area and Wernicke’s areas) responsible for language comprehension and production. In addition, caregivers also help children acquire language. Through Vygotsky’s process of scaffolding, parents guide their children from a point of minimal mastery of their language to that of complete mastery. Language acquisition occurs through a systematic process whereby an infant

moves from crying to cooing to babbling to the use of complex non-verbal forms of communication to the use of telegraphic speech. A parent can use the levels identified to assess for any anomalies in their children's acquisition of language. In the event of any problems, they can choose to consult specialists with expertise on issues pertaining to speech disorders.

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