

Language acquisition
is learned



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This essay will evaluate and look at the research and evidence put forward by psychologists and linguistics, in relation to the suggestion that language acquisition is learnt. Both psychologists and linguistics' have questioned this statement. Different theories & hypothesis of how this takes place have been offered, each theory has its good points as well as bad points; however none as yet seems to be perfect in explaining this complex learning experience.

Two leading theorist who stand out above the rest are B. F. Skinner and Noam Chomsky as they both offer important theories, which can be compared for their values they suggest and the problems they raise.

Skinner (1985) discusses the issue of language acquisition by applying conditioning principals. Chomsky (1957) disagrees with Skinner and argues that language is much more and complex as well as less predictable than Skinner believed.

Skinner in his theory of language development using Banduras learning theory added that we use reinforcement in the language acquisition; He acknowledges that language is a critical step in the evolution of the human species, and involves a change as vocal musculature became susceptible to verbal operant conditioning.

However in contrast Chomsky (1957) cited in Gross, (2005) disagrees with Skinner; Chomsky argues that language is much more complex, as well as less predictable than Skinner believed. Even though language cannot develop without some form of environmental influence, Chomsky believed that environmental factors could never explain language development adequately. Furthermore he suggests the existence of an innate language

acquisition device (LAD), whereby children are born with the capability to construct and recognize all types of sentences, even though they have never heard them before. Aitchison (1983) cited in Gross (2005) agrees with Chomsky's argument that children are born with knowledge that language is governed by rules.

Bruner (1983) Social Interactionist theory supports the development of language from the early interactions between infants and adults; He gave more impact to pragmatics, rather than the development of grammar. He suggests Language Acquisition Support System (LASS), where first one person talks then the other person is necessary for development. The Social Interactionist theory does not ignore previous theories, but offers an added social perspective of language acquisition.

Skinner (1985) cited in Gross & McIlveen (2002) recognizes that prelinguistic vocalization such as cooing and babbling are probably inborn; he argues that adults shape the babies sounds into words. For example Maa could be misinterpreted as mama and by reinforcing those sounds which approximate the form of real words, through selective reinforcement; words are shaped into sentences with correct grammar being reinforced and incorrect grammar being ignored.

Lovass (1987) cited in Gross (2005) showed that selective reinforcement can be used to teach emotionally disturbed children.

Whitehouse (1982) cited in Gross & McIlveen (2002) stated that this type of language learning, is put together in: " a patchwork of thousands of separately acquired frames, patterns, responses, rules and small tricks. The <https://assignbuster.com/language-acquisition-is-learned/>

style of the final product contradicts the chaos of its construction'. Positive reinforcement takes place in getting the child what it asks for. For example "may I have a drink of water" produces a drink of water which in turn reinforces that string of words used termed as 'mands'. Another way reinforcement takes place is if the parent, either became over excited, and touches, pats, pokes and feeds the child when they vocalize.

Skinner went on to state that imitation played a vital role, and even suggested that when children copy these verbal labels (tacts) and the child receives positive reinforcement from the adult, the child learns to repeat the label or tacts. Moerk & Moerk (1979) cited in Gross (2005) say as children continue to learn and develop new words and phrases through imitation so their language develops and increases more as adult.

However while imitations appear to be involved in the learning of accent as well as vocabulary, imitations in say syntax and semantics such as complex aspects of language is less obvious, this was shown earlier. When children who imitated adults sentences have a tendency to use the level of grammar they are at so between 18 and 30 months the child's imitations is apparently using its own unstructured speech

In contrast Chomsky, argues against reinforcement and proposes that human language acquisition is a innate biological ability, which all humans possess, he views some form of 'generative grammar' which he feels, could explain the rapid acquisition and creative nature of grammar as well as language. Furthermore he goes on to suggest that there may be a critical period involved in the child's language development if the Childs not

exposed to language then the child may never be able to develop their language.

As seen in studies of wild children, for example, in the case of Genie. Who had been locked in her room from a very young age; she had been fastened to a potty chair until age thirteen, if she made any sound Genie was punished by her father. Genie was kept in isolation until social services removed her from her home. Where she was then placed in a children's hospital

All she could do was whimper; due to lack of communication between her and her family. For the next several years she was studied by psychologists, to see if she was able to learn a first language. Curtiss (1977) was a graduate working towards her Ph. D. However during Genie's first seven months working with Curtiss, she had learnt to recognize hundreds of words by this time Curtiss began to consider Genie's acquisition of language systematically.

When they visited the home of one of Genie's therapists in June 1971, she was exploring one of the rooms in the house, she picked up a decorative pillow: when asked what it was Genie replied "pillow," Genie was then asked if she would like to see the family cat she replied, "No No cat," and shook her head. At first she could only speak in one word utterances, like a toddler, but as time went on she started to develop and string words together, using verbs. For example "Curtiss come, want milk".

Lenneberg (1967) put forward a similar theory to Chomsky as he claimed that a child's brain is not adequately developed for the acquisition of

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language, until after two years old and after puberty the brain loses its flexibility, so will no longer acquire a first language. However, in the case of Genie, both Chomsky and Lenneberg are wrong in one sense. This is because Genie did acquire language after this suggested critical period even though the language acquisition was limited.

In conclusion, operant conditioning does not offer an explanation of the child's generalized use of grammatical rules which they have never heard or been taught. It also doesn't account for child's ability to understand syntax of the sentence.

As suggested earlier Aitchison agreed with Chomsky about children's knowledge of the rules that govern language, however she disputes the claim that it was due to LAD. Aitchison alleged that children possess inbuilt puzzle-solving abilities enabling them to process linguistic information as well as other sorts of data. In contrast Chomsky argues that an innate capability exists independently of other innate abilities. In the case of Genie, she made progress and was able to manage the rules of grammar this is what Chomsky believes distinguishes human language from animals language. However you could say this all depends on what is defined as language.

As mentioned earlier Genie made whimpering sounds when she was found. This could be due to being conditioned into not making sounds, as she was punished if she made any sound. This can this can be seen when she was at one of the homes she was sent to. She was punished and so reverted back exhibiting behavior when she was first found. This can be linked to Brunner's

social interaction theory in that Genie was isolated and no one spoke to her. Which Bruner though was important to the development of language.

It could be argued that if the forbidden experiment had been able to run its course. With Genie as she had started with one word utterances like a toddler however she appears to develop at about the same rate so in theory Genie may have been able to acquire a first language but as the experiment was cut short we may never know, maybe this study needs revisiting to see if it was possible according to Gross (2005) there has been a growing acceptance that neither operant conditioning nor the nativists' approach put forward a complete account for language acquisition. Instead an integrated view maintains that children cannot acquire language until a certain age and maturational stage has been reached. In addition language acquisition is more closely linked to environmental influences in addition to cognitive development than Chomsky proposed.

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