How children acquire language at which stage english language essay

Linguistics, English

Introduction:

The question to consider is how children acquire language and at which stage they could improve their speaking and listening skills. In particular, syntax and vocabulary are the main concern of the language acquisition domain. The task of psycholinguistics is to discover the relationship between language and the human mind (Field: 2003). Many theories, therefore, have emerged in exploring this relationship, which seek to explain the way in which children understand and acquire language. Over the last five decades these theories have offered various ideas and interpretations of the relationship. For example, in Behaviourist theory, which is associated to skinner's research into language, language acquisition is considered a collection of habits. It is thought that children learn how to form correct utterances through positive reinforcement from the people around them (Patten and Benati: 2010). Cognitive theory, which is associated with Piaget, is considered a way of discovering how individuals create and use language in their social context (ibid, p71). Interaction theory, related to Bruner, holds that language comes from the interaction between children and their environment (ibid, p99). There are, however, two theories in the relevant acquisition literature which oppose one another and provoke countless debates: Chomsky's theory and Tomasello's theory. In Chomsky's theory, children biologically possess an innate ability to acquire their language. This ability is mainly specific to language. Whereas, in Tomasello's theory language is acquired through language use by means of social skills, such as, joint attention and general learning mechanisms (Behrene: 2009). This paper seeks to explore these two theories in order to contrast them. The first and

second parts of the paper present an overview of the main ideas in the two theories. The third part focuses on their different aspects, including the: poverty of stimulus argument, linguistic creativity, modularity and language specific - domain versus domain- general learning mechanisms. The fourth and final part, discusses some weak points in the two theories.

Overview of Chomsky's (Innatist) theory:

In language acquisition domain, Chomsky's theory is called an innatist theory, because he proposed that children biologically possess suitable abstract knowledge for the task of first language learning . This abstract knowledge shapes the linguistic system which they learn. In fact, through this innate knowledge children can discover the rules of their language system and reduce hypothesis formation and guessing. (Patten and Benati: 2010). Chomsky's main argument is that all human beings are born with an innate knowledge which is particularly designed for language acquisition (ibid). This argument is indeed, opposed to the one that language is a result of the interaction between human beings and the environment or item-usage learning (e. g. Skinner, 1957; Tomasello, 2003). Furthermore, The term Language Acquisition Device (LAD) was coined by Chomsky in this context to refer to such innate knowledge or the little black box (Patten and Benati: 2010). The (LAD) comprises the universal principles of all languages, by which children can be kept on track and not confused by all the complex rules of particular languages. When this (LAD) is activated, the child can discover the structure of the language s/he is to learn by matching the innate knowledge of basic grammatical relationships to the structures of the

special language in the environment (Lightbown and Spada: 1999). However, since the 1960s, instead of (LAD) universal grammar hypothesis (UG) was introduced by Chomsky. It was given much concern by him instead of, the (LAD), because, in Chomsky's view this hypothesis means that there is an innate knowledge source which governs the shape of natural language (Patten and Benati: 2010). It should be noted that the first appearance of Chomsky's theory was in 1959 in his critical review of Skinner's book Verbal Behavior in 1957. Chomsky in his review pointed out many shortcomings in applying Skinner's theories to language acquisition. For example, Skinner's experiment using rat boxes is not relevant to language because the behaviour of rats is unlike human behaviour. As a result, Skinner has a mistaken understanding of the nature of language. Furthermore, the environment considered solely as learning mechanism can not be the basis of language acquisition and therefore, man's ability to acquire language must be innate (Aitchison, 2007).

Overview of Tomasello's theory (usage-based theory):

The account of language acquisition provided by Tomasello comes under the umbrella of usage-based theories. Recently, a new view of language and human linguistic competence has emerged (Tomasello: 2003). This view comes from a set of theories usually called cognitive-functional linguistics, and also called usage -based linguistics in order to emphasize their main ideas that language structure is produced or appears from language use (e. g. Langacker, 1987a ; Croft, 1991; Tomasello, 1995, 2003). It is note worthy that this view stands in direct opposition to Chomsky's innatist theory.

Because, Tomasello in his theory is mainly concerned with the question of how children ' get from here to there' from the constructions of infant level speech to the abstract constructions of adult thought through one set of processes of acquisition (Tomasello: 2003: 3). In Tomasello's theory it is impossible that humans can have been born with a specific collection of communicative behaviours only for language. This collection more probably learned by children during their years from the linguistic conventions used around them. They must possess flexibility in order to learn both the different words and the suitable expressions of each language and the different types of abstract constructional pattern which historically these languages have grammaticized (ibid). Tomasello emphasizes, however, four points in his theory: First, the innate skills which people have are not specific to language but can be used as means for language learning. Second, theory of mind is central to symbol use, because humans can understand symbols while nonhuman do not possess this ability, because they use signal system. Thirdly, word-learning skills include: joint attention, which means the ability that children possess in their first year old whereby they can understand other people as intentional agents and interact socially through an object to which both pay attention; children note this attention to both it and themselves; Intention reading, means the ability to understand the social world around them through imitating adult acts; the construction-learning skills encompassing: analogy and pattern-finding. The latter means the distributional analysis based on statistical information in the primary linguistic data and the ability to form perceptual and conceptual figures of similar objects or situations (Tomasello: 2003).

The differences between the two theories:

It is noteworthy that the accounts provided by Chomsky and Tomasello comprise many opposed aspects, of which the main ones are as follows:

3. 1. Poverty of stimulus argument:

The basic argument of the nativist theory is based on Chomsky's assumption of the poverty of stimulus (1965). This assumption means that the data provided by the input to which people exposed are not rich enough to account for language acquisition (Patten and Benati: 2010). In other words, it means that the language to which children are exposed as their input or the primary linguistic data is solely a set of individual utterances yielding some abstract principles of grammar which seem ambiguous for language acquisition . The best solution he can provide is the universal grammar hypothesis (UG), which means that all humans are born with an innate universal language containing a number of abstract principles which can lead the acquisition process (Tomasello: 2003). Despite the fame of the poverty of stimulus argument in the language acquisition domain and children's language research, it has certain, if we contrast it with the account provided by Tomasello's usage-based theory. We find that the research into the developmental psychology of language acquisition has provided many arguments which support the richness of stimulus in usage-based theories (e. g Clark2003, Tomasello 2003). In fact, the significance of social pragmatic interaction in language acquisition is evidenced by extensive findings in this domain (Tomasello: 2003). To put it more simple, Tomasello in his theory emphasizes that: There is no poverty of the stimulus when a structured

inventory of construction is the adult endpoint (Tomasello: 2003: 7). He notes that the hypothesis of an innate universal grammar has two major problems, namely, first, ' the linking problem' and ' the problem of continuity'. The first problem is how children can connect their abstract universal grammar with the particular language which they learn. The second problem deals with the developmental changes in children's language, for example, how people can understand children's language during their developmental change if we accept that universal grammar is always the same. It, therefore, seems useful to provide a description or explanation of child language acquisition which ignores any hypothesis of universal grammar which creates these problems (Tomasello: 2003). Accordingly, it is important to note that Chomsky and Tomasello are opposed on the argument of the poverty of stimulus. Tomasello's view, however, seems stronger, because nativists provide no support for their claims. As Pullum and Scholz (2002: 47) point out, the poverty of stimulus argument " still awaits even a single good supporting example". Moreover, Akhtar (2004) seems to agree with this criticism, in that she indicates that this argument was the basis for a number of nativist claims, yet indeed lack supporting empirical evidences.

3. 2. Language is creative:

Another difference between Chomsky and Tomasello is the former's belief that language is creative. From Chomsky perspective, creativity in language has three- fold support. First, people possess the ability to understand and produce strange sentences which they have never before heard or spoken

(Aitchison: 2007). Second, the creative use of language is free from the external and internal affects of the stimulus control (Chomsky: 1968). Third, the way in which people use the language considered to be coherent and appropriate to the situation (Hegde: 1980). By the way of contrast, we can see that Tomasello does not ignore creativity in language, but he has little concern for it. According to him, it results from the attempt of humans to create categories in their own language (Tomasello: 1995). Chomsky asserts that the creativity in language is something which can not be acquired solely through environmental learning methods (Aitchison: 2007). Tomasello contrastingly asserts that, during a period of time, children obtain the communicative conventions are obtained step by step from the people around them. For example, their social cognitive skills and developing cognition are utilised to internalise these conventions. Children's basic abilities are used to learn their first words. They create concepts so as to understand adult speech and then to produce suitable new words in their communicative contexts (Tomasello: 1995). It is thought, however, from the contrast between the two views that Chomsky's view about the creativity of language has some limitations. For one thing, nativists assert that every utterance we hear and say is completely novel and accepted. This assertion seems to be wrong. The reason is that to accept it we would need to assume that each word or sentence has a separate existence. Moreover, we have to assume that our past language experience is sufficient to provide a clear understanding of the present utterances. But, if these assumptions are accepted, the result will be that human communicative behaviour has no continuity(Hegde: 1980). The second point, on the creativity of language free

from the control of stimulus, seems to be weak, because, as discussed above in section (3. 1) no evidence has been offered in its support. Furthermore, with regard to the third point, in Chomsky's view the way that people use language is coherent and appropriate to the situation. It could be argued that this point is somewhat vague, since Chomsky admits that he can give no clear meaning to the terms appropriateness and coherent in this context (ibid). However, he stresses that the creative aspect of language is common. Humans constantly create novel utterances and many who lack this ability might be brain damaged (Aitchison: 2007). This view would be more popular if it took into account the effect of environmental learning methods in producing our utterances, since the one question that needs to be asked here is, how humans can produce them without communication with their input.

3. 3. Modularity:

In the areas of linguistics and philosophy of mind, the idea of modularity has raised a great deal of concern (Garfield: 1987). There seems to be another difference between Chomsky and Tomasello, about the modularity of mind in language acquisition. To illustrate, the definition of modularity according to Crystal (1998: 246) is: A term used in recent discussion of language in two slightly different ways. On the one hand, it is proposed, especially in J. A. Fodor's The Modularity of Mind, that the mind is modular in the sense that it consists of a number of different systems (modules) each has its own distinctive properties , such as the language system and the vision system. On the other hand, it is suggested, especially in government-binding theory

that language system itself is modular in the sense that it consists of a number of different subsystems which interact in specific ways. The concept of modularity is that the brain is divided into separate parts, an idea to which Chomsky gives much attention (1965). He identifies the language area as a separate faculty of mind, in that language is autonomous in the mind and a separate module in the brain (Aitchison: 2007). Furthermore, he goes on to argue that the human mind is, like other complex biological systems, modular in its internal formation (Chomsky: 1984). The main idea of modularity, according to him, is that the modularity of syntax means that the structures of syntax are not the same as the structures exist in other cognitive (Chomsky: 1968 cited in Tomasello: 1995). By the way of contrast, we can see that Tomasello does not agree that language is a separated module in the brain, because, by his reasoning, in order to have a perfect grammatical theory the syntactic abilities should be combined into cognition and not like an autonomous sub-system (Parisse: 2005). To sum up, Chomsky's view is a modular view in which there are different sub-parts in the mind each one possessing special characteristics. Tomasello, however, take the non-modular view that there are general principles employed in all cognitive domains which control the mind (Archibald: 1993). However, to return to the account of modularity provided by Chomsky, one of the difficulties with this account is the claim that syntactic structures are not like the structures which exist in other cognitive domains. This seems to be wrong, because it gives the idea that the syntax module is innate, yet if we give the example of the game of chess, we find that it possesses a number of unique structures, such as, the images of a knight fork or queen-a side

attack- in human cognition. But there is no need to presume that this uniqueness chess- playing form needs an innate mental form (Bates et al. 1991). Moreover, the structures of cognitive thought which adults utilise in order to play the game of chess come through a process in which people employ general cognitive processes to face their problems in their social interaction which they may have had in learning to play a constructed game (Tomasello: 1995). Hence, it is thought that Chomsky's view seems to be weak because it is difficult to specify which part of the brain is responsible for language. As Bates asserts, it still far from knowing perfectly which parts of the brain are responsible for language (Bates in press, cited in, Tomasello 1995).

3. 4. Language- specific versus domain- general learning mechanisms:

Another point of difference between Chomsky and Tomasello concerns the way in which children acquire language. is another different point between Chomsky and Tomasello. The difference lies in the contention over whether language should be a specific domain or a domain - general learning mechanism. A specific domain in this context means a domain specific to language, whilst, domain - general refers to learning mechanisms which are not specific to language, yet applied generally. From Chomsky's perspective, since, human beings are able to learn language and animals are not, this ability is considered genetically inherited (Aitchison: 2007). Nativist theory, in fact, hypothesises that children are born with universal grammar (UG), a set of innate principles and parameters. This possession helps children to learn language without making errors as they learn (Conroy and Thornton:

2005). Therefore, this assumes that children possess a pre- existing domain-specific innate form which specifies the form of their language knowledge. Moreover, in language learning in particular, syntax children obtain ability without exposure to adequate stimulus (Chomsky; 1986, Pinker; 1994). However, Tomasello believes that it is false to suppose that children have genetically endowed grammar (Tomasello: 2003). To his mind, children in order to learn their language employ item-based learning integrated with some general learning mechanisms that are used in other cognitive domains , such as, analogy (Conroy and Thornton: 2005). Moreover, in Tomasello's view the properties of language structure come from joint attention figures and not from innate language – specific mechanisms (Segalowitz: 2001). As a result, Tomasello significantly did not ignore language universals; however, to him they not universals of form or a special type of syntax or linguistic symbols but are instead, the universals of human communication and cognition. For example, human beings use language in similar social contexts in order to provide solutions in language for communicative tasks, such as, describing specific entities (Tomasello: 2003). Consequently, Chomsky's view that language has a specific-domain is weak , because languages differ in their grammatical relations, of subject and object, for example, Acehnese, an Indonesian language, and Tagalog, a Philippine language, do not possess these grammatical relations (Tomasello: 1995).

4. Some weakness in both theories:

Tomasello, then, introduced a new model of usage-based theories in language acquisition in which he paid attention to a main set of skills, namely, intention reading, joint attention and pattern-finding skills. These skills are general skills utilised also in other types of cognition and not in language alone. Furthermore, although they are innate, they are not like the universal grammar (UG) invented by Chomsky, because they are not specific to language (Tomasello, 2003). But Tomasello's account seems to entail some limitations. It is thought that he does not provide a clear explanation for the fact that these skills are sufficient for language acquisition. As Wilson (2006: 138) points out: Tomasello's central claim is that joint attention and intention reading are foundational and prerequisite for language acquisition. It does seems reasonable to assume that they are necessary for language development, but the big question is, are they sufficient? Can they entirely account for all of the complexities of language ... from parsing speech stream to the emergence of complex grammatical structures? Hollich et al. (2000), on the other hand, seems to agree with this criticism, because they assert that Tomasello's theory, which is one of the social constructivist theories, does not possess a complete or sufficient explanation for the fact that children can produce increasingly inserted sentences in their utterances. Moreover, the problem with these theories is that they still offer no clarification of children's ability to discover the relationships between language units. In contrast to this, Chomsky's theory is considered one of the famous theories in the language acquisition domain. It has indeed, affected the entire literature language acquisition, because of the controversy

surrounding it. Yet this theory too attracts a number of criticisms. In this section, we focus on four critical points made against this theory. A major criticism concerns the universal grammar hypothesis (UG) which has been discussed above. Although (UG) aroused widespread interest in language acquisition debates, it is thought, that it is based solely on abstract thinking and lacks empirical support. As Kadarisman (2007a) points out, the concept of universal grammar must be without meaning unless it has empirical evidence. But, without adequate explanations, it seems to be more a slogan than a scientific effort. Moreover, due to its abstraction, (UG) neglects the local importance of language used in the cultural context (Becker: 1995). Second, Chomsky's theory is criticised for relying on logical arguments only. As Palmer (2000) indicates, Chomsky's' nativist claims remain are still the same as they have been fir the past two decades. Because his claims are based on logical arguments instead of, direct evidences or reasonable interpretations, his arguments have no external support. Tomasello seems, agree with Palmer in this criticism because he states that Chomsky in his account relies strongly on logical arguments, not using the scientific study of human behaviour and cognition (Tomasello: 1995). Third, it is criticised because it can not be tested. This creates some contention around Chomsky's account. The reason is that his theory has no clear cut procedures which could be examined. To put it more simple, Chomsky considered theory-construction in linguistics as similar to theory-construction in the physical sciences, particular, physics. Yet, there is a deference between these two domains, because, the mathematical model in physics depends on physical phenomena and is testable, whereas,

Chomsky's model relies on subjective judgments made by individual native speakers who may disagree with each other. Consequently, it can not be tested (Moor and Carling: 1987). Fourth, Chomsky's theory is criticised in terms of its ideas, if considered as philosophical ideas, for instance the adoption of such innatist ideas as, the universal grammar (UG) hypothesis which is based on the hypothesis of an innate language faculty. Subsequently, many linguists (e. g. Hegde, 1980; Moore and Claring, 1987) have strongly criticised these ideas. For example, Hegde asserts that the concept of a nativist theory is merely part of an ancient philosophical idea. Furthermore, Moore and carling believe that Chomskian linguistics are linked by these ideas to philosophy, in particular, epistemology, the part of philosophy concerned with knowledge theories.

Conclusion:

The domain of language acquisition possesses a varied collection of theories. Their main concern is to discover the way in which people, in particular children, can acquire language. The accounts given by Chomsky and Tomasello can be critically contrasted, as seen above. They obviously stand on two opposite sides. In Chomsky's theory, children are born with an innate ability by which they acquire their language, whereas, in Tomasello's theory, language is acquired through language use and not by biologically innate ability. Furthermore, the innate abilities which children have are not specific to language. However, the main aspects which have been contrasted in this paper comprised: first, the poverty of stimulus argument, in which, according to Chomsky, the input is not sufficient to acquire language, while, from

Tomasello's perspective there is no poverty of stimulus; second, Language to Chomsky is creative, because it is free from the control of stimulus while in Tomasello's view language results from the attempt of humans to create categories in language; third, modularity, Chomsky's assertion that the mind is separated into sub-parts, whereas Tomasello believes, that general principles control the mind; and fourth, Language- specific versus domain-general learning mechanisms; either there are universals specific to language, as in (UG) hypothesis of Chomsky or, as Tomasello states universals is not specific to language but apply to all human communication and cognition. Hence, we can conclude that Chomsky's account strongly relies on the hypothesis of universal grammar (UG) to support his view on the poverty of stimulus argument, creativity of language, modularity and the language- specific domain. It should be noted that the universal grammar hypothesis (UG) brought a great deal of debate among scholars of language acquisition, even though one of its limitations is that it has no empirical evidence to support it. Tomasello's account, conversely, depends on general skills in language acquisition, such as, joint attention, intention reading and pattern finding skills. Yet he did not provide adequate explanation to convince us that these are sufficient for language acquisition.