

The acquisition of spoken language psychology essay



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Before children can make their first word, they have their own way to connect themselves with the world. People often refer to that period as the pre linguistic stage. Pre linguistics refers to a certain stage “ before a child has a linguistic system for acquiring language” (Wetherby, Warren, & Reichle, 1998, p4). It usually lasts from 0-13 months and ends when children say their first meaningful words (Shaffer et al., 2002). During this stage, infants communicate with adults by crying, cooing and babbling or using gestures by pointing and touching to get adults’ attention (Siegler, & Alibali, 2005).

There are considered to be four pre linguistic stages (also called pre symbolic stages) before children speak their first word: The first stage is “ vegetative sounds” and occurs within the first two months of a baby’s life, where babies just make natural sounds, for example crying, swallowing, coughing, etc. The second stage is “ cooing and laughter” and happens between 2 to 5 months old. Babies coo and laugh when they feel happy and comfortable and the sounds consist of either vowel or consonant sounds. The third stage is “ vocal play” which occurs between 4 to 8 months, and involves babies making longer and more continuous sounds. From the ages of 6 to 13 months, children start babbling. Children in this stage start to produce repeated consonants (e. g la-la-la, ma-ma-ma) and later produce more complex vocalizations like ‘ pip’, ‘ ama’, ‘ obboo’ (speech-therapy-information-and-resources, 2012). Up to this stage, what the child produces is nothing more than vocal play, and it is only afterwards that children develop a system of creative words and have a dramatic increase in

vocabulary that they are then ready to move on to linguistic communication (Bates, O'Connell, & Shore, 1987; Wetherby, Reichle & Pierce, 1998).

As soon as an infant is born, he can already watch his mother's face. Gradually he learns to make eye contact and this helps him gain information from the mouth and face about language. In the first week, when parents try to communicate with their baby, they try to interrupt him and add action and sound. That is when turn-taking starts to develop - parents and children will take turns to create sound and gestures to communicate. After about six weeks, babies begin to smile. That's when parents' actions can get a response. By 3 months, babies develop an awareness of sound and gestures and show great interest in different sounds occurring in different situations. By 9 months, babies can interact with others by copying and imitating their gestures and sounds such as clapping their hands and coughing. By 12 months, children can show adults what they want or what interests them by pointing at an object or an event (Child development, 2002). From a child's first birthday, this second year of life is considered to be a "social-cognitive revolution" (Carpenter & Tomasello, 2000, p. 40). Pre linguistic skills are thought to prepare a child for their later language development. According to McCormick and Schiefelbusch (1990), pre linguistic skills include: being able to pay attention to sound and pictures around them; being able to imitate other's gestures and sounds; being able to take turns; being able to understand an object's existence even when they are out of sight; being able to understand that there's relationships between objects, and that they have intended purposes; and being able to communicate using gestures and associate a word with its meaning.

Mundy and Gomes (1997) think that “ early non verbal skills and their underlying social-cognitive structures reflect a unique component of the pre linguistic psychological foundation requisite to language development.” This essay reflects this and will focus on two main pre linguistic skills, joint attention and gestures, and analyse the extent to which is there continuity or discontinuity between those pre linguistic skills and the later acquisition of language. However, before this can done, the distinction between receptive and expressive language must be made: receptive language is what is heard and understood, whilst expressive language is what is said to other (SERVE, 2012). So for example, receptive vocabulary refers to the collection of words that an infant can understand.

Joint Attention

There are a lot of studies based around the relationship between joint attention and language acquisition. It is defined as the ability to follow the attention of others and the directing of others’ attention for social purposes (Tomasello, 1988). Quite a few researchers consider joint attention as a central aspect of early development in children that can be associated with language development (Adamson & McArthur, 1995; Bruner, 1975, 1977; Bates, 1979; Bakeman & Adamson, 1984; Moore & Corkum, 1994; Tomasello, 1988, 1995). The following studies will demonstrate the link between joint attention and later language acquisition.

Firstly, Desrochers Morissette, and Ricard (1995) found that at the age of 15 months, following gaze could predict expressive language. They also found that at 24 months, receptive language could not be predicted from following

gaze. However, in Ulvund and Smith's (1996) study, the same type of joint attention was found to have predictive correlations with receptive and expressive language, but the disadvantage of this study was that covariance between variables was not controlled for.

Morales et al., (2000) have tested if there's a relationship between responding to joint attention and vocabulary acquisition and whether there's a critical period in the early two years of development of joint attention to be accessed. The results have shown responding to joint attention skill across 6-18 month of age predict receptive and expressive vocabulary at 30 months in the typical infants. However, responding to joint attention in infants older than 18 months old no longer predicted language development. This is in agreement with the Desrochers Morissette, and Ricard study, that after a certain stage between 18 and 24 months, joint attention cannot predict future language development.

In a recent study by Watt, Wetherby and Shumway (2006), 160 children were assessed in their second year of life, with two groups being made - "early" and "late" - with the average age of each group 14.31 months and 19.76 months respectively. The relationship between the pre linguistic skills and their receptive and expressive language was analysed near their third birthday. Their results showed that joint attention contributed uniquely to expressive outcome, which further shows a continuity between pre linguistic skills and linguistic skills in the future.

With knowing that most researchers often mix different types of joint attention together to aggregate a total score to measure the relationships

between joint attention and language development (Bates, Thal, Whitesell, Fenson & Oakes, 1989; Fenson et al., 1994), Mundy & Gomes (1998) did a longitudinal study on 14-17 months old and examined whether one type of joint attention skill: following the gaze and pointing of a tester, would predict receptive language development. They found that for 14 and 17 months olds ($r = .51$ and $r = .49$ respectively), the language development outcome can be predicted.

Gestures

Gestures are an important part of infants communicating with others. In the MacArthur Communicative Development Inventory parental report, they observed a large amount of correlations between gestures and receptive language between 8 to 16 months of age, but not between gestures and expressive language (Fenson et al., 1994).

Fenson and colleagues suggest that from understanding language to making gestures, it acts as a bridge to finally being able to produce language. Their hypothesis is further supported by Goodwyn, Acaredolo, & Brown's study (2000). In their study, 103 11 month old infants were divided into 3 groups, and took standardized language tests at 15, 19, 24, 30 and 36 months. The three groups were labelled as the sign training group, the non-intervention control group and the verbal training group. In the sign training group, parents used symbolic gestures and encouraged infants to use them. In the non-intervention control group, parents knew nothing about symbolic gestures. In the other control group (the verbal training group) parents were asked to make special efforts to show infants the gestures. The verbal

training group showed an advantage over the sign training group on most of the measures. It suggests that efforts to increase the use of symbolic gestures in infants have an increasing effect on both receptive and expressive language skills in the second year of life.

In the same study as mentioned previously by Watt, Wetherby and Shumway (2006), they also found that as children begin their second year, having an inventory of conventional gestures contributes to receptive language outcome. In support of this, Crais, Watson and Baranek (2009) suggest that the use of gestures in children should be used as a measure to assess a child's communication skills.

Conclusion

The studies from above have suggested a continuity between two of the pre linguistic skills, joint attention and gestures, and the later acquisition of language in children. From the joint attention studies, it can be concluded that there is continuity between joint attention and later language use. However, it was also discovered that after the age of 18 months, joint attention skills can no longer predict language use. The gesture studies share a similar conclusion that there is a continuity between gestures and later receptive and expressive language skills. It was also found that if children were asked to use more gestures, it led to an increase in language performance. This suggests that this method can be used in helping children with language delay.

The pre linguistic skills mentioned in this essay play an important part in the continuous development of a child's language skill. The findings of these

studies are meaningful. Knowing that there's a strong association between joint attention skill, gestures and later language acquisition, children with language delay can be easily identified and offered intervention sooner.