

Language development in early childhood



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Language acquisition is an everyday and yet magical feat of childhood.

Learning and mastering one language is hard enough to do. Learning and mastering dual languages makes can place additional difficulties on students entering a school environment where English is the native language. Within three to five years, virtually all children become fully competent in at least one language. During the past twenty years, concern has become more increased over the educational needs of young children from non-English speaking families, and how to bridge the gap in language acquisition.

Students who have a home language (L1) other than English are faced with the challenge of learning a new or target language (L2) that has features different from their home language. Even more remarkable are those children who simultaneously acquire proficiency in two, or more, languages during the preschool years. Over the past 50 years researchers and psychologists have studied the language development of young children. The object of this research was to determine what and when language is learned, what variables explain the process of development, and the complexities of language.

There have been four theoretical perspectives proposed to determine language development. These perspectives, nativist, cognitive development, behaviorist, and the interactionist, while unable to provide complete, irrefutable explanations of language development, did contribute significant ideas and concepts. The nativists and the cognitive developmental perspectives emphasize the contributions of nature (inborn or innate human capabilities); whereas the behaviorist and interactionist perspective focuses more on the contributions of nurture (Otto, 2006, p. 27).

Behaviorist perspective is associated today with the name of B. F. Skinner. Skinner developed the theory of “operant conditioning,” the idea that we behave the way we do because this kind of behavior has had certain consequences in the past. Behaviorist perspective emphasizes the role of nurture and considers learning to occur based on stimuli, responses, and reinforcements that occur in the environment. Language is taught through situations in which children are encouraged to imitate others and to develop associations between verbal stimuli and objects. Operant learning is a major part of the behaviorist perspective (Otto, 2006, p. 31).

Skinner argued that language acquisition is learnt by reinforcement and shaping where the child goes through trial-and-error. In other words, the child tries and fails to use correct language until it succeeds; with reinforcement and shaping provided by the parents gestures (smiles, attention and approval) which are pleasant to the child (Otto, 2006, p. 32).

The interactionist perspective, also known as symbolic interactionism, directs sociologists to consider the symbols and details of everyday life, what these symbols mean, and how people interact with each other. Vygotsky, an interactionist, believes that a clear understanding of the interrelations between thought and language is necessary for the understanding of intellectual development (Otto, 2006, p. 33). Language is not merely an expression of the knowledge the child has acquired. Vygotsky’s social-interaction theory serves as a strong foundation for the modern trends in applied linguistics. It lends support to a less structured and a more natural, communicative and experiential approaches and points to the importance of

early real-world human interaction in foreign language learning (Otto, 2006, p. 33).

In the cognitive development perspective, Piaget was very interested in knowledge and how children come to know their world. Piaget may be best known for his stages of cognitive development. Piaget discovered that children think and reason differently at different periods in their lives. He believed that everyone passed through an invariant sequence of four qualitatively distinct stages (Bruce and Weil, 1996, p. 281). A central component of Piaget's developmental theory of learning and thinking is that both involve the participation of the learner. Knowledge is not merely transmitted verbally but must be constructed and reconstructed by the learner. Piaget asserted that for a child to know and construct knowledge of the world the child must act on objects and it is this action which provides knowledge of those objects (Bruce and Weil, 1996, p. 283).

The nativist perspective argues that humans are biologically programmed to gain knowledge. The main theorist associated with this perspective is Noam Chomsky. Naom Chomsky has made a number of strong claims about language: in particular, he suggests that language is an innate faculty – that is to say that we are born with a set of rules about language in our heads which he refers to as the ' Universal Grammar'. The universal grammar is the basis upon which all human languages build. Chomsky proposed that all humans have a language acquisition device (LAD). The LAD contains knowledge of grammatical rules common to all languages. The LAD also allows children to understand the rules of whatever language they are

listening to. Chomsky also developed the concepts of transformational grammar, surface structure, and deep structure (Crain, 1992, p. 299).

During early childhood, children's abilities to understand, to process, and to produce language also flourish in an amazing way. Young children experience a language explosion between the ages of 3 and 6. At age 3, their spoken vocabularies consist of roughly 900 words. By age 6, spoken vocabularies expand dramatically to anywhere between 8,000 and 14,000 words. During infancy and toddlerhood, young children are almost always able to understand far many more words than they can speak. However, with this language explosion, their expressive (spoken language) abilities start to catch up with their receptive (ability to comprehend language) skills.

A young human's acquisition of language takes place in a series of six stages: paralinguistic, babbling, one word (holophrastic), two word, telegraphic speech, and fluent speech.

Oral language, the complex system that relates sounds to meanings, is made up of three components: the phonological, semantic, and syntactic. The phonological component involves the rules for combining sounds.

The semantic component is made up of morphemes, the smallest units of meaning that may be combined with each other to make up words. The syntactic component consists of the rules that enable us to combine morphemes into sentences. As soon as a child uses two morphemes together, as in "more cracker," she is using a syntactic rule about how morphemes are combined to convey meaning. Syntactic rules become increasingly complex as the child develops. Children learn to combine two

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ideas into one complex sentence, as in “ I’ll share my crackers if you share your juice.” Of course speakers of a language constantly use these three components of language together, usually in social situations (Crain, 1992). Children born into culturally diverse families have an additional challenge of becoming proficient in either language.

Children who acquire two languages, prior to age three, is termed simultaneous bilingualism and is found usually in homes where parents speak two or more languages. Successive bilingualism occurs after the age of three, when child acquires a second language. Also, these children experience language interference. This occurs when a child confuses the vocabulary from one language with that of another. In instances when children appear to mix the two languages, code mixing, reflect their parents’ use of the second language. Code switching, not to be confused with code mixing, is a deliberate use of the two languages and is used by the child for emphasis or to show ethnic unity (Otto, 2006, p. 72).

Three major factors have a significant influence on second language acquisition: learner characteristics, social setting and linguistic input. Age is an important factor in second language acquisition. Not only do students learn a new language with more ease than adults, they also acquire productive phonetic knowledge at a level of near-native pronunciation. A child’s first language serves as a foundation on which the second language is acquired (Otto, 2006, p. 76-77). The social setting in which interaction occurs with speakers of the target language is an important factor in second language acquisition, and can be described in terms of three variables: the second language learner’s role in the setting as a listener or an active

participant; the presence of concrete referents which contribute to symbol formation and conceptual development; and the person who is modeling the target language. Linguistic input, quality and quantity, must be comprehensible to the learner.

English language learners should be asked critical thinking questions from all six levels of Bloom's Taxonomy; knowledge, comprehension, application, analyzing, evaluating, and creating. The level of questioning that is most frequently used when teaching ELLs, especially for students in pre-production and beginning production levels of English language acquisition consists of five basic questions: who, what, where, when, and what, again. Answers/responses to these questions can be in the form of yes/no or embedded questions. Pictures and drawings will help students give the correct answer. Responses to these questions are generally right in the text.

Comprehension: This level shows that the student has understood the facts and can interpret them. Students are asked to compare, contrast, illustrate, and classify information, and make use of Venn-diagrams and other graphic organizers (Bloom, 1956).

Application: In this arena, students learn to solve problems by using previously learned facts in a different way. English language learners might need scaffolding and word banks to build, choose, construct, develop, organize plan, select, solve, and identify the different proponents of a story or lesson (Bloom, 1956).

Analysis: It has been found that at this level students may not have enough vocabulary and language to express responses in English. The tasks,

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therefore, at this level for English language learners will be to become able to complete, with some teacher scaffolding, the ability to classify, contrast, compare, categorize, sequence (Bloom, 1956).

Synthesis: This is the level where students compile information together in a different way by combining elements in a new pattern or proposing alternative solutions. Teacher support and scaffolding to answer questions at level 5 will be needed. Synthesis has been found to be particularly difficult for English language learners. Students may be able to choose, combine, create, design, develop, imagine, make up, predict, solve, and change (Bloom, 1956).

Evaluation: Questions at this level of Bloom's taxonomy can be modified so that the language is simplified but the task remains the same. English language learners can learn to give opinions, make judgments about the action in a story and evaluate the work of an author (Bloom, 1956).

Students in the United States do not speak with one voice; they come to school speaking more than 149 different languages (National Virtual Translation Center, 2007). Less visible than language and race are the differences in home cultures and prior experiences that shape the thoughts and language of each student. This individualized knowledge base provides the foundation for oral and written language learning. Students' prior world knowledge, experiences, and fluency in their native language, when different from the mainstream, have translated into the infamous achievement gap that spurred major educational reforms and is at the heart of the No Child Left Behind Act of 2001 (Gauthier, Holmes, & Rutledge, 2009).

Language and culture are an interactive and interwoven part of a child's life. A child's patterns of communication are developed through multiple means such as family, socioeconomic status, dialect, and education. These language and cultural factors impact student learning. The growing population of ELL students in American classrooms makes it essential for the regular classroom teacher to know how they learn and use systematic, targeted strategies that lead to English proficiency. Instruction planned from an asset perspective acknowledges that English Language Learners are language experts. As an expert, nonnative speakers are empowered as they share and teach their classmates their native language. Depending upon the level of the ELL students' English proficiency, they can simply point to objects and say the non-English word or translate oral and written words and phrases into their native language. As language experts, ELL students are elevated to the status of teacher where they teach their native speaking class mates aspects of their language and knowledge about their country and culture (Gauthier, Holmes, & Rutledge, 2009).

Language acquisition is an everyday and yet magical feat of childhood. Learning and mastering one language is hard enough to do. Learning and mastering dual languages place additional difficulties on students entering a school environment where English is the native language. However, with the advances in technology, changes in attitudes, biases and the inclusion of parents has made bridging the gap in second language acquisition and bilingualism much easier.