

Language Acquisition - An Overview

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Abstract: *The present paper aims to illustrate the overview of language acquisition by infants. Aim of this paper is discuss about language acquisition process, theories and various stages of language acquisition up to the age of three years.*

Keywords: Language Acquisition, Infants, Theories, Stages of Language acquisition

1. Introduction

Language acquisition is a complicated process, because it involves a wide range of social, psychological, cognitive, linguistic, physiological factors. The study of the child's acquisition of mother tongue is a topic of great interest. The child's language acquisition potential can tell us a great deal about the intellectual functioning of the child. The use of language has a tremendous effect on the child's relationship with himself and to his environment. Every normal child acquires a language, from the day of birth and there will be talking going on about them in a great way as the time goes by those who take care of them. Parents and others constantly talk to him/her as if they understood. This takes place during the period when infant is maturing physically and mentally.

2. Language Acquisition Process

In language acquisition process one can notice the influence of environment and imitation on the learning of the language. The child's acquisition of the first language takes place in an informal and natural condition. The evolution of child's knowledge, takes place in his own mother tongue and his social development. All children seem to acquire their mother tongue slowly and in a systematic way. Many social issues influence this process. This may be due to their family background, parent's education, and society in which they live. Language acquisition of child generally begins with the interaction with his mother, during the conversation, the mother provides the child lots of verbal input, and the child receives it. Then the child provides the output to his mother. During the process they should keep the conversation coherent. The purpose is that the child may be able to attain optimum psycho-social development.

3. Language Acquisition Theories

There are various theories about language acquisition. Different scholars have their different thoughts about language acquisition. One of the best-known theories is Skinner's behaviorism. Skinner was commonly known in the contribution of observing animals' behavior. However, Skinner also devoted in education through mechanical teaching and focused on stimuli-response connection. (Brown, 2000) Skinner (1957) stated that idea or meaning is explanatory fiction, and that speaker is merely the locus of verbal behavior, not the cause. However, in 1960s, Chomsky (1959) had a highly critic about Skinner's

behaviorism. (Brown, 2000) According to Chomsky (1965), he claimed the existence of innate properties of language to explain the child's mastery of a native language. Chomsky believed that people have inner knowledge about language learning. More recently, constructivism brings a new school of thought in language learning. Vygotsky (1978) proposed a new theory called ZPD (Zone of Proximal Development) which means that it is a distance between a child's actual cognitive capacity and the level of potential development. Children can achieve their potential ability through others' teaching.

4. Stages of Language Acquisition

In normal language development, speech appears only after a relatively sophisticated non verbal communication system has been established. This pre speech mode includes cry, eye contact, facial expression and gestures. Crying of a baby conveys some significant linguistic communication. An infant can make controlled sound within the first few months of life by making cooing sounds, laughs, cries, gurgles etc. These are the immediate antecedents of communicative speech. It is the inflection and intonation of the adult talk that is easily imitated by children. Thus they unknowingly lay the basis of the speech they are going to learn shortly. The very young baby utters far more vowels than consonants. The first vowels pronounce normally. The front vowels and the back vowels become more frequent as the child grows. Consonants first appear as glottal and velar sounds formed in the back of the mouth. The order of development of the consonants progresses from the back to the front of the mouth. (Rajimwale, Sharad, 2005).

Usually the babbling stage starts by six months of age. In this period, children typically engage in 'vocal play' manipulating pitch, loudness, etc. This stage is called marginal babbling. At about seven months, infants start to make extended sounds that are chopped up rhythmically by oral articulations in the syllable like sequences, opening and closing their jaws, lips and tongue. This is called canonical babbling. Next the child learns to repeat the sounds or reduplicates them. This stage is called 'talking' where others hear the child saying baba, boo-boo, la-la etc. In this stage, parents help the child in associating sounds with objects by taking the advantage of talking such as 'meou meou' for cat, bow-bow for dog etc where these animals are seen. This is called indicating behavior. The child also learns symbolization during this stage. i.e., when the child hears dogs barking or something like that, the child says bow-bow. This is called symbolization process.

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During babbling children show intonational features in a very broad sense pointing to their capability of learning by imitation. So the babbling stage can be called as pre-linguistic period preparatory to the growth of language. By the end of their first year, most children have mastered the ability to say a few simple words. These single word utterances are used to mean a whole sentence. i.e., one word functions as a sentence. This stage of child's language development is known as holophrastic stage. In this stage the child is not equipped to use syntactic construction, therefore, the meaning of a sentence is to be found in one word. Children are most likely unaware of the meaning of their first words, but soon they learn the power of those words as others respond to them. Then they start to use words which are in the form of ideomorphs. That is, the child makes their own words to refer something.

eg: /tu tu/ to refer cockroach
 /brr/ to refer vehicles

At the age of eighteen months most children can say eight to ten words. After a while, they start to use single words like a complete meaningful sentence, accompanied by some gestures which look like a telegraphic message. But the articulation of the sound will be distorted by substituting or replacing some sounds.

eg: suu > /cuu/ 'shoe'
 paisa > /paicca/ 'paise'

At this telegraphic stage of child's speech development, the utterances are totally free from tense, pluralization or other grammatical categories. At the age of two, they put the words together in crude sentences such as /paalə/ 'more milk' /appam taa/ 'give food'. During this period, children rapidly learn words that symbolize or represent objects, actions and thoughts. At this age, they also engage in representational or pretend play. At the ages of three, four and five, a child's vocabulary rapidly increases, and he or she begins to master the rules of language.

An amazing feature of language development is the speed with which it is acquired. The first word is spoken at about 12 months, by two years of age most children have vocabularies of about 270 words and this increases to 2600 words at the age of six. Children generally use syntactically correct sentences by the age of 3 and highly complex constructions by the age of five. Similarly, in the beginning some pronunciation problems are common. They cannot pronounce aspirated sounds. Instead of that they pronounce its corresponding voiceless or voiced sounds.

eg: katha > kata 'story'

While pronouncing clusters, they usually simplify the clusters into single consonant or geminated sounds or they modify the cluster by inserting a vowel in between the consonants.

eg: skuul > suul 'school'
 pakṣe > pace 'but'

In the stage of grammatical development, they start by repeating same words such as bye bye, ta ta, ka – ka, etc and then to connect two different words. In this period, they can use nouns, words, and then adjectives and so on. But they have some problems with connecting words, link morphs or case markers. At the age of 2 ½ - 3, they gradually get most

of these grammatical categories. Questions and negative transformations of the sentences also start to use during this time.

Milestones in child's Language Development

Age	Language Level
Birth	Cries
2-3 Months	Cries differently in different circumstances, Coos in response.
3-4 Months	Babbles randomly
5-6 Months	Babbles rhythmically
5-6 Months	Respond to name
6-11 Months	Babbles in imitation of real speech, with expression
12 Months	Says 1-2 words, imitates familiar sounds, understands simple instructions
18 Months	Uses 5-20 words, including names
Between 18 Months and 2 Years	Says two word sentences, Vocabulary is growing
2 Years	Can use up to 270 words
2 ½ Years	Says short sentences
Between 2 and 3 Years	Identifies body parts, Starts to use pronouns, Combines nouns and verbs, Vocabulary develops in to 450 words, Matches 3-4 colours, knows big and little, Makes some plurals

5. Conclusion

- Language acquisition and other milestone developments are tied up with each other.
- Language acquisition of infants had great impact of social variables.
- In the first three years are very complicated and most important for infant's linguistic and non linguistic developments. Pronunciation difference or phonological errors are some of the salient features of infant's utterance.

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