

Prospects and Challenges of Language Acquisition and Language Development: The Way Forward

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Abstract

Language acquisition is a crucial stage in children's process of language development. During this period, they struggle with communication, understanding and expressing their feelings. The child's ability to develop fast-thinking, problem-solving skills, and maintain good relationships solely depends on the availability of role models and language repertoire. Consequently, parents need to pay serious attention to their children's language acquisition and development strategies since it is a determinant factor for their success in the language learning process. This can be achieved not only by encouraging them but motivating the children. The parents, older siblings and caregivers must serve as role models to the children. This work aims to identify some learning strategies that can enhance children's language acquisition and language development and the roles of parents and caregivers in motivating them early enough in life to develop receptive and expressive skills as they learn to communicate. Suggestions are made that since parents, older siblings and caregivers are the first teachers' children encounter during this stage, adequate support and motivation should be provided for them by talking to and with them, singing for them and reading aloud.

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Introduction

Language acquisition is a precursor to language development. It is impossible to talk about language development without acquiring the first language, which in this context of the discussion is regarded as both the Mother Tongue (MT) and the Language of the Immediate Environment (LIE). However, in this context, language acquisition and language development are dealt with as two sides of a coin. It is a process through

which infants or children learn to interact with their parents, siblings and peer groups. The capacity for language development of children starts from the womb. A child in the womb begins to hear linguistic signals through speech utterances outside the mother's womb.

Undiyaundeye (2014) corroborates the above view by saying that "learning begins in the uterus where the foetus starts to recognise its mother's voice and differentiates it from other sounds after

birth". A normal child begins to acquire the language of the parents (MT) naturally without understanding the rules of the language as early as ten (10) months through blabbing.

Within the first five (5) years, infants acquire and develop language spontaneously because everybody is a teacher in their environs (Anyanwu & Otagburuagu 2002). To further enhance this development, parents and older siblings tell them stories, ask them questions eliciting responses and reading aloud letter sounds even picture reading as learning strategies for the vocabulary development. The parents can go ahead and procure other learning materials like audio-visual tapes and CDs with nursery rhymes, storybooks with beautiful pictures all to provide support for their children's language development (Owens, 2017). It is instructive to observe that language is not only a form of communication but a useful medium for imparting cultural values into our children either by spoken or written based on linguistic codes or symbols (Owens, 2017).

Language is an individual as well as social possession (expatiate more on now language is individual and social possession). It enables human beings to express their thoughts, feelings, ideas, and life experiences. Hence, language is regarded as man's invaluable possession as it serves as a distinctive marker between human beings and other animals (Okoro, 2015). Language is cardinal to a strong feeling of kinship among human beings, unlike other animals. Truly, children are born without prior knowledge or ability to

speaking their "MT" or the "LIE" which in this case is their first language (L1) yet, unconsciously and without formal teaching and learning at the formative stage (1 year – 5 years), they can acquire several words and grammar of a given language (Okoro, 2015).

Unlike language learning which builds on the premise of the first language (L1) that has been acquired this is usually done in a formal setting where the teacher remains the role model. Language acquisition therefore is the process by which children acquire the capacity to perceive, comprehend, produce and use words through initiation and repetition. Language acquisition ceases at the age of six, giving way to language learning till the end of one's life.

Anyanwu and Otagburuagu (2002) note that speech is specie-specific and has become such an integral part of activities that its complexities of form and mastery are almost taken for granted and the speech proficiency of individuals in a speech community almost neglected or ignored. Thus, from the moment of birth when the first language (L1) signals start to manifest from the child until he begins to utter some simple sentences at the age of about six, the child's attempt to master his L1 follows one long period of unconscious or semi-conscious operation. There is nothing that indicates that the child follows a predetermined pattern of conscious participation in the language program. Rather the child develops language skills through stimulus-response. However, it is noteworthy to say that language acquisition is maturationally set. As a maturationally

determined phenomenon, language acquisition would not be possible if it were not glued to other developmental processes. That is why most “feral man and wolf children” would not speak well after they had been captured by individuals and brought into the human environment. Some scholars argue like Anyanwu and Otagburuagu (2002) argue that the ability of such wild ones to acquire the human language has become permanently impaired because of failure to develop synchronically with other human beings. Language acquisition therefore must be regarded as a developmental need that must be fulfilled at a certain period in the growing process or be lost in life.

Methods of Language Acquisition

Language acquisition is different from language learning. The following are the various ways a child acquires his first language:

- Through unconscious exercise in the child’s immediate environment using parents and older siblings as role models.
- Language acquisition naturally takes place in an informal setting without organized language lessons.
- Children are totally immersed in the language they are trying to acquire, not done under proxy.
- Language acquisition actually is a developmental stage in language use, when the child attempts to process most language tasks and data in phonology, lexis and structure, lexical items, semantics and vocabulary

development simultaneously without formal instruction.

Stages of Language Acquisition

Language acquisition can be divided into receptive and expressive. There are four language skills: Listening, Speaking, Reading and Writing. These can be divided into receptive skills and expressive or productive skills. Whereas listening and reading are regarded as receptive skills, speaking and writing are expressive skills.

Receptive Skills

They are called receptive skills because every individual first of all listens or hears the sounds of a language before responding just as the same way a learner should read before writing. When a child engages in listening or paying attention to what is being said in his environment, he is receiving or gaining information, hence it is called receptive skills, while on the other hand, whenever an individual speaks or writes, he or she is sending out information, and that is called expressive skills (Okoro, 2021).

At home, babies listen to their parents’ and older siblings’ speech and cry whenever there is an unusual sound. From birth to the period of one year (1 year), they can babble two letter words such as *pa*, *ma*, *da*, among others. For instance, they can be attracted by objects that produce sounds, toys, music and rhymes. However, within the first 3 years, the child can respond to simple commands, enjoy storytelling and answer simple questions.

Allen and Marotz (2017) state that babies use different cries for different situations. For instance, a child may cry because of pain, yet in another context, his cry may indicate hunger or thirst. Furthermore, they added that within 2-3 years, many children ought to have acquired the vocabulary range of about 25-50 words. This enables to ask and answer simple questions. By the age of 3-5 years, children's speech pattern must have improved by becoming longer as they combine at least two or more words to communicate their thoughts, feelings and experiences.

Expressive Skills

In language acquisition and language learning, the two skills referred to as expressive skills are speaking and writing. In expressive language acquisition, speaking especially during the early stage can be seen as the process of putting thoughts, ideas and feelings into verbal form. It implies producing the sounds of language accurately and combining the produced sounds in a specific method into utterances for the sole purpose of communication. At 0-12 months, new babies start making sounds that let others know that they are experiencing pain or pleasure. When they are happy, their smile indicates that they are happy. They have communicated in a non-verbal way even though they did not speak. The baby smiles at you when you come into view. They repeat the same sound a lot and "coo's and goo's". From 1-3 years, the baby can now accumulate more words as each month passes.

Theories of Language Acquisition Noam Chomsky's Perspective

Chomsky asserts that every child is endowed with the natural ability structured in the brain that controls the production and interpretation of speech. He called it a Language Acquisition Device (LAD). Indices that Chomsky used to support authenticate his claims were: there is an optimal age between language acquisition (1-5 years) and language learning (6 years). Chomsky argues that language acquisition is a function of innate structure in the human brain. He believes that language hinges on performance. However, Dell Hymes propounded a theory of communicative competence to criticize Chomsky's theory of competence vs performance. He says that language is also a cultural and social phenomenon and that a native speaker of a language is also one that can perform in a language. He believes that language comes alive only in inter-group situations. His theory is part of the developmental metrics of language acquisition (the social + the linguistic aspect).

Lev Vygotsky's Perspective on Language Acquisition

The connectivity culture shares with language development of children form the basis of Vygotsky's proposition especially the interpersonal relationship between the child and others. He believes that socialization aids in the learning process. He highlighted the role of "shared language" in the development of thought. The term "shared language" refers to social interaction and can be well

understood in relation to “Zone of Proximal Development” (ZPD). According to Vygotsky, two developmental levels determine the learning process viz-a-viz interaction and egocentricity. What can a child achieve if left to himself and what he can accomplish when playing with others. The ‘ZPD’ is a time children are ready to learn if appropriate support and motivation are given both from the peers, older siblings and adults.

B.F Skinner’s Perspective on Language Acquisition

Skinner affirmed that infants are tabula rasa, which is empty slate. He therefore views language acquisition as a cognitive behavior using operant conditioning. He argues that children develop language through trial and error techniques. In other words, the child tries and tries severally until success is achieved using appropriate support and reinforcement by parents and older siblings such as (attention, smiles and approval nods). When a child requests water to drink and he utters it to the understanding of an adult around him, if he gets it, next time he will be motivated to utter such a word that led to the satisfaction of his needs previously (stimulus-response). This confirms the four contingencies that Skinner believed were the basis for language acquisition i.e. stimulus and response and reinforcing the stimuli, motivating operations and discrimination. He concludes by stating that children acquire language through imitation and practice as well as prompting and shaping. In all, the three

theories point at the environment as a contributive factor to children’s language acquisition.

Vygotsky opines that egocentric speech is a means of socialization among children and their peers. Obviously, a child uses more egocentric speech when playing with his peers than when he is alone. Chomsky is of the opinion that the child’s biological traits will function maximally so long as people are in the child’s environment to activate them. Skinner also opined that children will acquire language naturally by imitation and reinforcement that springs from the immediate environment.

Challenges Facing Children during Language Acquisition

Since it is difficult to speak a language without first, listening to the sound components of that given language, understanding it and assigning meaning, some children learn wrongly by speaking or attempting writing in the language without first listening to and understanding the sounds of the language.

Some Roadblocks are:

- The environment even though it has been upheld to be positive, sometimes may tend to give negative development. For instance, if a child receives a lot of reinforcement in his language use in his environment the tendency of acquiring language faster is there unlike the opponents.
- Socialization index: when a child fails to receive the level or percentage of language support/reinforcement from his social environment, his capacity for the acquisition and development of his

first language suffers. For example; if a child has anxiety disorder, if he is neglected, it can affect his speech ability and understanding of objects and concepts in real world situations.

- The physical health and development of an infant can mar his chances in language acquisition. There are some illnesses which can hinder the child from making progress at the stage of language acquisition. Poor health challenges especially at the early years of any child can retard the development lead to speech impairment.

Conclusion

From the ongoing, Language acquisition therefore is the process by which children acquire the capacity to perceive, comprehend, produce and use words through initiation and repetition. Language acquisition ceases at the age of six, giving way to language learning till the end of one's life. We can deduce that language acquisition stages are critical periods in the life of infants. Therefore, it is incumbent on parents and older siblings to enhance the process of language acquisition in children within their environment.

Suggestions

To improve the language acquisition and language development of children the following among others should be done:

- Parents and older siblings should create time or make allowance out of their tight schedules to create storytelling time for their children.

- At the early stage of life, parents and caregivers should endeavor as their children's first teachers to motivate and support their language use by reading aloud and singing lullaby songs.
- Provision of learning aids like: toys, CDs for nursery rhymes, alphabets, pictures or picture reading with letter sounds.
- Provision of audio-visual aids to language learning for their vocabulary development.

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