

Theories of First Language Acquisition

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Abstract: *First Language Acquisition is a complex phenomenon that has been debated over for a long time by researchers and thinkers. The biological foundations of language such as Chomsky's LAD, as well as the evident influence of external stimuli have resulted in many different schools of thought for language acquisition. This paper explores different theories from these schools and presents their features as well as their criticisms. It also outlines the differences between acquisition and learning, and presents the stages of language acquisition.*

Key Words: *First Language Acquisition, LAD, acquisition, learning.*

1. INTRODUCTION:

First Language Acquisition simply refers to the process in which children acquire their first or native languages. Human beings are endowed with an innate capacity to acquire language. This capacity is a vital element that distinguishes us humans from other species in existence. We are the only species that use complete and complex language systems for communication. The biological foundations of language in humans are evident in the way the human body is designed – from the neurological processes in our brains to the way our organs such as our lungs, our bone structure, and our facial muscles facilitate speech. However, it is imperative to understand that this innate capacity may not always manifest due to physical and mental disabilities in some individuals. Also, there is no genetic disposition for acquiring particular languages. For example, if an infant from German were to be adopted and raised in Japan, that child will not speak German until and unless it is the language spoken in his environment, which is quite unlikely. Language acquisition involves growth and maturation of relatively fixed capacities, under appropriate external conditions (Chomsky, Cartesian Linguistics: A Chapter in the History of Rationalist Thought, 2009). And all human languages are equally easy to acquire as first languages – it does not mean that a globally influential language like English is easier to acquire than a language like Japanese that has 3 different scripts. An important fact about first language acquisition is that children can acquire two or more first languages with ease, as can be found in bilingualism. Bilingualism, however, does not necessarily mean that an individual has two first languages, as they can have second languages that they learn later in life as well. First language acquisition has been an area of intrigue and interest for many researchers as this paper will discuss further.

2. UNDERSTANDING FIRST LANGUAGE ACQUISITION:

Acquisition vs Learning:

To understand first language acquisition, a few clarifications must be made. A crucial point is that first languages are acquired, not learnt. This distinction between learning and acquisition is vital in understanding language acquisition. Acquisition is implicit and involuntary, whereas learning involves explicit instruction which is voluntary on the learners' parts. Acquisition is effortless, while learning requires effort. When children acquire their first languages, they do not require formal instruction, and they acquire the basics of all essential parts of a language like pronunciation, grammar, intonation, all by the age of 5-6, well before they enter institutions of formal education. Eventually, the outcome is the same - all individuals talk unless physical and mental impairments affect their linguistic capacity. Other aspects of speech such as eloquence, the ability to throw jokes, hold a meaningful conversation, understand and use sarcasm, are all developed and learned individually over time.

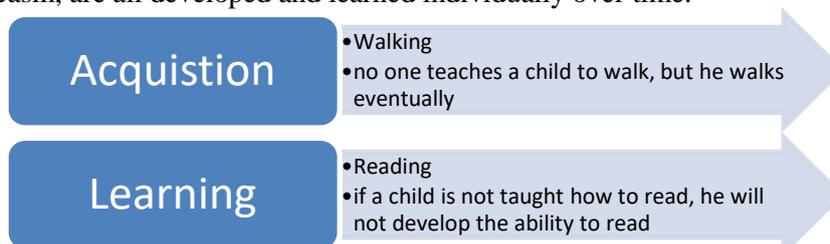


Fig 1. Differences between Acquisition and Learning (Fromkin, 1983)

Stages in First Language Acquisition:

The innate capacity of language in humans does not mean that all human beings possess the ability to speak perfectly grammatical utterances in his first language upon birth. Language is acquired in steps, progressing with age until a level of competence is reached. There are six primary stages of language acquisition, as denoted below (Hutauruk, 2015) –

1. Pre-talking stage / Cooing (0-6 months): At the cooing stage, babies produce vowel-like sounds to respond to human sounds, and turn their heads and search with their eyes for speakers when they hear the sounds of speaking (Bolinger, 2002). They may produce vowel-like sounds, especially the back vowels [u] and [o] in the typical ways of "cooing". They [i] sound is a bit challenging at this stage, but they may produce the sound when screaming or crying. Consonant sounds like [b], [p], or [m], are not produced yet at this stage.
2. Babbling stage (6-8 months) According to Steinberg (Steinberg, 2003), babbling involves the sounds infants produce as consonant-vowel combinations. This includes some common sounds we associate to parental figures such as [ma-ma-ma], [da-da-da], [ba-ba-ba] or [na-na-na].
3. Holophrastic stage (9-18 months): Fromkin defined holophrastic as a combination of holo meaning "complete" or "undivided" with phrase (Fromkin, 1983). Thus, the holophrastic stage is where a child produces simple one-word utterances to represent meanings.
4. The two-word stage (18-24 months): At this stage, children start to combine words. According to Fromkin, children start to form actual two-word sentences, with the relations between the two words showing definite syntactic and semantic relations and the intonation contour of the two words extending over the whole utterance rather than being separated by a pause between the two words (Fromkin, 1983). For example, an utterance like "John go" or "I eat" may be produced. The consonant sounds [j], [p], [b], [d], [t], [m], and [n], can be pronounced by children at this stage.
5. Telegraphic stage (24-30 months): The telegraphic is named so because the child produces concise utterances with primarily content words, as you would find in telegraphic messages (Fromkin, 1983). These utterances imitate full sentences as more words are combined.
6. Later multiword stage (30+months): In the later multiword stage, utterances have communicative intent and are not limited to just a few content words (Bolinger, 2002). Functional words indicating an understanding of grammatical structures begin to emerge at this stage.

Nature vs Nurture:

First language acquisition is a complex phenomenon and leaves many puzzling questions for researchers. The most heated argument in language acquisition may be the question of whether it is nature or nurture that helps human acquire language. This argument has been explored by the ancient theories of whether language is an innate gift by God or learned from one's environment. There are some who believe that languages are a natural predisposition, whereas some believe that language is purely functional and will cease to exist if we were not required to communicate for survival. Thus, there have been various discussions of what extent language is hardwired into the human brain, and to what extent it is learned through interaction with the environment.

How is language acquired?

There are certain questions regarding the first language acquisition which require answers –

- How do children create novel utterances that they have never heard before?
- How do they get things right without being corrected?
- How do they master grammar by the age of 5, when they cannot master equally complex mathematical equations even in their teens?
- How do they chatter away, using relative clauses without realizing it while they cannot even tie their shoelaces properly?

Language acquisition leaves a lot of questions and puzzles unsolved, and as a result, linguists have come up with theories that attempt to explain some, if not all the aspects of this complex and intricate phenomenon.

3. THEORIES & PERSPECTIVES OF FIRST LANGUAGE ACQUISITION:

Language acquisition has been the subject of keen interest of man for many years. There have been many attempts to answer the question of how a human being develops his mother-tongue. This has resulted in the existence of a number of school of thoughts with different theories on how human beings acquire language, four of which are explained below –

Behaviorism: The behaviourist theory of language acquisition emerged in the 1950's and is based on the psychology of habit formation. B.F. Skinner is at the forefront of the behaviourist theory, and suggested that babies imitate the language of their parents (Skinner, 1957). This developed into the imitation theory – children learn language by imitating their parents or caregivers. Moreover, the stimuli-response theory was also highly influential in this era. This theory basically lies in the idea that language learning is conditioned by the stimulus or input that a child receives, which leads to the response or output as language on the child's part. Although Skinner's view is not all wrong, it is met with plenty of objections. One crucial discrepancy in Skinner's explanation is that children make mistakes which reveal that they are not simply imitating but actively working out and applying rules. To add to this, children rarely receive grammatical corrections at such young ages, as parents tend to be more concerned with truthfulness and politeness. Moreover, the Critical Period Hypothesis popularised by Eric Lenneberg suggests the existence of a time period within which children can acquire language perfectly (Lenneberg, 1967). This window closes at adolescence, and after this point, children will never achieve native level knowledge of a language. Hence, the behaviourist view fails to explain how children speak beyond the input that they receive from adults, and how input may no longer be sufficient after a point of time.

Innateness: The innateness view emerged as a direct criticism of the behaviourist theory of language acquisition. The proponent of this theory is Noam Chomsky who directly refuted the behaviorist view in his review of Skinner's Verbal Behaviour in 1959. According to Chomsky, the ability of children to create novel utterances despite the impoverished language input they receive concludes the existence of an inborn faculty for language acquisition (Chomsky, A Review of B.F Skinner's Verbal Behaviour, 1959). This innate natural faculty hardwired in human beings is known as the Language Acquisition Device or LAD (Chomsky, A Review of B.F Skinner's Verbal Behaviour, 1959). He states that all human languages common principles – like nouns and verbs which exist in all languages. It is the innate acquisition device that helps human beings to access and process these principles. Chomsky later modified his LAD to the concept of Universal Grammar. Like the LAD, the Universal Grammar (UG) still contained specific knowledge about language. The UG is what enables human beings to apply rules to transform language and generate infinite number of utterances, as opposed to the behaviorist model which simply suggested that language outputs are proportional to language inputs. Although Chomsky's theory is revered and accounts for many things that cannot be explained otherwise by other theories in existence, it is often criticised for the fact that the theory fails to account for real children and their experiences with their caregivers to see what the influence might be.

Cognitivism: Jean Piaget, a Swiss psychologist, was the pioneer of the cognitive theory of language development. The cognitive view directly opposed behaviorism as well. While behaviorism likened human beings to animals that are essentially programmed, cognitivism accounted for the role of mental activities and rational thoughts of the human mind in language acquisition. According to Piaget, language is a mental and emotional process where the child's cognitive development is linked to the language development (Piaget, 1926). He suggests that before a child can verbalize a concept, he must first have an understanding of what it is. Thus, cognitive development is a pre-requisite for language acquisition. The cognitive theory is not free from scrutiny as well. One area of doubt is that as children continue to develop and grow, the link between language and intellect gets muddier and harder to trace.

Interactionist: In recent years, different theories have started to stress on the language input received by children. Many are of the opinion that language exists as a result of the human society and the need for communication. In a nutshell, language exists as a result of human interaction, without which it would have ceased to exist in the first place. Interactionists like Jerome Bruner suggest that the language behaviour of adults when talking to children, mostly known as child-directed speech or CDS, is specially adapted to support the process of language acquisition. Human adults change their manner of speech when interacting with children to communicate at their pace of language development. This act of support for the children's language learning process is described as scaffolding. The term Language Acquisition Support System or LASS was coined by Bruner. The term was coined in response to Chomsky's LAD. According to Bruner, if there is a device for language acquisition, then there is a support system as well (Bruner, 1983). This support system is the social environment in which the child interacts with adults and develops language with the help of input on the adults' parts. Thus, the interactionist theory of language acquisition is concerned with the role of interaction in language acquisition.

4. CONCLUSION:

First language acquisition is indeed a complex process that cannot be explained entirely by one theory. What is evident is one thing – all human beings eventually learn how to talk, and all human beings have the capacity to acquire language if not for exceptional circumstances like mental and physical disabilities that may hamper the

process of language acquisition. The different theories of language acquisition all play an important part and cannot be directly refuted. Human behaviour plays an important role in our language development, although the extent of its influence is not in its entirety. The innate capacity endowed in human beings play a very vital role in our ability to formulate rules to manipulate language. Moreover, our cognitive abilities are essential to process language meaningfully. However, as we do not exist in isolation, the influence of input that we receive as children from the interactions with the adults in our environment are very crucial for us to learn how to speak not only grammatically, but appropriately. Thus, language acquisition is a concept that will continue to fascinate and intrigue human beings for a long time.

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