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## Research Article

### DEVELOPMENTAL PSYCHOLINGUISTICS; FIRST LANGUAGE ACQUISITION AND INDISPENSABILITY OF INPUT

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#### ABSTRACT

Psycholinguistics studies the relation between human psychology and language. Developmental Psycholinguistics aims to unearth the progressive process of language acquisition in humans. Language acquisition is the process by which language develops in humans. First language acquisition in humans is instinctive, spontaneous, unconscious and enduring. There are different theories on Language Acquisition by which we learn to use language in meaningful ways to communicate. The Linguistic Input from the adults plays an indispensable role in Language Acquisition and is a precursor for the hierarchical development of communicative faculty in infants.

##### Key Words:

First Language, Language, Acquisition

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#### INTRODUCTION

The study of language acquisition is the domain of Psycholinguistics and Language acquisition is a higher level cognitive skill that makes normally functioning humans capable of perceiving and comprehending language. It involves the development of auditory and oral abilities in humans, enabling them to communicate. Language acquisition generally refers to first-language acquisition, the way in which children master their native language. Language acquisition also includes second-language acquisition, which refers to the learning of another language or languages besides the native language by both, children and adults.

##### First Language Acquisition; Characteristics

1. It is instinctive. It gets triggered at birth and develops gradually. However, linguistic input from the environment is needed for the child to acquire a specific language.
2. Natural Language acquisition during childhood is largely spontaneous. First language develops automatically and does not require instruction.
3. It is the unconscious learning of one's native language or languages in the case of bilinguals during the first 6 or 7 years of life.

4. The quality of first language acquisition is enduring. The first language is never forgotten though a native might encounter difficulties in recall if the language is not frequently used.

##### First Language; Sources

The first language is undoubtedly passed on from parents to their children. Astonishingly, the child can later produce sentences which he/she has never heard before!

Neurolinguistic evidence supports that the child stores the lexicon of words and the sentence structures of his/ her native language in mind. This enables the child to produce an unlimited number of sentences with finite input.

The Language is transmitted to the child through the following routes-

1. Linguistic input from parents (performance)
2. Abstraction of structures by children
3. Internalization (competence of next generation)

##### Language acquisition: theories

###### Imitation

This theory of language acquisition entails that a child learns to speak by copying the adult utterances which he/she hears. The

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Child strengthens his own language faculty by the repetitions, corrections and other reinforcements which the adults provide. However, this theory has invited criticism as there is evidence supporting the claim that children do imitate sounds and vocabulary but the learning of grammatical nuances cannot be accounted for by this theory.

The way children master irregular grammatical patterns in English is surely something more warranted than mere imitation. For example, the child employs a reasoning process called analogy to internalize the fact that past tense forms of verbs 'go' and 'take' do not follow a regular pattern. The child acquires that 'went' and 'took' replace the regular but incorrect forms 'goed' and 'taked' respectively.

Undoubtedly, Imitation alone cannot account for this learning. This suggests that language acquisition is rather maturational than merely imitative. Analogy, imitation and reinforcement cannot account for development of language because they are based on the assumption that the child acquires a set of sentences rather than a set of grammatical rules.

### **Innateness**

This theory argued that children are preconditioned for language acquisition; they have an innate capacity for language development. This view was propounded by Noam Chomsky who argued that language development is predominantly controlled by biological forces, a viewpoint named Nativism.

The child is biologically endowed with a Language Acquisition Device(LAD) which provides children with the knowledge of linguistic universals. Children are born with an innate biological outline which specifies those features that are universal to all languages.

The primary linguistic data is supplied to the child via adult speech, the child then processes this data by employing the grammatical knowledge and the general language learning principles contained in the LAD.

This accounts for the phenomenal speed with which the child learns to speak and masters grammatical patterns of this native language. Chomsky stressed that environmental, cognitive and individual factors alone are not sufficient to explain the complex act of child language development.

### **Cognition**

This proposition of Language Acquisition lays that cognitive foundation is a precursor to language development. Linguistic structure is only learnt by the child if there is an already existing cognitive base.

The model of cognitive progress was laid by Jean Piaget, a Genevan psychologist who proposed a parallel between emergence of linguistic skills and stages of cognitive development. Piaget laid that cognitive development of language is a progressive phenomenon which involves reorganization of mental processes due to biological maturation along with experience from the environment. Piaget theory held that *schemas* are the building blocks of knowledge, which enable the child to form a mental representation of the world. The child progresses from one stage to the next stage of language development via adaptation processes like assimilation, accommodation and equilibration.

### **Role of Input in Language Acquisition**

The parents make a variety of speech modifications while talking to their children during their growing years. The earliest mother-child interactions are essentially important ways of establishing meaningful communication. The children are able to learn language because of the peculiar way in which the adults speak to them. This special simplified language is called Motherese /Child Directed Speech (CDS)/baby talk or caretaker speech.

The manner in which the adults talk to children is influenced by three factors:

Firstly, the adults have to gain the attention of the child. The adult has to make the child conscious of the fact that the utterance is being addressed to them by calling the child by his/her name or by using a special tone or by any other means. Secondly, the adult has to wisely choose the apt vocabulary, sentence patterns and the subject matter that the child can comprehend. Caretaker speech is generally characterized by simple sentence structures. The use of relative clauses, complements or negative constructions is avoided.

Thirdly, the adults can devise novel ways of talking to the child to facilitate learning. They can slow down and put in greater pauses to make it easier for the child to understand. Adults can adopt the technique of repetition as it allows the children more time to interpret adult utterances. The adults can, for example, use reduplicative words for animals while conversing with a child, this is when a cat is called a 'miaow' and a dog becomes 'bou-bou'. Diminutive form of the word might also be used like 'kitty' and 'doggie'.

The adults are selective when it comes to communicating with the child. They may omit some words and word endings in order to simplify what they are saying. Snow (1972) recorded that adults use fewer word endings and articles when speaking to two-year-olds than to ten-year-olds.

Adults also try to avoid using function words like pronouns. The baby talk will have the repetition of the noun; for example, 'the girl went to the market, the girl bought chocolate, the girl came back home.' In the adult speech, the second and the third instance of 'the girl' is replaced with 'she' whereas this common noun is retained while talking to a child.

Another significant input for language development in early stages is incorporating the strategy of 'Taking Turns'. The adult encourages the child to take their turn as speaker and listener in conversation. The aim is to assign an interactive role to the child.

Thus, the adults make necessary adjustments in their conversation with an aim to make themselves better understood and to facilitate child language acquisition. They first grab the child's attention, then select the appropriate words and then the manner in which to utter them.

Brown and Bellugi (1964) pointed out that parental speech to young children consists of short, syntactically well formed, semantically simple and repetitive utterances.

The characteristic features of the adult-child communication can be summarized as follows:

- Phonological - the adult input to the child is characterized by phonological simplification, distinct consonant-vowel combinations and frequent syllable reduplication. There is use of higher pitch, exaggerated intonation, slower speech and distinct pauses between utterances.
- Syntactic - the sentences are transformationally less complex, well-formed and intelligible. Fewer verbs, fewer coordinate or subordinate clauses and fewer embeddings are used per utterance. There is rarity of modifiers and pronouns in the adult input. The subject nouns or pronouns and auxiliary in yes/no questions are often deleted. There is incorporation of more imperatives, occasional questions and declaratives with increasing age of the child.
- Semantic - the adult uses a limited range of semantic relations to make the input intelligible to the child. Reference is made to concrete referents and there are fewer references to the past. A limited vocabulary and the use of many diminutives makes language assimilation easier for the child.
- Pragmatic - the adult-child interaction employs more directives, imperatives and questions to enable the child to make sense of the meaning in context. The usage of more deictic utterances imparts contextual information to the child.

## CONCLUSION

Language acquisition is the process by which children learn their native language. The children master structural information from the native language spoken around them and internalize this information for later use. The children move from the general to the particular, gradually updating their knowledge of their language. The environmental input plays prominent role in promoting, stimulating and shaping language development.

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