

Language Acquisition in Early Childhood

Nilima Shayla

ABSTRACT

Language is a must to go along with a social life. Language is the main medium of communication. In our lifetime we may use more than one different language. But all the languages are not close to our hearts. We use our first language or mother tongue to express our deeper emotions. We learn mother tongue almost automatically without any severe external effort. At early childhood infants acquire language, they don't learn it. To acquire a language a suitable environment is needed. Language acquisition is faster than language learning. Biggest part of language acquisition occurs at early childhood. This article aims to discuss the factors that are required to acquire a language properly, and also points out the development at every stages.

The Need of a Linguistic Environment:

The world is the live theatre for human being. Here all human need to communicate with each other for almost all purposes. Communication is done through various means. Communication takes places through gestures, postures, body languages, signs, drawings, symbols and so on. But the most facilitating means of communication is language. Language has the highest chance of expressing the exact idea of any individual. But language is not any instinctive ability. The innate capacity of eating, drinking, walking, running are developed naturally, though those activities might need time to be developed, yet a human can acquire such activities without any external assistance. On the other hand, language is not any innate capacity. Language is a ability that needs to be nurtured. Language is needed to be learnt. Without any external assistance language can be learnt, but that statement needs further discussion to come to a conclusion. Because, without external effort languages can be learnt only if the individual belongs to a proper linguistic society. For example, if we assume a new born baby to be kept in a place where no language users exist, the baby will learn no language. Because language acquisition needs at least hearing the language from other speakers. On the other hand, if the same baby is placed in a place where people talk a language around him, it will automatically acquire the language even if nobody teaches him how to talk. The baby will listen to others and will learn from surrounding. No direct teacher is needed. Unlikely the isolated baby, the social baby will get the surrounding as a indirect teacher for picking up the language. so, an active environment with language users is the first requirement to start off the linguistic journey.

The Importance of Pre-linguistic Stage:

Language helps to express the ideas and emotions with the use of proper meaningful words. Linguistic stage is the stage, when an individual can utter words, can form up sentences and participate in a conversation. But before a baby starts uttering words, it learns to produce sounds. Just after birth, a baby is not able to produce all the varieties of sounds. The vocal system of a baby is not fully ready to produce all the language sounds just after birth. Prominently a baby only cries. But these cries help babies to prepare for the linguistic stage. On course of time, the pitch and pattern of different cries get changed. Different cries indicate different needs. Visibly, this crying stage is the pre-linguistic stage. Being in pre-linguistic stage, babies communicate with adults through crying. Fairly there are four types of different cries, such as: hunger cry, anger cry, fake cry and mad cry. Each type of cry has their own pitch and pattern, by which the adults can easily understand they need of the baby. If there would no pre-linguistic stage, the babies would not be able to pass the information about

their needs to adults. so, before a baby enters into the linguistic level, the pre-linguistic stage helps the babies to survive and make them ready for the next vast linguistic stage.

Linguistic Stage: The Impact of Caregiver

The caregiver is the person who plays the most vital role in the linguistics journey of a baby. As stated earlier that without a proper surrounding no language can be picked up by the learner, the caregiver of the baby is the one who facilitates and accelerates the process of language acquisition. The first condition of acquiring a language is to arrange an environment where active language users exist. In most cases this arrangement is a normal social process. Because when a baby is born, it belongs to a family where other family members are present who takes care of the baby from the very first day. The mom, the nanny, the grand-parents, elder siblings act as the care giver of the baby. The caregiver facilitates language acquisition in two ways, when they interact with the baby directly, and when the adult members have conversation among themselves. Both of the situations help the baby to acquire language subconsciously. From around 3 months babies start to react consciously to adult speeches without understanding the language. Gradually the learn to observe things. Around seven months babies can recognize adult intonations. At this point babies start imitating the sounds they hear from adults. The more the caregiver talks to the babies, the faster the babies start imitating. So, it is very important to interact with babies. Infants with no interactions with adults tend to pick up the language late. If the infants don't have the scope to listen to the language, they won't be able to imitate and this consequently drives to belated acquisition of language.

Holophrastic Stage: Inauguration of Real Speech

Holophrastic stage is the stage when a child starts uttering small words or word like sounds. Theoretically this is the period for developing nasal and plosive sounds. The babbles of pre-linguistic stage become prominent at this period. Sounds like [a], [b], [d], [g], [m], [n], [o] are frequently used vowels and consonants that are used in chain in different combination to correspond to the words. The caregiver or family members understand the child's speech as they are accustomed with the child behavior. The words are produced in isolation. During this period the child's produced sounds are like animal cries as the sounds are small and fragmented. Researches show that the infants need two weeks to acquire 10 words but needs four weeks to produce orally. This process depends on how much the baby is exposed to the language. Actions or objects, that happen to appear frequently in front of the infant, are acquired first and fast. According to Nelson (1973), the most frequently used words in different contexts can be like:

Social words: no, hi, bye yes (yah)

Activities: go, see, up

Objectives: ball, cat, boy, car

Modifiers: here, more

Overextension or under-extensions are very common during this stage. For example: a child might use the word "ball" to refer all round objects in the environment. Again, the verb "see" might be used at the first stage only to indicate a particular object. Shortly, holophrastic stage is the stage of observation, repetition and correction.

Telegraphic Speech: Another Step Ahead in Linguistic Journey

Around 18 months, child language changes in two ways. During this stage vocabulary increases fast and syntax emerges with two words string. Syntax, at this period, lacks function words and inflections. Most often the syntax consists of two words with the combination of nouns, pronouns, verbs, adjectives and prepositions -

Red ball

car runs
come here

By now children can indicate someone's activity -
mom cook
baby play
papa work

Can ask WH question-
who, what, where

Can make request -
more cookie
come play
mamma doll

Can make rejections-
milk no
more no

Can point when an object appears or disappears -
gone rain
dad come
ball lost

As the sentences are small and lacks auxiliaries, articles, prepositions and modals, it might be tough to understand the intended message by the infant. The easiest way to understand them is to check the intonation and stress they make while talking. A single sentence like "nice doll" can be expressed in two ways -

NICE doll

nice DOLL

when the stress is on "nice", indicates the beauty of the object.

When the stress is on "doll", points the object that is admired.

At this stage infants mostly learn to use the lexical morphemes. They can express their ideas using minimal words. Though the short sentences they use are not grammatically correct, but that gets better with pace of time.

Advanced Stage:

Advanced stage starts at late two's and by four years old the child becomes a fluent language user. At this stage children learn fast though many grammatical rules are still to flourish after this stage. At this point learners overgeneralize some grammatical rules:

comed

past tense: played, goed,

plural form: boys, mouses

degree of comparison: taller,

gooder, badest

Longer sentence formation with SOV and VSO structures happen at this stage. Question making takes place without the inversion of word order. They can say – "what he can do?" instead "what can he do?"

To express negative opinion, negative words occur at the beginning of the expressions, like -
no play
no sleep
daddy no work

Gradually all the expressions get better with time. Advance stage does not claim to reach the excellence, but opens the door as proficient language user. This advanced stage actually never ends. It continues till adult age. Even after adult age we may learn new versions of language very often. Learning has no boundary. Adults learn consciously, but children learn automatically, freely and fast if a favorable environment is given.

References

- Trudgill, Peter. (2000). Sociolinguistics: An Introduction to Language and Society. London:
Penguin Books.
- Bonvillain, Nancy (1997). Language, Culture and Communication. New Jersey: Prentice Hall,
Upper Saddle River.
- Liberson, Stanley. (1981). Language Diversity and Language Contact. Stanford: Stanford
University Press.