

FIRST LANGUAGE ACQUISITION

Introduction

- Language acquisition is the process by which humans acquire the capacity to perceive and comprehend language, as well as to produce and use words to communicate.
- First language acquisition refers to the child's acquisition of his mother tongue, and how he comes to understand and speak the language of his community.

Theories of first Language Acquisition

The behaviourist perspective :

- The Behaviorist perspective Learning is explained in terms of imitation practice and reinforcement.
- Behaviourists view that children learn language through a process of stimulus (hearing) and response, in which they imitate sounds and practise what they hear. Thus, correct structures are positively reinforced and encouraged by their environment.

Behavioristic Approaches: Bloomfield, Fries, Pavlov, Skinner

- ✓ Focus on the immediately perceptible aspects of linguistic observable behavior– the observable responses and the relationships or associations between those responses and the events that surrounds them.*
- ✓ Effective language behavior is the production of correct responses to stimuli.*
- ✓ If a linguistic response is reinforced, it becomes habitual or conditioned; otherwise is abandoned*

Skinner's theory of Verbal Behavior (1957)

- ✓ learning occurs by operant conditioning;
- ✓ a response or operant is maintained by reinforcement from another person;
- ✓ verbal behavior is controlled by its consequences

Theory does not adequately account for

- ✓ The human capacity to acquire language
- ✓ Language development and language creativity
- ✓ The abstract nature of language

Current Approaches: Constructivism

- ✓ Constructivism is a social construction and negotiation of meaning;
- ✓ Learning is a dynamic process that is both social and mental; language is a representational system formed by the child as she relates symbols to concrete concepts and experiences
- ✓ Language and thought interact to promote intellectual growth; thus such representations function as a medium for intellectual growth.
- ✓ Children's language use reflects their underlying cognitive abilities and their social and emotional growth; Children's language is culture/community based—it reflects their experiences.

Constructivist Approaches (functional): Piaget, Vygotsky, Bloom

- ✓ The study of language now centers on the relationship of cognitive development and the construction of meaning in the environment;
- ✓ Language is seen as one manifestation of the cognitive and affective ability to deal with the world, with others, and with the self;
- ✓ Language must be understood from two stand points:
 - ✓ the abstract, formal, explicit rules proposed under the generative grammar [**form** of language],
 - ✓ the **functional** level of meaning constructed from **social interaction**.

Language from the perspective of Constructivism

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Vygotsky's Language/Thought Relationship

- ✓ Language is used for communication; it initially serves a social function.
- ✓ Social interaction, through language, is a prerequisite to cognitive development; cognitive and communicative development evolves from the social function of language; every child reaches his or her potential development (including language development), in part, through social interaction.
- ✓ Language and thought are distinct and develop independently; when the two systems fuse with the development of inner speech, logical reasoning develops.

Cognition and Language development

- ✓ Bloom (1971): Children learn the underlying structures and not superficial word order; however an utterance carries meaning that is context-bound;
 - ✓ What children know will determine what they learn about the code for speaking and understanding messages
- ✓ Piaget (1969): The child's development is the result of his interaction with the environment, with a complimentary interaction between their developing perceptual cognitive capacities and their linguistic experience.
 - ✓ What children learn about language is determined by what they already know about their world;
 - ✓ Children appear to approach language learning equipped with conceptual interpretive abilities for categorizing the world (Gleitman and Wanner, 1982)

Generativist Approaches (cognitive): Chomsky, Lenneberg, Berko

✓ The Generative Model: The focus is on abstract rules – freedom from the scientific method/the observable. The approach offers a systematic description of the child's language as being innately determined, ruled-governed and operating in a parallel fashion. Human languages are all alike at the deep structure—theory proposes a number of potential properties of Universal Grammar UG.

✓ Eric Lenneberg: language is human and certain modes of perception, categorizing abilities, and other language related mechanisms are biologically determined –we are born with the capacity to learn language.

✓ Berko (1958): The child learns the language not a a series of discrete units, but as an integrated system.

Chomsky's critical review of behaviourist theory

- Chomsky argued that Children's minds are not blank slates to be filled by imitating language they hear in the environment.
- They are born with a specific innate ability to discover for themselves the underlying rules of a language system on the basis of the samples of a natural language they are exposed to.
- Chomsky suggests that language is an innate ability that is to say that human beings born with set of rules about language in the brains called the UNIVERSAL GRAMMAR.

- Language acquisition is not just a process of associating words with elements of external reality. It is also a process of associating words and phrases with the other words and phrases that occur with them, or words with grammatical morphemes that occur with them.