

LANGUAGE ACQUISITION IN CHILDREN

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Abstract:

Language acquisition is a natural and gradual process that plays a fundamental role in a child's cognitive, social, and emotional development. This article examines the main theoretical approaches to child language acquisition, including behaviorist, nativist, and cognitive perspectives. It also describes the key stages of language development from infancy to early school age and analyzes the influence of family, social environment, and bilingualism on linguistic growth. Special attention is given to the role of interaction, play, and modern technology in shaping children's communication skills. The study emphasizes that successful language acquisition depends on a combination of innate abilities and rich social experience.

Keywords: language acquisition, child development, bilingualism, speech development, cognitive growth, social interaction, early childhood

Language acquisition in children is one of the most fascinating and complex processes in human development. Researchers emphasize that language is not only a means of communication but also a tool for thinking and socialization (Hoff, 2014). From the earliest days of life, a child is surrounded by linguistic input that gradually becomes meaningful speech. Unlike many academic skills, language is acquired naturally through daily interaction rather than formal instruction (Clark, 2009). Understanding this process is essential for creating effective educational strategies.

Theoretical Approaches to Language Acquisition

For decades, scholars have proposed different explanations of how children acquire language. The behaviorist theory, represented by early psychologists, considered language learning as habit formation based on imitation and reinforcement (Lightbown & Spada, 2013). According to this view, children repeat what they hear, and adults strengthen correct forms through positive feedback.

However, this explanation was criticized because children are able to produce original sentences that they have never heard before. The nativist perspective argues that humans are born with an innate capacity for language and possess an internal mechanism that helps them organize grammar (Brown, 2007). This biological readiness explains the universal similarities in early language development across cultures.

Contemporary researchers combine these ideas and claim that language acquisition results from the interaction between natural abilities and social experience (Hoff, 2014). Children actively analyze the speech they hear and construct their own linguistic system rather than simply copying adults.

Stages of Language Development

Studies show that language development follows predictable stages (Clark, 2009). During the first year of life infants pass through the pre-speech period. They recognize familiar voices and produce babbling sounds that prepare the organs of speech for real words. Around the age of twelve months, children begin to use their first meaningful words. These words usually represent whole situations rather than single objects (Hoff, 2014).

Between one and two years vocabulary grows rapidly, and children start combining words into short phrases. By the age of three or four most children can build simple sentences and use basic grammatical forms (Lightbown & Spada, 2013). The preschool years are considered crucial because the foundation of the native language is formed during this period.

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Nevertheless, language learning continues at school when children master reading and writing skills.

The Role of Family and Environment

The family environment has a decisive influence on linguistic growth. Hoff (2014) states that the quantity and quality of parental speech strongly affect vocabulary size and communicative confidence. When parents talk to children, read books, and respond to their questions, they create a rich linguistic atmosphere.

Peer interaction also contributes to development. According to Clark (2009), communication with other children teaches negotiation skills and the ability to express personal opinions. On the contrary, excessive exposure to television or mobile devices cannot replace live dialogue and may even limit language progress (Lightbown & Spada, 2013).

Bilingualism in Childhood

Bilingualism has become a widespread reality in many countries due to migration and international communication. Research shows that children who grow up with two languages often develop better cognitive flexibility and attention control (Paradis, Genesee, & Crago, 2011). They learn to switch between languages depending on the situation, which strengthens their mental adaptability.

At early stages bilingual children may mix words from both languages, but this is considered a normal developmental phenomenon rather than a problem (Hoff, 2014). Gradually they learn to separate the languages and use each of them appropriately. Clear exposure, such as one language at home and another at school, helps children achieve balanced proficiency.

Nevertheless, bilingual development requires supportive conditions. If one language is rarely practiced, the child may lose confidence in using it (Lightbown & Spada, 2013). Regular communication, reading books in both languages, and positive parental attitudes are essential to maintain steady progress and to avoid temporary delays.

Educational Implications

Educational practice should be based on the natural needs and interests of children. Language develops most effectively through play, storytelling, and everyday communication rather than formal memorization (Brown, 2007). Teachers need to create situations where children can speak freely, ask questions, and express emotions without fear of making mistakes.

Correction of errors must be gentle and indirect. Instead of criticizing a child, adults should provide the correct model within conversation, which supports confidence and motivation (Hoff, 2014). Group activities, dialogues, and creative tasks encourage active vocabulary use and help children understand the social function of language.

Cooperation between teachers and parents is also very important. When both sides follow similar strategies, children receive consistent linguistic input. Early identification of speech difficulties and timely professional support can prevent many learning problems and ensure successful language development (Clark, 2009).

Language acquisition in children is a multifaceted process shaped by innate mechanisms and social interaction. Scholars agree that warm communication, meaningful activities, and balanced use of technology support successful development (Clark, 2009; Hoff, 2014). By understanding these principles, parents and educators can help children become confident speakers and active members of society.

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