

A COMPARATIVE STUDY OF SELECTED LANGUAGE ACQUISITION THEORIES

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Abstract

Although language acquisition is innate, it is important not to overlook it. The unconscious nature of language acquisition further makes it a vital point of study. Thus overtime, scholars have emerged with various concepts concerning the acquisition of language in humans. Some have considered basic requirements for language study while others have even gone further to study hypotheses of language acquisition which afterward led to the emergence of theories. The study of language acquisition is essential in order to understand the process by which we learn meaningful ways to communicate; to speak, write or even use language. Therefore, with theories of language acquisition, such as BF Skinner's behavioral theory, Chomsky's nativist theory, MacWhinney's competition model theory and Vygotsky's sociocultural theory; there are comparisons to be done to establish what connects and distinguishes one from the other. This essay thus assesses different theories of language acquisition; brings various aspects of language acquisition theories to light; and studies theorists with their different ideologies towards language mastery in a child. Finally, the paper draws a conclusion from the similarities and differences that exist in the theories of BF Skinner, Noam Chomsky, MacWhinney and Lev Vygotsky.

Keywords: Language, Language acquisition, Language theories, Innatism, Behaviorism, Social interactionism

Introduction

Different scholars have come up with various dimensions of meanings concerning language as well as different perspectives about language acquisition which they have backed up with theories and approaches. Language, according to Anyanwu (2008) is sharing information, giving entertainment and expressing feelings. Furthermore, he stresses that language is spoken. Thus based on his view, one can say that language is spoken in order to communicate, express ones feelings, or elicit information.

In line with this assertion, language is man's most valuable weapon as he uses it for the medium of communication (Obasi and Oku, 2002). Buttressing this idea, they explain that language is a special feature of man that makes him distinct from animals. By implication, language either verbal or non-verbal is the only tool for man's interaction with another.

In addition, man uses language in all spheres of life and without language human existence and advancement would not have been possible. Language can be learnt or acquired but the focus of this work is on language acquisition theories. The acquisition of language applies to the process of language mastery in which there is no conscious effort as the type usually experienced in the mastery of a foreign language (Anyanwu, 2002). This implies that language acquisition is an unconscious act and that language is not inherited but rather every normal human being has the capacity to master the language spoken in his immediate environment.

Meanwhile, language acquisition is a human phenomenon built on certain theories. Theories are scientific findings regarding the nature of human beings especially children, their development and capability of doing or learning things (Ibe, 2013). On this note, this study assesses different theories of language acquisition and aims to do a comparative analysis of the behavioral theory, innate theory, relational framework theory and interactionism theory.

The essay further brings to light different aspects of language acquisition theorists such as Skinner, B.F Noam Chomsky, MacWhinney and Vygotsky with their ideologies towards language mastery in children.

Concept of Language

Language is a symbol of communication. It is also an inevitable aspect of human existence and advancement. The only feature that distinguishes a man from an animal is the use of language, even though animals make sounds, they do not speak. Speaking is man's highest productive skill. Language is seen as the most sophisticated communication tool of life (Maduekwe, 2007). He also opines that language is that distinctive human reality which serves as the means and end of behavior ordered and achieved within any given community, society or nation at large. Therefore, the author stipulates that language is an important tool for processing personal perceptions of self in relation to one's surroundings.

The aim of language is for communication and communication according to Ezenwa (2011) is the process of transferring information, ideas, feelings or messages from a source to a receiver. Language as well, is the only tool for man's interaction with another. It reflects how human beings view and interact with their world - that is what they say, how they say it and why they think in certain ways. In line with this, Halliday as cited in Nzerem (2015) views language as an institution whereby humans communicate and interact with each other by means of habitually used oral auditory symbols. In addition, the author asserts that language is purely a human institution. By implication, humans use language to communicate ideas, emotions and as well a system of voluntarily produced symbols. The symbols are first heard and then produced using the speech organs such as lips,

teeth etc. This assertion runs in line with Bloch and Trager as referred by Nzerem (2015) that see language as a system of arbitrary vocal symbols by means of which a social group co-operates. This means that language brings people to live and co-operate. Thus, it can be said that language is the major means of learning culture.

By implication, a child can no doubt learn some activities such as politeness to his elders by observation or through the language of his community. Invariably, the child uses language to transmit his culture, as stated in Ndimele, 2015, language is a tool for thinking within the particular culture in which it is used. The author further argues that language not only enables its users to think about the various aspects and relationships of their own culture but also restricts their thoughts to these things. Thus, apparently, language teaches cultural norms. Furthermore, according to Adegbite (2013), language serves to establish and maintain human relationships and express social roles. The author opines that language is for asking or answering questions, greeting and getting things done. Basically, the above assertion is much imbibed in culture. For instance, children learning how to relate with one another, greeting their elders and exhibiting other desirable behaviors.

Language Acquisition

Acquisition is a mixture of social and biological factors. This means what the child is born with and the stimulus from his environment. Language acquisition is therefore the process by which humans acquire the capacity to perceive and comprehend language (Wikipedia).

Also, language acquisition means the ability to be aware of language, to understand it, as well as to produce and, use words and sentences to communicate. In this premise, language acquisition simply implies the process by which we learn to speak,

write, and even use sign language to communicate in meaningful ways. Therefore, language acquisition means the mastery of one's language. This runs in line with Henna (2012) who opined that language acquisition is a cognition that truly makes us human. He further stresses that other species do communicate with an innate ability to produce a limited number of meaningful vocalization which can be demonstrated with bonobos (pygmy chimpanzees) or even with partially learned systems like songs of birds. This therefore, shows that language is human species-specific and that language acquisition is specifically for humans. Thus, only humans benefit from language acquisition as they (humans) grow within human society.

Psychologists also add that humans acquire language through a stimulus response connection. For them, the child acquires his language due to the series of rewards which he receives. Based on this, Anyanwu (2002) views language acquisition as the methods and process by which a newly born child not only begins to listen, to understand and speak his language; but also exhibits an understanding of its rules and how to use them. The author further maintains that a child's mastery of the speech habits of his language merely depicts his/her hidden understanding of the rules of that language. By implication, the child already has the rules of his language which helps him to acquire the language. The child's acquisition is then programmed and expected to be achieved within a given time frame of 0-6years. A child's acquisition development are as follows: S/he begins the language development from the first day of birth to six (6) months, the child 'coos' and this is the period of vowel development. From 1 year to 1¹/₂ years is the babbling stage and it is for the development of consonant sounds. 1¹/₂ to 2 years is the time the child begins to develop one word. 2years to 3years the child starts forming 2 words together. Example; (Ma - eat). 3years-3¹/₂ years

is for the formation of 3 words and certain phrases. 3years - 4years, the child can make simple sentences. Example: ('Mum come', 'Dad go to'). Then 4-6years, the child improves on his/her sentence formation.

Now, between one year to 3¹/₂years all those things the child does, the child can take to the telegraphic stage and the language development corresponds with the psychomotor development. At this point, Chomsky introduced another concept called the 'universal language of the child', which every child in the whole world has, no matter the country the child is born. It is from this universal language that the child speaks other languages. This means that the child moves from the universal language to the specific one. For instance, the child would say: da da, ma ma, pa pa.

The question that arises is how the child achieves this feat. However, Anyanwu (2002) highlighted some methods of language acquisition. The author emphasizes that first language acquisition is obviously an unconscious effort. He stresses that the child is unaware of the stress of the exercise because the child is making progress without difficulties that follow the moments of learning. This is an indication that there is no conscious effort put. Since the child has seen it as right to acquire the language of his immediate environment. Hence, s/he applies it to a process of language mastery.

Another interesting aspect of language acquisition is the 'Immersion type'. Anyanwu (2002) stipulates that the child is totally immersed into the language he is trying to master. The author further opines that everything about the child except sleeping, is speaking the language. This entails that the language must be spoken in the immediate vicinity of the child and the child must be soaked in it until s/he acquires the language very well.

Other methods of language acquisition, includes the informal nature of the program or process. Although for five years, the child makes no attempt at the formality level. Occasionally, there is a self-appointed teacher that stimulates a language lesson for the child but for a brief moment of two to five minutes. On this note, there is no organized language lesson, no set frame to begin and end the learning mode and no well-defined program of learning. The author therefore concludes that a child's ability to grapple with the mass of language data is mysterious. To him, the informal method of language acquisition remains one of the wonders of the human nature.

Theoretical Framework

This study is hinged on innatism or the nativist theory, an enterprise that stems out of a series of books and articles by Chomsky and his collaborators in the 1950s and 1960s. The terms in this theory means the factors present in an individual from birth. Chomsky's theory of innatism (1957) holds that infants and children learn language at a speed that cannot be simply explained by the laws of behaviorism. In his view, children learning language tend to put words together in new ways. Chomsky opines that the human mind is by nature creative and dynamic. To him, children create meaningful sentences they have never been heard before whether you teach them or not. Chomsky further argued that children learn rules of language and apply them in their own way. According to Chomsky, the application of the rules might be inaccurate at first because children would not have heard adults using rules of language inaccurately. The theory also posits that human beings learn by staying in an environment where the language is spoken.

Chomsky came up with another claim; he credits the child with animate endowment of language acquisition device called (LAD) which enables the child to acquire language. Chomsky

classified into three features: Creativity (earlier mentioned), Hypothesis Making Device (HMD) and Universal Grammar (UG). The UG enables the child to process all the utterances that invades his/her auditory sense and come out with a grammar of his/her language. The child's construction of grammar shows his/her possession of an unborn HMD. Chomsky argued that children will never acquire number of sentences if the language acquisition mechanism was dependent on language input alone. This becomes the major reason for the theory of Universal Grammar: an idea of innate, biological grammatical categories, such as a noun category and a verb category that facilitate the entire language development in children and overall language processing in adults. However, Chomsky has made a great effort in illustrating to some extent a child's language acquisition by providing approaches like the LAD and UG which give account of knowing how children combine a noun and a verb into a meaningful, correct phrase. For instance; a boy + to eat: a boy eats.

Comparative Study of Language Acquisition Theories

Behaviorist Theory

One of the earliest scientific explanations of language acquisition was provided by Skinner (1957). As one of the pioneers of behaviorism, he accounted for language development by means of environmental influence. Skinner argued that children acquire language based on language behaviorist reinforcement principles by associating words with meanings. To him, correct utterances are positively reinforced when the child realizes the communicative value of words and phrases. For example, when the child says "milk" and the mother will smile and give her some as a result, the child will find this outcome rewarding, enhancing the child's language development (Ambridge and Leiven, 2011). Skinner presented his behavioural theory using operant conditioning approach which has already

been explained. Since operant conditioning is contingent on reinforcement by rewards, a child would learn that a specific combination of sound stands for a specific thing through repeated successful associations made between the two.

Innate Theory

Skinner's theory idea was strongly attacked by Noam Chomsky, in his article in 1959; 'A theory called innate theory or innates'. Chomsky was against Skinner's idea of language acquisition through operant conditioning, that children often ignore language corrections from adults. Instead, children typically follow a pattern of using an irregular form of a word correctly, making errors and later on, returning to the proper use of the word. For example, a child may use the word "gived", but eventually, the child will definitely go back to learn the opposite "gave".

Chomsky claimed the pattern is difficult to attribute to Skinner's idea of operant conditioning as the primary way that children acquire language. Supporting Chomsky's argument, Harley (2010) opines that if language were solely required through behavioural conditioning, children would not likely learn the proper use of word and suddenly use the word incorrectly. Thus, Skinner failed to account for the central role of syntactic knowledge in language learning competence.

Instead of Chomsky giving credit to Skinner's operant conditioning, he argued for a mathematical approach to language acquisition based on the study of syntax. Chomsky emphatically debunked the Skinner's idea of seeing a child as a tabula rasa, rather to him, there is something inborn in a child. Hence, he sees language as being creative in nature. To Chomsky, what the child requires is the environment to influence him/her for a better behavior.

Relational Framework Theory

Another theory is the "Relational Framework Theory" (RFT). The proponents of this theory include; Hayes, Barnes-Holmes and Roche in 2011. The theory provides a wholly selectionist leaning account of the origin and development of language competence and complexity. Based on the principles of Skinnerian behaviourism, RFT posits that children acquire language purely through interacting with the environment.

The theorists introduced the concept of functional contextualism in language learning which emphasizes the importance of predicting and influencing psychological events like thoughts, feelings and behaviors, by focusing on the variables they can manipulate in the context. The RTF distinguishes itself from Skinner's work by identifying and defining a particular type of operant conditioning known as 'derived relational responding', a learning process that appears to occur only in humans possessing a capacity for language. An empirical study supporting the predictions of RFT suggest that children learn language via a system of inherent reinforcement. The theory therefore, challenges the view that language acquisition is based upon innate, language specific cognitive capacities.

Social Interactionism Theory

In a related development, social interactionism emerged as another language acquisition theory. The collaborators of this theory include the Soviet psychologist Lev Vygotsky and Jerome Bruner (1983). The theory gives an explanation of language development and emphasizes the role of social interaction between the developing child and linguistically knowledgeable adults.

The principle of this theory is based largely on socio-cultural factors. Unlike the other approaches, it emphasizes the role of reinforcement in language acquisition. Specifically, it asserts that much of a child's linguistic growth stems from the

modeling of an interaction with parents and other adults, who frequently provide instructive corrections (Morek, 1941). The theory is similar to behaviourist though differs in that it posits the existence of a social-cognitive model and other mental structures within children. This theory also anchored on the zone of proximal development. It describes the set of linguistic tasks (proper syntax, suitable vocabulary usage) a child cannot carry out on their own at a given time, but can learn to carry out if assisted by an able adult.

Conclusion

Having looked at some of the language acquisition theorists and their principles on child language acquisition, it is pertinent to say that the environment is very paramount for a child acquiring a language. The child observes and imitate what the adults around him/her say. More so, reinforcement is a relevant factor since it will make the child realize the communicative value of words. However, language acquisition should not be solely acquired through behavioural conditioning because the child as at then, might ignore language corrections from adults. Hence, they follow their own pattern of using or forming words. Basically, if a child will make a mistake in using a word and later comes back to correct him/herself without anybody teaching him, as we teach them how to brush their teeth or tie a shoe; It means that language acquisition seems to be a passive, innate process. In as much as we say that child's language acquisition is passive, innate, and in order to facilitate a child's language development, there is need for modeling of social interactions between the knowledgeable adult and the child.

Finally, the contributions of the emirate scholars are fantastic but the fact that remains; how acquisition of language happens in children is the subject of much debate in the linguistic society. The study therefore recommends that habit formation,

association and conditioning should complement the principle of innatism and each other respectively.

Secondly, language teachers should employ the theories based on the context use.

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