

Research Article

The Journey of Language in Childhood

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Abstract

This study aimed to review and synthesize the current understanding of children's language acquisition by examining the cumulative effects of biology, cognition, environment, and social interactions. It focuses on three major theories—behaviorism, nativism, and interactionism—and explains their core contributions to the understanding of language development. Within the nativist perspective, the critical period hypothesis suggests that language learning is most effective before puberty, when neural flexibility facilitates natural fluency and precise pronunciation. Beyond theoretical frameworks, environmental and social interactions significantly shape the development of language. For instance, children experiment with sounds, gestures, and words through play, storytelling, and imitation, which form the foundation of grammar and meaning. It is possible to learn multiple languages simultaneously, which can lead to opportunities for improvisation, understanding, and creative thinking in future communications. Studies in linguistics, psychology, and education have consistently found that children's language instruction is dynamically influenced by their innate abilities and environment. To achieve the highest level of performance in learning outcomes, children must interact with others, receive feedback, and engage in genuine conversations. Language skills are strengthened by these interactions, which also enhance cognitive and emotional functioning. Language acquisition occurs through experience in a diverse linguistic and cultural environment. Language acquisition is not merely an innate capacity or passively absorbed; rather, it actively develops through practice and immersion in diverse linguistic and cultural environments. Parents, educators, and policymakers must understand how children's language skills are acquired and improved, especially when it comes to their language skills. In order to ensure that children reach their full communication and cognitive potential, Communities can create spaces that encourage interaction, curiosity, and empathy to ensure that children's full communication and cognitive potential are reached. This means that language is not just a means of expression but also a foundation for learning, connections, and global comprehension.

Keywords

Language Acquisition, Child Development, Cognitive Growth, Multilingualism

1. Introduction

The development of human language is a reflection of cognitive and physical growth, and its disruption often signals a delay in typical development. This idea is rooted in Chomsky's notion of a language acquisition device, which emphasizes the importance of a “critical period” until the age of 12

[9]. Without early exposure, achieving complete competence in a language is unlikely without radical divergence. Even if second-language learners' phonological qualities are more competent than those of late second-language acquirers, they still tend to possess phonological imperfections that may

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persist throughout their lives, highlighting the importance of early acquisition. Children are immersed in a world of sounds, gestures, and symbols, and gradually, over months and years, they transform these into language to create meaningful communication [14, 17]. As Pike explains, phonetics collects the raw materials, and phonology processes them, allowing phonetics to provide the sounds, phonology to organize them into a meaningful order, and semantics to connect them with meaning. Unnatural systems acquire language by being programmed with a specific language, whereas humans do not require programming. Bruner argues that adult caregivers play a key role in a child's development [5], while Carey and Gelman believe that it is more the child's decisions that construct knowledge [6].

Language development is closely linked to cognitive growth [20]. Children build their understanding by structuring their knowledge, and evidence suggests that interaction styles significantly influence linguistic outcomes [16]. It is important to note that the cultural context influences language use; exposure to multiple environments helps individuals understand language and develop effective ways to interact with others [13].

Interactive storytelling, collaborative learning, and authentic communication stand as vital components of the linguistic learning process [23]. However, they are valued by many educators but utterly disregarded in favor of more conventional methods. Understanding how people learn languages can have numerous benefits by improving various facets of our educational system. Helping Children Succeed Globally by Developing Communication Skills enables children, families, educators, and policymakers to develop the language skills necessary to express themselves and others effectively worldwide [5, 6].

2. Theoretical Background

For a long time, language acquisition studies have raised two central questions: is language acquisition mainly the result of environmental conditioning, or is it a native capacity of the mind? Researchers have drifted between one behaviorist, innatist, or interactionist position and the other in search of insight into how children acquire their first language.

In today's research, a growing consensus has emerged that language development is the result of complex biological, cognitive, and social interactions. Theories of language acquisition in their early days were based on behaviorist psychology that considered language as a learned behavior. Based on Locke's *tabula rasa* theory of mind [7], which posits that the mind is a blank slate at birth and that all knowledge is acquired through experience, behaviorists claimed that children learn language through imitation, reinforcement, and conditioning [24], as reflected in Skinner's theory of verbal behavior [4]. Skinner proposed that verbal behavior is a function of the verbal environment. Thus, children acquire

language input by observing, imitating, and being rewarded or punished for their language use.

According to this model, growth is caused by external factors, as supported by the empirical basis. The differences in language around the world stem from differences in geographical and cultural environments, in which children pick up patterns they hear. However, behaviorism does not account for the creativity we see in children's language. According to Bochner and Jones, the fact that the child does not repeat the speech of adults but strings together utterances and sentences that he has never heard is a reality [2]. It shows that children have an internal force rather than being influenced solely by their environment or situations.

As a matter of fact, children often overgeneralize grammatical rules (e.g., they may say "goed" instead of "went"), which indicates that they are not simply imitating but are instead hypothesizing about their language's structure. In light of the restrictions of a rigid behaviorism, other theories emphasizing the mind's innate contribution to one's capacity for language soon appeared. In the atmosphere of innatism, other theories, such as Plato's theory of reminiscence and Descartes' biological rationalism, emerged, which infer that human beings are born with an innate capacity for language competence. [12, 21], Plato says knowledge is recollection from a previous existence [21], while Descartes believes specific ideas (e.g., God) are in the soul [12].

This school of thought in modern linguistics made Noam Chomsky question behaviourism. Chomsky berated a biologist at MIT who posed the question of how children could acquire such a complex grammar from such limited and erroneous input, "the poverty of apprenticeship" [8]. Rather than suggesting such a principle, he holds that humans have an innate *language acquisition device* (a LAD) that helps them progress quickly in speech [8]. This LAD, which is based on universal grammar, allows children to produce and understand an infinite number of sentences. Essentially, Chomsky is arguing against any environmental determinism [9]. He believes that the language environment does not somehow construct language within the individual's mind. Instead, he asserts that language production involves a mutually complementary relationship between the individual's innate capacity and external cultural input. Universal grammar provides the overall framework within which a culture's words, phonological features, and specific rules of grammar can apply. In this way, language is an expression of culture. It influences how we perceive and see the world around us. Chomsky thinks of language as an organ that, like a muscle, strengthens with use; without environmental exposure, it cannot be activated [9].

According to interactionism, specific theories elucidate the connection between innate structures and external input. Bruner proposed 'scaffolding' whereby caregivers can facilitate a child's engagement in a more complex communicative exchange [5]. Likewise, Carey & Gelman stated that children actively construct meaning from whatever language stimula-

tion they receive, including environmental language input [6]. These views suggest that language development in children is not a passive process, akin to a sponge absorbing water. Instead, it is an interactive process that requires active participation and feedback.

Meaningful communication is an important aspect of this interactive model. Spada and Lightbown noted that although children may be exposed to limited hearing in non-interactive speech, authentic learning requires engagement and dialogue [15]. Without opportunities to test out ideas, receive feedback, and learn to speak correctly, children's language development does not fully mature. It disappears into thin air, lost forever. Language is therefore not just an idea in our heads; it is made in society and is partly dependent on broader social and cultural development [1].

The critical period hypothesis provides additional insight into the crucial period for language acquisition. Lenneberg [9] and later scholars, such as DeKeyser & Larson-Hall [11], proposed that there is a biologically programmed threshold for language input into the brain—a "critical period" of sorts. In their infancy, children activate their language abilities through interaction with the environment and, in this way, build their native phonology, syntax, and vocabulary by three years old [13].

By the time school begins, most children are already accomplished speakers of their local environment, with their schemas and articulation skills shaped by the linguistic community to which they belong [3]. By about age 12, the (LAD) begins to weaken. It is not good evidence that just because people learn more languages as they get older, they teach them well. Snow and Hoefnagel-Hohle also reminded us that late learners are at a disadvantage and are unlikely to ever reach the same level of fluency as those who start foreign language exposure much earlier in life [3].

How children read and write can be affected by their socio-economic background and other factors. As stated on limeylaws.org/poverty-illiteracy-and-human-rights, different cultures can significantly affect how a child learns languages [19]. Ajzen and Fishbein demonstrated in 1980 that parental beliefs and behavioral style influenced linguistic outcomes. Parents who are primarily focused on the intellectual event use more elaborate words [1]. However, the parents who are directing their attention specifically to the social event weigh up the slightest nuances in our smiles or eyes that tell what we feel inside, very carefully. The impact of more widely shared cultural norms is also observed. Collectivist cultures often emphasize bonding language, while individualist cultures stress self-expression and freedom of spirit. Cultural differences affect not just what people say but how language works in real life. The views of opting for summarization suggest multiple factors. The interactionist theory gives precedence to the critical functions of sociology, which make the theory more comprehensive compared to behaviourism and nativism. In the current era, learning a new language is a combination of several factors that continuously evolve. Children are born

with the potential for language; however, this potential requires stimulation in a culture and development through usage. A mother tongue is learned from birth, it increases in pace during socialization, and reaches its peak ability in the critical period before puberty [9]. Scholars can now gain a better understanding of development through the integration of psychological, linguistic, and pedagogical knowledge.

Eventually, language acquisition is a multidimensional phenomenon involving innate capacity, social interaction, and cultural aspects. The earlier debates were treated in behaviorist and innatist theories, while the current ones are shifting to a biological-social nexus. As will be shown in the following sections, understanding how language is learnt provides insights into human development. Moreover, it equips educators, parents, and policy-makers with practical advice, empowering them to foster language acquisition in their respective sectors.

3. Literature Review

The way children learn language is a complex process influenced by nature, nurture, and social interactions. Communication comes naturally to us as part of human instinct. Children acquire language by being present and actively participating from the start. A common misconception about speech development is that language learning begins only after birth, when a child hears their first words. However, research shows otherwise. Kids do not initially use words to talk. They cry, waah, gesture, and coo to make their meaning clear. These sounds also often allow the infant to practice playful and exploratory movements with their articulatory organs at their own pace [15, 27]. During this early period, children must be exposed to the whole language environment of their family.

During the first months of life, children are attentive listeners and learn the sounds, rhythms, and patterns of speech, which form the basis of vocabulary, syntax, and phonology [28]. According to Piaget [20], cognition must develop before there can be any language to express it. As stated by Piaget, children did not project their first words onto the world outside their environment. For instance, if an infant speaks the word 'milk' when being fed or 'ball' when playing with a ball, this highlights a clear relationship between cognition and experience from early infancy to the acquisition of language [20]. This first stage lays the groundwork for the one-word stage, during which children begin using these early connections in meaningful speech.

Between six and nine months of age, infants begin to produce babbling sounds, not just simple sounds. These sounds resemble the structure of the adult language system. According to Lieven & Tomasello [19], the most frequent sounds at this stage are nasals (/m/, /n/, /NG/) and voiced stops (/b/, /d/, /g/). The vowel /a/ is often used in crying and babbling. This balance of sounds indicates a natural biological readiness, but when enhanced by a more enriched environment, it is reinforced through caregiver interactions. In addition, infants

begin to recognize rhythmic and intonational patterns, a complex yet crucial aspect of language acquisition. This recognition, which is a key to understanding the prosodic cues needed for language, enlightens us about the complexity of language acquisition. As the child moves away from vocal play that occurs at random times and in repeated elements, a period of building babbling begins – i.e., a production in which sounds are produced in successive meaningful sequences.

The one-word stage typically develops after the pre-linguistic stage, usually around the first year. At this stage, children demonstrate their linguistic competence by using single words, including nonce forms, to convey meaning. For instance, a child's use of the word "eat" could mean "I am hungry," while the use of "ball" could mean "I want the ball" (Lieven & Tomasello [19]). According to Prathanee et al. [22], children's development at this stage can be observed through their ability to identify objects and family members, imitate sounds in their environment (e.g., cars or birds in the air), and respond to gestures (e.g., hellos and goodbyes). The utterances like the ones above suggest that the child is effectively using single words to communicate. He or she will receive reinforcement from the environment for further use of these utterances as per the principles of the Interactionist approach.

From the Age of 18-24 Months, a Child Progresses from the Word Stage to the Word Stage. The combinations, though simple, now convey complex relational meanings. They often convey a complete message with fewer grammatical markers, yet remain complex enough in context. For example, a child might say "dada chair," adapting the same words to different contexts, which could mean "Dad is in the chair," "that is Dad's chair," or "Dad, put me in the chair" [19].

During this stage of child language acquisition, children showed a desire for order and meaning, even when understanding meaning without proper morphology. Shortly after, the telegraphic stage appears, during which children can create sentences such as "I am a good girl" or "I want a cookie." Snow and Hoefnagel-Hohle [25] suggest a child in this stage may actively use up to 50 words in their productive vocabulary. However, it is fascinating to note that they understand many more words than they can actively use.

Also, during these stages, phonological development occurs. There are many predictable phonological processes that children use when imitating adult speech [23]. These processes, such as voicing (e.g., /p/ - /b/ as in [pig] - [big]), word-final devoicing (e.g., /d/ - /t/ as in [red] - [ret]), final consonant deletion (e.g., [home] - [ho]), velar fronting (e.g., /k/ - /t/ as in [goat] - [doat]), palatal fronting (e.g., /sh/ - /s/ as in [shoes] - [soes]), gliding of liquids (e.g., /r/ - /w/ as in [run] - [wun]), and stopping of fricatives or affricates (e.g., [jump] - [dum]), often simplify adult speech in consistent ways. Identifying different error patterns can provide valuable insights into whether a child's articulation is delayed or is following a typical developmental path. Furthermore, these processes also show the child actively and enthusiastically

exploring the boundaries of the phonological system, a key aspect of their development. They are handy for speech-language pathologists evaluating a child for a potential delay [23, 25].

Children's imaginative behaviour at the morphological level supports Chomsky's proposal of an innate linguistic capacity [10]. Based on Universal Grammar, children use their 'underlying' grammatical knowledge to acquire the 'surface' grammar of their own language and to follow certain common underlying principles. Children first produce forms like "foots" and "goed." When they start using these forms, it indicates they are on a processing track; they will also take on the exceptions. Within the process of attaining linguistic competence, the stage of overgeneralization, in which children apply a rule too broadly and incorrectly, constitutes a decisive advancement. Children can utilize cognitive reasoning and pattern recognition, informed by mental ability and social feedback, to refine their language [25, 27]. From the interactionist perspective, social scaffolding plays a crucial role in language development, underscoring the importance of social interaction in children's linguistic development.

Bruner [6] states that caregiver's scaffold children's learning by extending their utterances and providing corrective feedback." "Based on these observations, Carey and Gelman [8] argue that children do not treat what they hear as direct instructions; instead, they actively interpret it to form hypotheses. This active role of children in interpreting and revising their language should be respected and acknowledged. In turn, their own productions are revised according to feedback from their environment. According to Spada and Lightbown [26], being exposed to a language does not activate a child's language skills. They need the opportunity to interact, discuss, and use the language. The family environment likely has a significant impact on individuals. As noted in earlier work by Ajzen and Fishbein [1], your beliefs and interaction style as parents or educators will affect children's language. To illustrate, parents who emphasize intellectual development are more likely to use high-status vocabulary.

In contrast, parents who are focused on social or emotional development are likely to use more affective language. Cultural context plays a role in maintaining social unity within a culture. For instance, collectivist cultures tend to use language to manage social unity. On the other hand, individualist cultures tend to use language to express oneself and assert independence from the group. The differences extended beyond vocabulary, grammar, and pragmatics to other social and cultural factors relevant to human learning. Finally, the critical period hypothesis suggests that the timing of these developments is of great importance. The idea concerns a limited time window for optimal neurological readiness to process language input, lasting up to the onset of puberty [11, 17, 18]. In these early years, children activate their constitutive language engine to build the phonological, syntactic, and semantic scaffolds. By the age of twelve, this facility declines,

and after that age, it becomes more difficult to 'learn' a second language, with a lower likelihood of a native-like outcome [25].

Being surrounded by high-quality language input early in life is not just beneficial; it is a necessity, as the difference between acquiring it early and later becomes apparent. All things considered, languages develop in stages, from babbling to four-word constructions, and on to more complete forms. At the same time, phonological and morphological stable structures, such as complex sentences, are integrated into the pervasive basic syntactic-semantic principles of spoken human language. At these stages, the vocabulary, syntax, and rhythm develop through the interplay of innate mechanisms, cognitive growth, and social interaction. The role of family and cultural environments in a child's language development cannot be overlooked. Children actively experiment with linguistic rules while conforming to more general linguistic patterns. The overall conclusion suggests a model of language development that includes learned and innate factors, family and environmental influences, and interaction with others [3, 19, 25, 27].

4. Conclusions

Language acquisition refers to the process of language development that occurs naturally without any formal teaching. Unlike learning, which is conscious when we are 'taught' a language – this is when we deliberately work towards memorising the vocabulary, the grammar, and the syntax rules in a classroom – acquisition is the unconscious development of linguistic competence in the mind of a child, as this is how the language is processed effortlessly. The construction of a building that is not a natural occurrence is analogous to the growth of a tree [3, 10]. Childhood is believed to be the most favorable time for language learning because the language acquisition device (LAD) in the brain is more active [19, 29]. Observational evidence indicates that language learning occurs in early childhood. People who learn a language during this time often achieve a higher level of fluency and a more native-like accent than those who learn it later. It is tough to learn a second language after the critical period has ended. First-language interference hinders pronunciation, grammatical intuition, and real-time speech, regardless of well-developed reading and writing skills [23, 25]. This paragraph is not suitable because it exceeds 10 words and contains unrelated content. For instance, some children from immigrant households learn their cultural mother tongue, such as English in the United States, at home and at school. This simultaneous exposure enables children to develop diverse first-language skills, showcasing the brain capacity to comprehend and combine languages in early childhood. Linguistics refers to this phenomenon as linguistic submersion, in which the learner is fully immersed in a language environment that facilitates natural language learning without formal instruction [3, 26]. You are sure to learn more formal lan-

guage rules later in life, but it is not often spoken with the same ease as it is naturally acquired. While students fare well in reading, writing, and vocabulary related to academic and formal language, phonological skills, which reflect unaided spontaneous speech patterns of the target language, are particularly hard to acquire [19, 25].

According to the critical period hypothesis, as children reach around age 12, the capacity of their Language Acquisition Device (LAD) declines. Any further attempts at language learning would require a slower, less natural, and more effortful, conscious process [11]. The most effective means of fostering bilingualism depends heavily on early exposure and on the functional use of language. Moreover, beneficial experiences are much more important than classroom learning. After the critical period, if a person is motivated and immersed in the language's culture, learning becomes easier. According to Spada and Lightbown [26], positive attitudes towards the target language and culture not only lead to improved language outcomes, but also instill a sense of optimism and hope for the learners. Two types of motivation are very effective.

- 1) The term curiosity, in the context of language learning, is not just a simple desire to learn practices, beliefs, and other aspects of another community. It is a powerful force that ignites one's interest and drives them to delve deeper into the way of life of another culture. This curiosity, when harnessed, can lead to a more profound understanding of the language for practical, cognitive, and intellectual purposes, fostering a sense of enlightenment and open-mindedness.
- 2) The term empathy, a key component of language learning, is not just a result of cultural exposure, but a skill that can be developed through repeated interaction with the target culture. As students develop a deep resonance and appreciation for the norms that govern language use, they find themselves better able to identify and integrate [26]. This heightened empathy-related motivation leads to greater fluency and better integration into the L2 community. The student who is immersed in a positive cultural system experiences less cultural shock, reassured and prepared to adapt to social norms more easily, and is more likely to assimilate the language and cultural rules more effectively and deeply, thus helping them to view the world as a more global citizen [3, 26, 29].

Furthermore, language learning is a key to cognitive and social development. The initial experiences with language shape individuals' verbal communication, cognitive schemas, memory, attention, effortful control, problem-solving, and the ability to make associations between data. Children who are immersed in a world of words through play and storytelling, and who participate in interactive conversations, often cultivate higher-level reasoning skills and enhance their social-emotional skills. Learning a new language is not just about mastering one's mother tongue; it's about a lifelong journey of growth and development. These benefits are not

confined to a single language; they extend to other languages. The advantages are further amplified when exposure is frequent and purposeful, and occurs in a social environment.

In conclusion, language learning is a harmonious blend of nature, nurture, and the individual's social and cultural involvement. Most first- and second-language learning occurs at a young age, with family, school, and the broader cultural environment providing vital input. While formal education can support this process, the ability to naturally develop fluency, formality, and phonology is best achieved through early and consistent exposure and interaction. This natural exposure is key to sparking the learner's motivation, curiosity, and empathy towards the target culture. Cultural involvement adds a unique flavor to the learning process, helping learners acquire new language knowledge and leading to proficiency and growth. Understanding what fosters or inhibits a child's language development can guide teachers and parents in embracing cultural diversity and encouraging multilingual, literate, and culturally competent children in their classrooms and homes.

Abbreviations

LAD	Language Acquisition Device
L1	First Language
L2	Second Language
BMI	Body Mass Index (<i>example format</i>)
MIT	Massachusetts Institute of Technology

Author Contributions

Danyal Alper is the sole author. The author read and approved the final manuscript.

Conflicts of Interest

The author declares no conflicts of interest.

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Biography



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