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ДЕТИ, ИЗУЧАЮЩИЕ ИНОСТРАННЫЙ ЯЗЫК
CHILDREN AS LANGUAGE LEARNERS

Summary: This article poses the question: Why are children facile language learners? Examined in the light of Lenneberg's theory, children's facility with language can be explained as stemming from children's genetic predisposition for language learning.

Key words: Language learning, theoretical, psycholinguists, behavior, language acquisition.

This book continues with an overview of research in the area of psycholinguistics. Psycholinguistics is a field of science concerned with language learning. How do children learn their mother tongue and what happens when they study a second language? What kind of neurological processes are involved in children's language learning? What happens when children learn new words? How do they master grammar? This chapter will address these psycholinguistic questions which are not merely of theoretical interest but of great practical importance. Insights provided by psycholinguistics have a huge impact on language instruction. They help teachers to be more effective in the classroom.

Over the last fifty years or so, psycholinguists have learned much about children's language learning. While more is known about how children learn their

mother tongue, researchers are just beginning to understand the processes of children's second language learning. Some researchers argue that the processes of first and second language learning in children share some important similarities; others even say that the processes are fundamentally similar. That's why it seems impossible to speak about children's second language learning without first saying a few words about how they learn their mother tongue. The parallels between the two processes are too significant to leave out the former when discussing the latter. Throughout this book, the description of the parallel first language learning processes will precede the discussion of various aspects of second language learning in young children.

We seldom stop to marvel at the speed and ease with which children learn their first language. We do tend to take first language learning for granted, and yet the phenomenon is nothing short of a miracle. Perhaps only occasionally, when we travel abroad and see a toddler jabbering away in a foreign language (which we have studied for years in high school and college and have failed to master), do we have a moment's realization of the magnitude of a task that children accomplish when they learn their mother tongue.

All normally developing children master the complexity of pronunciation, grammar, and vocabulary of their first language within the first four or five years of their lives. Not only do children learn to use highly sophisticated grammatical forms of their first language, they also develop an impressive vocabulary. During particularly intense periods of language learning, such as toddlerhood, young children learn a new word every waking hour of their day.

While children's first language facility surprises nobody, we often marvel at how quickly children learn a second language. Most of us have heard or told stories of immigrant parents who struggle with learning ESL while their children effortlessly "pick up" the language. Or you may have met adult immigrants who speak accented English after years of living in an English-speaking country while their children speak English without a trace of an accent after having been in an

English-speaking environment for a relatively short time. Why is that so? Why are young children facile second language learners? Conversely, why do so many adults tend to find second language learning challenging? What kinds of language learning faculties do children have that adult's lack?

One of the first answers to these questions was provided in the mid 1960s by an American linguist of German extraction, Eric Lenneberg. Lenneberg studied certain behaviors shared by a number of species. In particular, he was interested in behaviors that are:

- shared by an entire species;
- learned at around the same time by all the members of the species;
- learned following a rigid and predictable schedule when no amount of instruction would make any difference;
- learned instinctively, because members of the species cannot help developing this particular trait.

Lenneberg came to the conclusion that if a behavior found in a species meets all these criteria, that behavior is congenital or innate. An interesting example of congenital behavior is found in baby ducks. When newly hatched ducks see a moving object (whether it be their mom, the leg of a farmer or the broom), they start walking behind that object. We say that ducks "learn" to follow the moving objects. However, it is important to realize that ducks cannot help this behavior, because it is genetically predetermined. All baby ducks follow a moving object, provided they see it shortly after they are hatched.

Lenneberg argued that just as a duckling cannot help following its mother, a child cannot help learning a mother tongue. Pointing out that human speech develops in all members of the human species that humans begin to speak at roughly around the same age, and that human language learning follows a predictable sequence of developmental steps, Lenneberg hypothesized that human language ability is innate. Modern linguists who share Lenneberg's position use the term language instinct to refer to the innateness of language.

The premise behind Lenneberg's theory is that learning to speak is akin to learning to walk. You can no more teach a child to speak than you can teach a child about taking its first baby steps. Provided the child is exposed to language, a normally developing child will start to speak her mother tongue. In other words, children learn language quickly and easily, simply because they cannot help it.

An attempt to answer the question as to which aspects of the language system are congenital was made by an MIT scholar, Noam Chomsky. The theory developed by Chomsky had an enormous impact on the language science community. In the late 1950s and early 1960s when Chomsky's first studies of language acquisition came out, they unleashed violent debates which came to be known as the "linguistic wars." Generations of linguists have been busy testing Chomsky's hypothesis. He is one of the most frequently cited scholars of all time. What are the ideas that stirred this intellectual commotion?

According to Chomsky, children's ease at mastering grammar is all the more surprising given the fact that children's exposure to language is limited. The language children hear is hard to use as a material for inducing grammar rules—it is messy, full of false starts, and interruptions.

Chomsky hypothesized that children are quick to master the grammars of their languages, because their capacity to generate grammatically structured speech is innate and because a special grammatical blue print is prewired into children's brains. Having dubbed this grammatical blue print Universal Grammar, Chomsky argued that because of the universality of this congenital grammatical blueprint, all the world's languages share some universal properties: for instance, a sentence is composed of a noun phrase and a verb phrase.

Do the recent findings in psycholinguistics invalidate the more traditional grammar-based learning methods? The answer is not straightforward. For instance, the Natural Approach is simply not viable in all learning contexts. Relying on comprehensible input alone may not be a viable option in such

situations as when adult learners study a foreign language from non-native speakers.

However, teaching young students a second language is different. When young children learn their second language in a situation of ample input provided by native speakers, naturalistic approaches to language teaching appear more fitting.

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