

First Language Acquisition

People have been interested for hundreds of years in how babies seem to be so effortlessly and universally successful in learning their first language. After many years of research, linguists today believe that first language acquisition is the result of a complex set of factors which make unique contributions (and which undoubtedly operate interactively with each other).

According to the latest research, perhaps the most important of these factors is the innate capacity all human brains have at birth to learn language (spoken or signed). Chomsky believes that all babies have LAD or Language Acquisition Device to help them with language (Brown, 2006). He believes that they are biologically programmed to develop and speak languages, same as human are biologically programmed to walk or run. They do not need to be taught to perform such things. Chomsky also used the term “biological endowment” for babies’ innate capacity to learn language (Newport, 1990, as cited in Lightbown & Spada, 2013). At a very young age with no education experience, babies can extract rules for language that are spoken to them regularly. They discover rules of the language and start performing “telegraphic” by the age of 2. Telegraphic is a combination of words that babies put together without using any function words (Newport, 1990, as cited in Lightbown & Spada, 2013). However, what they say is still understandable because words are put in the correct order. This shows the innate capacity of human to learn and develop language (Pinker, 1994).

Another major factor which contributes to success in L1 acquisition is interaction. Interactionists emphasize the importance of interaction in language development for children (Newport, 1990, as cited in Lightbown & Spada, 2013). An example to prove this statement is a

story about a boy name Jim. He is hearing that has deaf parents. Throughout his childhood, the only input he gets from spoken language is through television. There was no interaction that allows him to use the language. From this, it shows that his proficiency is below the average. He also uses unusual terms and grammar functions. When he started school, his language develop started to improve slowly. However, it is different for Glen, Jim's younger brother. Glen is more developed in the language and has higher proficiency in the language. Glen was benefit from having an older brother to be his conversational partner. Glen got to interact using the language to his brother, while Jim did not have that opportunity. The interactionist said that interaction is essential part of language development because it provides appropriate responses to the children (Roy, 2011). Interaction allows speakers to adjust or tune in with each other to the same level of comprehension. A couple things that television or any electronic devices could not provide as interaction are paraphrasing and adjustment to individual needs (Kuhl, 2011). Technology might be able to repeat what has been said, but it could not adjust it to answer the listeners' needs. Language is complex, and babies need interaction to help them develop language. (Newport, 1990, as cited in Lightbown & Spada, 2013)

A third important variable is that children are fearless. The reason that children are fearless with language is because they have no identity. Language for them is just a way to get what they need or what they want. Language has not been part of their identity yet. There are many research on why adults cannot learn a 2nd language as babies do? From one of the studies I found, it talks about anxiety from learner's own sense of self. By the time Adults learn language, they have fully developed their L1, and that L1 become part of their identity (Masoud, 2011). Learning new language is like putting on a new identity on themselves. Many people are afraid

of losing their self-identity. However, babies have not yet discover their identities. They are in the process of forming their identity. This means babies have no pressure and nothing to be afraid of. They do not know if what they are saying is right or wrong, and even if it was wrong, the response they get back is all positive and encouraging. This helps babies to continue learning. On the other hand, some of the feedback adults receive can be discouraging and provide negative impact on the language. In addition to that, they also have pressure whether to be from school, work or family to remind them that they need to succeed the expectations. This makes adults become much slower to learn language compared to babies. Basically, babies are fearless because of their stress free environment life that they have. Being fearless then contributes to an effective language development.

Another important factor that contributes to L1 acquisition is mothers' womb. It has been talked about for a long time that mothers and babies are connected in a deep level. Within the whole pregnancy period, it is not only the physical aspect that is developed, but emotional and language aspect. There was a study (McElroy, 2013) on forty babies to see their reaction to different languages. They use the pacifier to test the sucking pattern of the babies when they hear their native language and a foreign language. The study found that babies react differently to their native language than to a foreign language. The results support the statement that babies develop their hearing at the last 10 weeks of pregnancy. The study shows us that babies do not only develop physically, but language wise as well. Infant's ears are developed to hear the intonation and rhythm of mother's speech. Therefore, the womb is another factor of L1 acquisition that would prepare babies to to become fully developed in their language.

Motivation is also important for language learning of children. Their motivation is assimilative motivation, a kind of motivation that wants to be part or a member of a particular group (Graham, 1984). Language creates self-identity so that we become part of a particular group. Children grow up in the environment that a language is used around them. Naturally, they are driven with a desire to be able to communicate and be like people around them. To become like, they have to develop to have native like speech to gain that acceptance. An example that support this statement clearly is our own experience. We often see little children use new words and phrases after they have interact it with someone, whether to be friends, cousins or anyone. This shows that children's language is influenced by interaction with people in their community. This could also means that they use those terms so they can become like others. Motivation is another factor that helps babies learn language.

A sixth factor that contribute to L1 acquisition is Motherese. Another term for motherese is "baby talk". Golinkoff (2015) discusses how motherese prepares babies for language learning. There are two benefits that has directly impact language learning from "baby talk". First, you get babies' attention and focus. It is important for everyone to focus when we learn something. Language is a complex things to learn. With full attention and focus that you get from babies when you "baby talk" to them, it helps them to absorb all the sound in their language that they need to use. Second, it is very useful for children to hear all the sounds and characteristics of their L1 being stressed and emphasized, which provide much clearer input for them. These two benefits of motherese are beneficial for acquiring L1 language.

Environment is also a big part of children acquiring their L1. Adults learn language mainly from textbooks and lectures in class. Children learn their 1st language purely from the

environment that uses their language. The language that people use with them and use around them are contextual. Moreover, they are wrapped in the loving environment. Everything they do and say will always gain back positive and encouraging reaction. In the process of learning to produce their L1, environment is a big key to help them progress in their proficiency.

Environment provide input, interaction and motivation to learn language. From the famous story of “the wild child”, we can learn about the importance of environment for language learning.

Victor, a child who was found in the jungle at the age of 12, did not have ability to communicate in any human language. For about 12 years, he did not have any contact with human. After he was found, he was given help to learn language by having conversation frequently. For about five years, he showed some progress of his language ability (Newport, 1990, as cited in Lightbown & Spada, 2013). As I mentioned earlier that environment provides things that are necessary to acquire L1. Victor did not get any input, interaction and motivation, simply because of the environment that he was in. This shows us that without a community and supporting environment, language cannot be learned and fully developed. Chomsky said that children have innate ability for language learning as they have biological endowment to learn how to walk and run. However, chomsky said that they can learn to walk as long as they have sufficient nourishment and freedom to use their ability (Newport, 1990, as cited in Lightbown & Spada, 2013). In my opinion, this could also apply to acquiring the language that children needs supporting environment to help them progress in their L1 proficiency.

The last factor is language interference. L1 interference is commonly used among foreign language learners. When adults learn languages, their native language could interfere with their learning in many aspects. However, for babies who are newly born, they have no language

exposure except language that are spoken by their parents. Babies do not have language interference because they do not have their own language yet. They are in the process of gaining language ability. Everything that are spoken to them are their native language that their whole brain is ready to absorb them. Comparing to adults learner, there is no language challenges for babies to overcome. There are nothing for them to adjust as adults that needs to adjust muscles in their tongues, or adjust to the culture of the language. Naturally, people will always bring the knowledge that they know to compare with new information that comes in (Nicholls, 2002). For babies, they also have nothing to compare to concerning language, which makes it easier for them to completely learn all new information. This is one of a main key to success in L1 acquisition of babies.

We have discussed on eight factors that help children acquire L1 acquisition. All of these factors are influential for children to be successful in their L1. Children have innate ability that helps them to learn language without being given proper language instruction. Children also need much interaction in order for them to progress in their L1 proficiency. Interaction provides language that is individualized for their needs. Children are also fearless to produce language because they have no social status and identity, which things are factors that cause adults to learn language much slower than babies. L1 is also successfully acquired by children because of the benefits that get in the womb. The time they spent at the very end of pregnancy helps them to get familiar with the rhythm and intonation of their language. Assimilative motivation is another huge part of children learning language. Motivation drives them to absorb and apply the language that are used around them so they can become part of their group. Children also get exposed to their language with exaggerated use of the language that clearly manifest the

characteristics of their language, which is motherese. Environment is also supporting children to keep learning and practicing the language. Last factor is children has no L1 interference as adults do, which allows them to be completely opened to all sounds and characteristics of the language. Children has so much benefits and tools that help them to acquire L1 successfully.

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