

Article

Language Acquisition and Language Learning

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Abstract: This article examines the concepts of language acquisition and language learning, analyzing their distinctive as well as interrelated characteristics from linguodidactic and psycholinguistic perspectives. Furthermore, it explores the content and distinctive features of the three principal theories explaining the mechanisms of language acquisition and learning, namely the behaviorist, nativist, and cognitive approaches.

Keywords: Language Acquisition, Language Learning, Linguodidactics, Behaviorism, Nativism, Cognitive Theory, Universal Grammar, Roger Brown's Research, Communicative Environment, Linguistic Worldview.

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1. Introduction

The question of how the ability to understand and use language develops has occupied a central place in philosophical and scientific thought since antiquity. Early reflections on this issue can be traced back to ancient Greek philosophy. In particular, Plato proposed that words emerge in human speech through innate capacities, thereby emphasizing the biologically determined nature of language ability. Similar debates were also prominent in ancient India, one of the major centers of Eastern civilization [1]. Within the tradition of Sanskrit grammar, scholars discussed the origin of humans' ability to understand word meanings, questioning whether linguistic competence is an innate biological characteristic or a socially transmitted ability inherited through generations. They also explored whether language development is governed by universal principles shared by all people. These historical perspectives laid the conceptual foundations for the contemporary nativist and behaviorist theories in linguodidactics [2].

Today, language acquisition and language learning are regarded as two complementary yet fundamentally distinct phenomena. Although they are closely interconnected, they differ significantly in their nature, mechanisms, and outcomes [3].

Language acquisition occurs largely through subconscious mental processes and relies primarily on intuition. It may therefore be described as natural language acquisition. In this process, the learner's attention is directed not toward grammatical structures but toward communicative meaning and the fulfillment of communicative needs. Acquisition typically takes place in a natural communicative environment without explicit instruction or rigid grammatical rules [4]. From early childhood, individuals gradually comprehend and interpret the knowledge available in their surroundings, enriching their linguistic worldview through authentic communicative experiences. Although language acquisition often appears to occur spontaneously, it generally requires considerably more time and

sustained exposure than formal language learning. Nevertheless, it ultimately enables individuals to achieve fluent and natural communication [5].

2. Materials and Methods

In contrast, language learning is a conscious and goal-oriented process. It primarily involves the systematic study of grammatical categories, orthographic conventions, and stylistic norms, followed by their application through structured instructional activities and practical exercises. Language learning is conducted within an educational setting through the collaborative interaction between teacher and learner, following the conventional teacher–student instructional model. As a result of this process, learners develop an organized system of linguistic knowledge, skills, and competencies.

From a linguodidactic perspective, the concept of language learning encompasses a broader scope than language acquisition, as it may include various stages of acquisition within the learning process. However, it is important to recognize that mastering theoretical linguistic knowledge does not necessarily result in its successful practical acquisition. A teacher may effectively explain grammatical rules and facilitate their memorization; nevertheless, genuine language acquisition begins only when learners actively participate in authentic communicative situations.

3. Results and Discussion

In essence, language acquisition is an intuitive, meaning-oriented process, whereas language learning is a conscious, form-oriented process that emphasizes grammatical accuracy. Only when these two processes operate in close integration can language education achieve effective and comprehensive learning outcomes [6].

Theoretical Foundations of Language Acquisition: Major Approaches

The distinction between language acquisition and language learning has directly contributed to the emergence of several fundamental theories in modern linguistics. Understanding the mechanisms underlying these processes requires an examination of how the human brain processes linguistic information. In this regard, three major theoretical approaches have played a central role in explaining language acquisition: the behaviorist, nativist, and cognitive perspectives [7].

According to proponents of the behaviorist theory, particularly B. F. Skinner, language acquisition is essentially the development of habits and skills shaped by environmental influences. From this perspective, the mind of a newborn child resembles a *tabula rasa* ("blank slate"), upon which linguistic knowledge is gradually built through environmental interaction [8]. Language development follows the sequence of stimulus → response → reinforcement.

For example, when a child attempts to pronounce a word, adults respond to the utterance and provide positive reinforcement if the pronunciation is appropriate. A child learning to say the word *water* initially imitates the pronunciation of adults. If the child correctly pronounces the word and consequently receives water, this positive reinforcement strengthens the linguistic habit associated with the expression [9]. Through repeated cycles of imitation and reinforcement, linguistic behavior gradually develops.

Despite its significant contribution to understanding the role of environmental input, the behaviorist approach has been criticized for its inability to explain why children are capable of producing entirely novel grammatical sentences that they have never previously heard. The theory therefore fails to account fully for the creative and productive nature of human language [10].

The limitations of behaviorism gave rise to the nativist theory, most notably advanced by Noam Chomsky. This approach argues that language acquisition is made possible by an innate linguistic capacity embedded within the human mind [11]. According to Chomsky, every human being is born with a Language Acquisition Device (LAD) containing the principles of Universal Grammar, which are common to all natural languages. When children are exposed to a particular linguistic environment, this innate mechanism activates the language-specific parameters, including word order, morphological patterns, and other grammatical features [12].

From this perspective, while all languages share universal grammatical principles, they differ only in the specific values assigned to these parameters. For instance, English typically follows the Subject–Verb–Object (SVO) word order, whereas Uzbek generally follows the Subject–Object–Verb (SOV) pattern. Despite these structural differences, children acquiring either language successfully master its complex grammatical system within a relatively short period because of their innate linguistic competence [13]. The nativist theory thus explains the remarkable speed and consistency with which children acquire grammatical knowledge despite receiving limited and often imperfect linguistic input [14].

The cognitive theory, primarily associated with Jean Piaget and his followers, provides a broader explanation by linking language acquisition to the child's overall cognitive and intellectual development. According to this approach, language acquisition is not merely the imitation of linguistic forms but rather the result of understanding meanings and integrating them into conceptual knowledge. As children's cognitive abilities develop, their language becomes increasingly sophisticated. In other words, children cannot meaningfully use words representing concepts that they have not yet cognitively understood [15].

During infancy, children initially produce meaningless vocalizations or babbling. Between approximately one and one-and-a-half years of age, they begin to recognize objects and produce their first meaningful words, such as mother, father, and water. By the age of three to four years, as their understanding of causal and logical relationships expands, they become capable of producing increasingly complex sentences that express abstract ideas and relationships between events. Thus, the cognitive approach emphasizes that language development is inseparable from the development of thinking and conceptual understanding.

None of these theoretical approaches, when considered independently, provides a complete explanation of language acquisition. The behaviorist theory effectively explains the initial stages of imitation and habit formation. The nativist theory accounts for children's rapid mastery of complex grammatical structures despite limited linguistic input. The cognitive theory, in turn, highlights the close relationship between language development and cognitive growth, demonstrating that linguistic competence evolves alongside intellectual maturation.

Taken together, these three perspectives offer a more comprehensive understanding of language acquisition by emphasizing the complementary roles of environmental interaction, innate biological capacity, and cognitive development in the formation of human language competence. Among the empirical studies that have significantly contributed to the understanding of first language acquisition, the longitudinal research conducted by Roger Brown, Professor at Harvard University, occupies a prominent position. Initiated in the early 1960s, Brown's investigation has become one of the most influential studies addressing the fundamental question: "How is a first language acquired?"

Brown systematically observed the linguistic development of three children, conventionally referred to in the literature as Adam, Eve, and Sarah, from approximately 1.5 to 4 years of age over a period of several years. The distinguishing feature of this study

was its naturalistic design. Each week, spontaneous conversations between the children and their mothers were audio-recorded in everyday settings. These recordings were subsequently transcribed and analyzed to examine the developmental patterns of grammatical structures emerging in children's speech.

This longitudinal methodology enabled Brown to document the sequential development of children's grammatical competence and to identify universal patterns in first language acquisition. Based on his observations, Brown identified two fundamental principles that have had a lasting impact on the field of first language acquisition and linguodidactics. The study demonstrated that parents rarely focus on the grammatical accuracy of their children's utterances. Instead, they are primarily concerned with whether the child successfully conveys the intended meaning and whether the information expressed is accurate.

For instance, if a child produces the grammatically correct sentence "Her name is Sarah," while referring to a girl whose actual name is Maria, the parent is likely to correct the child because the information is factually incorrect. Conversely, if a child says "He go shop," which is grammatically inaccurate, but the intended meaning is correct—that the person has indeed gone to the shop—the parent typically responds with positive feedback such as "Yes, that's right." These observations suggest that, in natural communication, successful meaning transmission is valued more highly than grammatical correctness during the early stages of language acquisition.

The Internal Nature of Grammatical Development

Brown further concluded that children's grammatical development occurs largely independently of explicit parental instruction. Parents do not consciously teach grammar in a systematic manner, nor does direct correction play a decisive role in children's mastery of grammatical structures. Instead, children acquire grammatical elements—including inflectional morphemes, tense markers, and other linguistic structures—in a relatively fixed developmental sequence that appears to be guided by an internal linguistic mechanism. For example, children consistently acquire the -ing progressive marker before mastering locative prepositions such as *in* and *on*, followed by plural markers. Remarkably, this developmental order remains highly consistent across children regardless of differences in parental teaching practices or educational background.

These findings provide strong empirical support for the view that grammatical acquisition follows an internally organized developmental process rather than being determined solely by external instruction.

Pedagogical Implications

Brown's findings offer important implications for language educators. Simply correcting learners' grammatical errors or requiring them to memorize grammatical rules is unlikely to produce the desired communicative competence. Instead, greater educational effectiveness can be achieved by creating authentic communicative environments that address learners' genuine communicative needs and encourage meaningful language use.

Such environments facilitate the natural development of grammatical competence through purposeful interaction rather than through isolated rule memorization. Consequently, effective language instruction should prioritize meaningful communication while integrating explicit instruction as a complementary component of the learning process.

4. Conclusion

Although the fundamental theories of language acquisition discussed above provide valuable conceptual insights into the internal mechanisms and biological-psychological

foundations of language acquisition, the practical outcomes of this process remain dependent on a variety of objective and subjective factors. Consequently, the transition from universal theories of language acquisition to specific didactic strategies requires a comprehensive analysis of such factors as instructional objectives, learner and teacher engagement, and individual learning styles. Careful consideration of these variables represents an essential stage in ensuring the effectiveness and success of the linguodidactic process.

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