

Input and Native Language Acquisition

Jigsaw Reading A1

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Imagine yourself an infant, lying in a crib, surrounded by people who are constantly producing vocal noises and attending to your needs. How do you figure out that these vocal noises mean something? How do you discover that they contain coded messages based on very complex systems of sound patterns, word meanings, word structure, sentence constructions, and discourse patterns? How do you internalize that code so that you can understand and transmit very complex messages?

First of all, the thing that makes all of this possible is that you are blessed with very sensitive ears which, at birth or shortly thereafter, are capable of detecting the minutest sound differences that adults use to signal meaning in their native language systems. You also have a vocal tract, which, as it matures is capable of producing exactly the range of sounds necessary for human speech. In addition, you have a brain which specializes in language acquisition and is capable of great feats of memory and pattern recognition. Finally, you are surrounded by intelligent, caring adults who expect you to learn to communicate and appear to be intuitively aware of what you need in order to develop a language system.

From birth on, parents and caregivers begin speaking to you and communicating with you through eye contact and touch. They often used exaggerated intonation, which tends to excite you and make you attend to important parts of what they say. Early on, you learn to attend to language directed at you and pay less attention to language spoken to others in your presence. As you respond to your parents' communicative efforts they begin to engage you in language play in which you learn to take turns vocalizing. One of the earliest systems of language that you learn is the system of rhythm and intonation used by your caregivers. This is a system through which a lot of the social and emotional content of speech is communicated. By the time you are eight months old, you are babbling with rhythm and intonation patterns characteristic of your caregivers' language. By the end of your tenth month of life, you have learned to ignore sound differences which are not a part of your native language and which you were able to attend to when you were one month old.

Your caregivers know that in order to communicate with you, they need to provide a rich context. For the most part, when they talk to you, they do so in the here and now. That is, they use language relating to things and events that are present at the time. This greatly facilitates your making the connection between the speech sounds they are making and the objects and events they are referring to. They also simplify their speech by speaking to you in short sentences to accommodate your limited working memory.

At about seven to eight months of age, you make one of the great breakthroughs in your language learning career—you notice that specific sounds refer to specific objects and actions. At first, you are not sure exactly which features of the object or action are being referred to by the specific sounds. Therefore your first recognized words and phrases may have broad meanings. For example, the word

'dog' may mean any hairy animal. Your caregivers often help by repeating words and phrases over and over and they often test your comprehension by having you point to things or perform in some way. As your recognition of words grows from one word to two, to three, and then to a half dozen, you begin to refine the sound categories which you use to distinguish between the words. You also begin to establish boundaries between the meanings.

During all of this process of interacting with you, your caregivers lavish upon you hugs and praises for every effort you make to communicate. When you begin attempting to actually speak your first words toward the end of your first year of life, your clumsy untrained speech muscles and your limited working memory, make it hard for you to articulate clearly enough for adults to recognize exactly what words you are trying to say. In spite of this, your caregivers expect your utterances to be communicative and they respond to the faintest similarities between your early productions and the words which they expect you to be saying. This social feedback has a marvelous effect on your willingness to keep trying to communicate. It also encourages you to continue refining your productions to match those of your speech community and to increase the efficiency of communication.

As you solidify your knowledge of the sound system categories which enable you to distinguish among words that you are learning and as you further internalize the meanings of words, your acquisition of new words suddenly explodes. Instead of learning one word every few days, you begin learning several new words every day and, as you get feedback from caregivers, you continue to refine your knowledge of words that have already entered your vocabulary. You also begin to understand combinations of words and the order in which words occur in adult speech begins to be very important to you.

At this stage, you not only get to where you can comprehend multiword utterances, but you begin to produce combinations of words. In response, your caretakers gradually increase the complexity of the speech which they direct toward you so that their speech is always a bit more complex than what you are producing. As a result, your ability to comprehend what is said is developmentally a few months more advanced than what you can say. That is, you typically develop the ability to comprehend a linguistic feature before you develop the ability to produce it correctly. Also, as adults give you feedback on your attempts to speak, it is mostly centered around a correct meaning, not a correct structure. Much of the structural feedback which adults give you is through a technique called expansion. In it, caregivers hear you say something such as, "He bringed a lizard," and instead of correcting you directly, they say, "Oh, he brought a lizard. Did you get to pet it?"

Another feature of caregiver speech that continues throughout the early years of language acquisition is that of verifying comprehension. Adults use many more commands and yes-no questions in their communication with children than they do in communicating with other adults. This is believed to provide a mechanism through which they can check comprehension.

As children approach the school years, adults tend to begin correcting their utterances more for social appropriateness. This may include some focus on correction of substandard forms of speech. Language learning is a continuous, interactive social process. In order to learn to communicate children in learning their native language need access to input, they can comprehend. Interaction with others increases children's ability to understand. This process begins at birth and continues across our life. We are continually learning new and better ways to communicate with each other. The following chart summarizes caregiver speech and the child's response.

Characteristics of Caregiver-Child Interactions

The Caregiver Speech:

The Child's Response:

Engages the child in social interaction.



Feels love and acceptance and learns the joy of turn-taking and interaction.

Talks about the here and now. Uses context to communicate meaning.



Figures out the meaning of what the caregiver is saying.

Uses exaggerated intonation.



Attends more to the caregiver and focuses on the important parts of the speech pattern.

Notes on the child's efforts to speak. Is not critical of failed attempts or incorrect grammar.



Is encouraged to keep on trying to speak, even if it is difficult and takes a lot of effort.

Simplifies vocabulary and syntax. Gradually increases complexity as the child's ability increases.



Can understand the message even when his/her processing capacity is very limited.

Repeats words and phrases often in the early stages of word learning.



Enhances the early recognition of the sound patterns of words and their associations with meanings.

Uses commands and questions frequently.



Has a chance to demonstrate comprehension so that the caregiver can monitor and give assistance.

Corrects mostly for meaning and expands children's utterances rather than give direct correction of grammar.



Focuses on comprehension and communication and relies on his/her innate capacity to learn a language to develop the details of form.

Adapted with permission from:

Teemant, A. & Pinnegar, S. (2007). *Understanding Language Acquisition Instructional Guide*. Brigham Young University-Public School Partnership.



Principles of Language Acquisition

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