

## **Learner Variables in Language Learning**

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**Abstract:** There are many cognitive factors that affect language learning. Among the cognitive factors, there is memory, attention and awareness, forgetting, context or environment. In which the learning process takes place. Memory plays a part in bringing about a higher and lower level of language mastery.

Mastering speech is one of the most notable and important achievements in early childhood. Over the course of several months and without any explicit training, toddlers move from the stage of uncertain pronunciation of individual words to fluent pronunciation of whole sentences; from a small vocabulary to a vocabulary that increases daily by six new words. New speech tools mean new opportunities for social understanding, for learning about the world and sharing experiences, joys and needs. The linguistic development seems even more impressive when we consider the nature of what is being mastered. It may seem that children just need to remember what they hear and repeat what they hear after a while. But, as Chomsky pointed out many years ago, if this was the essence of language acquisition, our communication would not have been so successful. Verbal communication requires productivity, i.e. the ability to create an infinite number of utterances that we have never heard before. This endless array of new sayings suggests that some aspects of language knowledge are abstract. Ultimately, the "rules" of combining words cannot only apply to certain words, they must apply to classes of words such as nouns, verbs, or prepositions. As soon as these abstract schemes become available, the speaker can fill in the "cells" in the sentence with words that best convey the message of what is happening. The key point of Chomsky's theory was that since such abstractions cannot be known directly, they must arise as a result of the child's mental activity when he listens to speech.

Experts on the language development of children are intensively discussing the nature of mental activity that ensures language acquisition. One group of theorists argues that the perception of speech simply activates the knowledge of grammar, which is already genetically embedded. A group of opponents believes that grammatical knowledge arises from the way the human mind analyzes and organizes information, and that this knowledge is not innate. The debate of scientists reflects fundamentally different beliefs regarding human development, and most likely they will not lead to an unambiguous solution. However, there are at least two areas in which there is a significant consensus of opinion that can serve as guidance for educators and policy makers: (a) the predictability of the language acquisition process; and (b) its multi-deterministic nature.

In general, the obvious "facts" of language development are not the subject of discussion. Most children begin to speak in the second year of life, and by the age of two they already know at least 50 words and are able to combine them into short phrases. As soon as the vocabulary reaches about 200 words, the rate of mastering new words increases significantly, and words that perform a grammatical function, such as articles and prepositions, begin to appear with some

regularity. During the preschool period, sentence patterns become more and more complicated, and vocabulary becomes more diverse due to the inclusion of relationship terms denoting size, location, quantity and time. By the time they reach the age of four to six, most children have mastered the basic grammar of a sentence. From this point on, children learn to speak more rationally and effectively. They also learn how to create and maintain larger language units such as conversation and storytelling.<sup>8</sup> Although there are individual differences in the rate of development, the sequence with which different language forms appear is quite predictable both during each individual stage and over several stages.

There is also a significant similarity of opinion that the course of language development reflects the interaction of factors related to at least five areas: social, perceptual, cognitive processing, conceptual and linguistic. Theorists disagree about the special significance and determinative role postulated for each sphere, but most scientists agree that each sphere is relevant. There is an impressive amount of research supporting the view that the process of language acquisition is influenced by many aspects of human experience and abilities. For each area, I will mention two research results that are able to convey a general idea of the conclusions available today.

Young children make a conclusion about the speaker's communicative intention and use this information to guide the process of language acquisition. For example, already at the age of 24 months, focusing solely on the enthusiastic tone of an adult and on the elements of the environment, children are able to conclude that the new word should refer to an object that was placed on the table at the time of the adult's absence. The verbal environment affects language acquisition. Between the ages of one and three, children from families in which parents "professionally" talk a lot heard at least three times as many words per week compared to children from "living on benefits" families in which they do not talk much at home. Longitudinal data suggest that aspects of parental speech perceived by children in early childhood determine speech performance at the age of nine.

**The perceptual sphere.** Perception in infancy lays the foundation. Auditory perception skills at the age of six or 12 months can determine the volume of vocabulary and the complexity of syntax at the age of 23 months. Perceptibility matters. In English, forms with reduced perceptual distinctness, for example, unstressed forms or elements that are part of a cluster of consonants, are particularly difficult for students with hearing impairments to perceive.

**Cognitive processes.** Frequency affects the learning rate. Children who hear an uncharacteristically large number of examples of some speech form learn it faster than children who receive the usual amount of information. "Compromises" among various speech spheres can take place when the perception of the entire sentence requires more mental resources than are available to the child. For example, children make more mistakes in small grammatical forms, such as verb endings and prepositions, in sentences with complex syntactic organization, compared to sentences with simple syntax.

**The conceptual sphere.** Related terms are tied to psychological age. Words expressing concepts of time, causality, location, size, and order correlate with psychological age to a much greater extent than words that simply refer to objects and events. Moreover, children learning different languages learn to talk about spatial location, expressed, for example, by prepositions in or next to almost the same order, regardless of the grammatical means of their language. Language skills are influenced by knowledge about the world around them. Children who have difficulty remembering any word are also less aware of the objects to which this word refers.

**Linguistic field.** The endings of verbs are the key to their meaning. If the verb ends in -ing, three-year-olds will decide that it refers more to an activity (for example, the form swimming from the English verb swim "to swim") than to a completed/completed state change<sup>19</sup> (the English verb push off "to push away").

The current vocabulary affects the learning of new words. Young children usually decide that a new word refers to an object for which they do not yet have a designation.

The research results presented above are only part of the data that, taken together, convincingly demonstrate the interactive nature of development. Children begin the task of mastering a language with perceptual mechanisms that function in a certain way, as well as with limited attention and memory capabilities. These cognitive systems, at a minimum, will influence what attention is drawn to in incoming language information, and they may well be central elements of the language learning process. Similarly, children's previous experiences with the material and social world provide the initial foundation for interpreting the speech they hear. Later, children will also use language prompts. However, the course of language acquisition is not guided solely by internal factors. The structure of the language to be learned and the frequency with which children hear different language forms will also have an impact. Despite the debate among theorists, it is obvious that language skills reflect knowledge and abilities in almost every field and should not be considered in isolation.

Representatives of educational and policy-making bodies often ignored preschoolers whose speech development seemed to lag behind their development in other areas, and argued that such children were "just a little behind" in speaking. Research data, on the contrary, suggest that language acquisition should be considered as an important indicator of success in complex integrative tasks. As we have just seen, whenever language "fails", it is implied that other areas have also failed – as causes or consequences of this. Indeed, large-scale epidemiological studies have demonstrated that children with diagnosed specific speech disorders at the age of four (for example, lagging in language acquisition without sensorimotor impairment, affective disorders or retardation) are at high risk of developing academic failures and mental health problems until reaching adulthood and already being in it.<sup>20,21</sup> Fortunately, research data also shows, that it is possible to speed up the process of language acquisition.<sup>22</sup> Even if the child has to create abstract schemas from language data himself, we can facilitate this process (a) by providing language examples consistent with the child's perceptual, social and cognitive resources; and (b) by choosing learning goals that are in harmony with the standard course of development.

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