

"Describe how children learn the rules of English grammar, with reference to the appropriate research."

From birth children start to acquire language and develop the skills necessary in order to communicate with others. Theories surrounding child language acquisition are varied and all carry various valid points.

Skinner's Behavioural theory centres on the idea that children learn through operant conditioning i.e. rewards and punishment. He suggested that when children see their parents as models and copy their speech they are rewarded with communication, being able to express their frustrations. Therefore if children do not learn to speak they are punished with lack of communication.

Noam Chomsky on the other hand developed the innate theory. He suggested that "Humans are hard wired to learn language in their DNA." Meaning that humans have an innate ability to understand and learn grammar and language patterns once stimulated by encountering speech from others.

A third theory is that of J. Bruner, he suggested that child language is developed through interaction with others. This theory accepts that children have an innate capacity for language development but link it to their interaction with their physical and social environments. It categorises the reasons why children use speech and suggests that they learn in order to achieve what they want.

When a child reaches the age of 18 months usually they begin the holophrastic stage of language development. This is the first stage in which a child will start to use language for the correct meaning and begin to understand simple rules language. At this stage children will generally only use common nouns and simple verbs, however they will not yet begin to change word endings for example to reflect plurals. An example of this can be seen from David Crystal's *Essential Grammar*. At the age of 18 months the child states "Bun. Butter. Jelly. Cakie. Jam." Children learn nouns first because they are names of objects and names of objects are the most important lexical terms they need in order to communicate and achieve what they want.

This stage of child language acquisition can be used to support the theory of interaction. Children learn the words they do because they are exposed to them in their everyday life. For instance if a child's father is a taxi driver they may learn the noun "car" because they are constantly exposed to it where as a child in a family of non-drivers may not know the word "car" because they are never exposed to them. Rodger Brown stated that children prioritise

the order in which they learn word classes according to their necessity. This theory can again be supported by a study completed by the University of Bristol in 2008. They found that all children no matter what country they are born in can make the same phonetic noises as a very young baby, however as they grow older they lose the sounds that their culture does not use. In the same way that a child never exposed to the noun "car" will not use the noun "car" (until they are older that is) a child in a country that does not use the phoneme "ch" will not therefore need to use it, thus when they are older they will find it impossible to be able to make that sound again. This is called phonemic contraction.

When a child reaches the age of 2 ½ years they begin to build up their grammar. As well as still using nouns and verbs they begin to develop a use of prepositions and pronouns. An example of this can be seen in *A Child's Learning to Read* by Paul Fletcher. At 2 ½ years old the child states "me want to read that" The pronoun "me" is used in this sentence showing an understanding of self awareness. However they have over generalised the use of "me" showing a lack of understanding of what pronoun is appropriate. In the same conversation the child states "Muffy step on that." The preposition "on" is used, this shows a more developed understanding of grammar and word classes because the child is using words to link verbs and nouns. However this sentence also shows how at this age children are still unable to understand the use of tenses. The child omits the "ed" off the end of the verb "step" showing a lack of understanding of the past tense.

This stage of child language acquisition can be used to support the idea of the innate theory. At this age children seem to understand more that what they can physically speak. Their parents may correct them but they will not change the way they speak because they believe they are correct. This can be seen in the "fis" study made by Burke and Brown. When a child referred to a *fish* as a *fish* the researcher asked "is this you *fish*?" and the child replied "no it's my *fish*." Implying that the child already understood the word fish and how it sounds but cannot pronounce it properly. Therefore they have the learnt a word before they could actually say it supporting the innate theory.

When a child reaches the age of 5 years they will have learnt the all the grammar that they will ever need to use. They will have a developed knowledge of word classes and how to pluralised words and use the different tenses correctly. They start to use more complex sentences and connective's and any mistakes they do make are down to an over generalisation. In David Crystal's *When We Grow Up* at 5 years and 6 months the child Lucy states (while playing a game) "I'll be the waitress and you have to eat in my shop. You come in, and sit down, and I can come and see you" the sentence is

correct, it shows a correct use of sentence structure and a developed use of different word classes.

▲An example of where a 5 year old may make mistakes is over generalisation, they may say "I learned something new" the verb "learned" should be "learnt" the child has understood the rule of adding "ed" on the end of a verb to make it past tense however has not learnt the exceptions to the rule. This could provide support for the Behavioural theory of Child Language Acquisition. From this example we can see that children have learnt the behaviour, in that they have learnt the "ed" means that something was done in the past. ▲And because they have been rewarded with communication they have assumed that everything they talk about that has already happened should have an "ed" on the end.

Children seem to learn incredibly complex and complicated languages very quickly and with relative ease, the rate at which they learn under the age of five is second to none other age. The theories surrounding how children learn language are varied and all have good points however they all have their flaws also. Perhaps a mixture of the all is a better way to explain how children learn, children must have some sort of innate ability that allows them to understand the rules of language. While at the same time the language used around them and the way they interact with other people also must influence the way they speak, otherwise why would we have regional language differences? Furthermore Skinner's Behaviourist theory also makes sense as children learn more language they are rewarded with being able to communicate with others thus ridding themselves of the frustration they must feel when not able to express themselves.