

Compare and contrast two theories of language development

“Language is the main way in which human beings communicate .” (Beaver, M et Al. 2001. p.139). It is used in different ways to socialise and express a persons needs. There are four main theories of language development but I will explore those of Noam Chomsky and B F Skinner. In the 1960’s Chomsky explored the idea that *“language development is innate and genetically predetermined.”* (Bruce, T and Meggitt, C. 2005. p.113). He believed that children are born with the necessary physical and intellectual abilities to acquire language, and therefore are able to invent new words and sentences that they have not previously heard. He suggests children learn to talk through their Language Acquisition Device (LAD). He suggests this structure consists of speech-producing mechanisms, the ability to understand, and parts of the brain. Chomsky’s theory is therefore a nature theory as he states the *“ability to learn language is instinctive .”* (Tassoni, P. 2006. p.424).

Skinner’s theory is a nurture theory, as he believes that we learn language through encouragement and reinforcement. He suggests that *“we learn language mainly because when babies try to communicate, their efforts are rewarded or reinforced in some way”* (Tassoni, P. 2006. p.423) and so this is a nurture approach. Parents or carers reinforce or encourage the baby through smiles, eye contact and spoken encouragement. Skinner believes that it is *“this idea of reinforcement”* (Tassoni, P. 2006. p.423) that explains why babies stop making some sounds. He suggests that if the child doesn’t hear any reinforcement or recognition of a sound then they will stop making it. He called this ‘selective reinforcement’. It is this theory that explains, *“why children speak in similar ways to their parents, using the familiar phrases and intonation .”* (Tassoni, P. 2006. p.423). Skinner’s approach is a behaviourist approach- believing that children learn from other children and adults’ behaviour.

These two theories are contrasting as one suggests that language development is through nature, and the other through nurture. In short it is either developed through what we get at birth, or how we are brought up. It is suggested that a child learns language through aspects, nature and nurture, as *“there is some genetic sensitivity to language, but that children’s experiences after birth are very important in their development of language .”* (Beaver, M et Al. 2001. p.149).

Chomsky’s theory is commonly acknowledged as it is comprehensive and explains why all babies’ language development follows a pattern, unlike Skinner’s theory. If Skinner’s nurture approach is accurate then each child’s language development should vary according to the amount of reinforcement and praise they are given. It is universally known that all children pass through the same stages at similar times, regardless of the amount of reinforcement. So whether a child’s language development is instinctive, or if it is learnt by observation and reinforcement, is inconclusive. **However I have seen at placement how children can learn language through praise, encouragement and reinforcement. Structures like Jolly Phonics and Letterland help to reinforce phonetics to children through memory cues and word and letter association. In early years books words are often repeated as the repetition of words helps children to repeat and remember the information, and therefore allows them to learn. I have also seen in placement in both the reception and Year 1 classes how repetition and reinforcement of words can help children learn. When reading words for the first time, or words that they struggle with, they are encouraged to repeat the word three times. By doing this the repetition helps them to remember the word. Also when a child is struggling to read a word, they are encouraged to sound the letters out to help them say the whole word. As this is something the children are familiar with and is reinforced often, most will sound the letters out themselves to try and work out what the word says. They have learnt to do this through reinforcement, and through praise from being told when they are doing well.**

Parents or carers can reinforce and encourage language through the acknowledgment of spoken praise and eye contact. This helps children gain confidence in what they are saying

and children who are actively encouraged to speak will acquire more words and sounds naturally.

When I did a speaking and listening activity with some reception children they showed that at the end of the activity they had recalled some of the basic information that they had told me and were able to repeat this to the class teacher. Through repetition and reinforcement they had been able to remember and recall information when asked.

References:

- Beaver, M et Al (2001) Babies and Young Children. Nelson Thornes.
- Bruce, T and Meggitt, C (2005) Child Care and Education- 3rd edition. Hodder Arnold.
- Tassoni, P (2006) BTEC National Early Years- 2nd edition. Heinemann.