

English Language Acquisition Analytical Essay

During development, children learn to communicate, respond, and even make requests through cries and coos. At a later stage, a child begins to develop sounds that are more complex and when he/ she is between 3 and 6 years old, a child is able to communicate easily. Researchers have tried to explain the process by which children learn language. One theory that has explained the process by which children acquire language is the Innate theory. This paper will discuss and assess the Innate theory of language acquisition.

The Innateness Hypothesis theory

The Innateness hypothesis theory, which is also referred as Innatist model, Naivist theory, or Rationalist mentalist theory is a model that explains how language is acquired (Chomsky, 1986). Noam Chomsky a linguistic professor developed the Innateness hypothesis model in 1950s (around 1959).

However, although Chomsky is credited as the one who originated with Innate model; this theory was in existence for more than a hundred years (Chomsky, 1986). Chomsky is only considered as one who developed this theory since he brought new ideas making the old concept to be accepted as a formal theory.

Noam Chomsky is a well renowned professor of linguistics who has contributed a lot in the study of language (Fromkin, 2000). His work in linguistic theory especially, the Innateness model of language acquisition has brought major changes in the field of linguistics. The Innateness model is one of the most prominent theories and because of this aspect; it has received a lot of public attention in the past and continue to cause a huge debate among many researchers in the field of linguistics (Fromkin, 2000).

Noam Chomsky developed the Innate theory as a way of reacting to the Behaviorists Language Learning Theory. In the Innate theory of language acquisition, Chomsky contradicted arguments of the Behaviorist theory (Chomsky, 1986). During the past few decades, the Innate theory has caused a lot of debate concerning first language acquisition (L1).

Theoretical Bases

When Chomsky developed the Navist theory, he came up with several assumptions, which formed the bases of the Innate theory. This theory has three assumptions.

First, according to Chomsky (1986, p. 12) "language acquisition is innately determined". This theory argues that children are born with extraordinary abilities to learn a language. Chomsky

particularly argued that when children are born, their mind is biologically programmed to learn a language (Chomsky, 1986).

As such, just like other concepts, children acquire language in the same way they learn any other biological function. This is to say that, just in the same manner children start to crawl or learn to walk, language learning for children is programmed in a similar way.

Secondly, Chomsky also argued that every child is born with a special ability to learn and understand rules of a language system (Pinker, 2007). Every language has rules in the way sentences are formed and how words are uttered and so on. For instance, a Standard English sentence contains a subject, verb, and an object.

According to Chomsky, children are born with abilities to discover such rules and master them in a natural way. Because of this special ability among children, language acquisition only happens within a short time for both easy and complex languages (Pinker, 2007).

The third and the last, yet crucial assumption is that environment has a role to play in determining children's abilities to learn or acquire a language (Pinker, 2007). Chomsky puts a lot of emphasis on environmental factor saying that this aspect cannot be ignored as it has a role in language learning.

Children brought up in two different environments can vary in terms of how they learn or rather; acquire a language (Blakemore and Cooper, 1970). In a given environment, a child can acquire a language faster while in another one a child can learn a language slowly. For instance, a child who brought up in an environment that has many children is more likely to learn a language faster compared to a child who grows in an environment that has no children. Constant interaction with other children helps in language acquisition.

Generally, in Chomsky's perspective the Innate model of language acquisition can be categorized in two hypothesis. The first hypothesis says that language acquisition in children does not depend on level of intelligence as children who are even below the IQ of 50 can easily learn a language (Konieczna, 2008).

This is because children have the ability to learn a language "effortlessly" (Blakemore and Cooper, 1970, p. 477). Chomsky further argued that even though language is complex considering it has set grammar principles, children do not need any form of special training to acquire or become competent in any language.

Chomsky further argued that children mind is set and designed to discover language rules even with limited information (O'Grady, 2008). This is because children do not need to imitate words or language in order to become competent in any language. For children to become competent in any language, reinforcements, rewards and special training play little or no role in language

acquisition (Pinker, 1994). He also argued that the process of language acquisition is passive and children can sometime utter words/ phrases they have never heard.

Language is innate

For the past few decades, a debate has emerged concerning validity of Chomsky's work. However, as many critics have opposed the Innate theory, several researchers have been in the front line providing evidence to support the Innate theory. One supporter is Eric Lenneberg. Erick Lenneberg developed the concept of critical period that has provided light and more explanation of the Innate hypothesis of language acquisition (Kampen, 2004).

According to Lenneberg's critical period, there is a particular period of life or time (critical period) when a child is able to acquire a language without any difficulties (O'Grady, 2008). Lenneberg referred this particular time as biologically pre-determined period (O'Grady, 2008).

According to this concept, if a child does not acquire or learn a language during this particular period, language becomes relatively hard to acquire beyond this period. Through this concept, Lenneberg provided adequate evidence to prove that Chomsky's argument is valid. This concept does not only confirm that language is innately determined, but it also proves that there is natural set of rules for a language.

Chomsky's most important bases of his theory argue that, children are born with unique abilities to learn a language (Pinker, 2007). Chomsky has provided more evidence to support his argument, which is widely discussed here. According to Chomsky (1986), Behaviorist theory failed to recognizes "the poverty of the stimulus Argument".

The concept of "the poverty of the stimulus argument" argues that almost all children learn their mother tongue or native language successfully at a particular time when they are less expected to learn any other complex concept in life (Kampen, 2004). In addition, the concepts also says that the first language that a child is exposed to, depending on the environment is very confusing and it may not necessary provide all basic information needed to learn a language.

This concept also argues that, sometimes children learn to use complex language structures when they have not even understood grammar rules or special instructions. Therefore, children are able to gain knowledge of grammar rules hence learn a language in a natural manner.

Lastly, this concept argues that children are capable of producing words that they have never heard (Pinker, 2007). For example, children can say puted, comed, and eated. This is not out of imitation and neither is it out of training, but it is acquired through creativity.

Universal Grammar/ Language Acquisition Device (LAD)

According to Chomsky (1986), language development does not rely on techniques of teaching although language acquisition varies according to cultures. However, Chomsky emphasized that language is universal.

In general, Chomsky emphasized on the facts that these grammar rules offer restricted possibilities; this is clearer in sentence structure. As a universal grammar, almost all languages have a similar structure. An example is James (S) has (V) a mango (O). Virtually all languages follow this structure of SVO (Pinker, 2007). This is what Chomsky referred as the Universal Grammar (UG).

To support this argument, Chomsky argued that “language is not a set of habits, but it is rule-governed” (Kampen, 2004, p. 56). In his argument, Chomsky explained that the human mind is fully responsible for processing linguistic information since it is designed naturally with a special device, which enables learning or acquisition of language by humans (Fromkin, 2000). This is known as the Language

Acquisition Device (LAD). According to Chomsky, the LAD is responsible for “detecting and learning the grammar rules” (Pinker, 2007, p. 78). This particular device becomes activated once humans hear a language. With the storage capacity of the brain, the LAD helps young children to become skilled at any language that they here or have heard in the past.

In Chomsky argument (1986), the LAD is made of Universal Grammar. All languages have certain universal rules. Universal Grammar (UG) does not mean that all language are formed with one basis rule, it only states that all languages contain some basic grammatical elements or fixed rules that are general. These rules define how people construct sentences in any language. Children also apply the same principle in a language. According to Innate model of language acquisition, there are two universal languages (Fromkin, 2000).

The first one is substantive universal. The substantive universal has fixed features phonemes and other syntactic groups such as noun and verbs (Fromkin, 2000). A good example in this case is the different between some phonological features. One such an example is utterance of vowels and consonants.

The way consonants /f/ and /v/ are voiced in words such as van and fun is distinctive. The second one is formal universal. According to Chomsky, every language has set grammatical rules (Fromkin, Rodman, and Hymans, 2002). The formal universal rules are those principles that establish the manner in which grammatical rules operate in any given language (Chomsky, 1986).

Concerning these two universal principles, Chomsky argued that a child becomes competent in only one of the principles. The first principle, which a child discovers automatically form his/ her core or primary grammar while those principles that are not discovered in the child’s mind automatically become the peripheral or secondary grammar (Guasti, 1993).

During the time when a child is developing, the primary grammar rules become easier to acquire compared to the secondary grammar rules, which are much harder to understand because the mind is not set or programmed to comprehend them.

Conclusion

Chomsky's work in linguistic theory especially, the Innateness model of language acquisition has brought many changes in the field of linguistics. The Innateness model is one of the most prominent theories and has received a lot of public attention in the past. It continues to cause a big debate among many researchers in the field of linguistics. Different theories have been developed that contrast Chomsky's work.

In fact, several scholars have criticized the Innate theory arguing that the hypothesis of Language Acquisition Device (LAD) is simply an conceptual that does not have scientific facts. Again, critics have also said that the theory focused much on language competence rather than emphasizing on the developmental feature of language attainment (Konieczna, 2008).

Because of such issues, Innate theory has caused a lot of controversies. Despite all of these critics, Chomsky's work is good enough to provide a valid explanation of how children acquire a language, especially the L1.

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