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## Language and Communication in Children: Implications for the Classroom Teacher

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### **Abstract**

*Language is the instrument through which all school subjects are taught to the students in the school. Without language, as the one of the distinguishing factors of human being, man could have been like other animals. The development of language in children is one of the wonders in child development and must be appreciated because of the educational implications. In this paper, the concept of language had been looked into. The paper discussed the theories of language development, functions of language, the phases of language, stages of language development and the factors that affect language development. The paper concluded by noting the educational*

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*implications of language development and made some recommendations, thus: Since language is a powerful tool for communication, learners should be encouraged to learn more than one language since the study of the other school subjects' hinges on communication ability. Teachers of language should teach with instructional materials like photographs, charts etc. The level of maturity of the learners should be considered in preparing instruction meant for them. Debating clubs and literary societies should be encouraged to make for easy language development since they provide platforms upon which learners can express their opinions. Correct pronunciation of words helps in language development since imitation is important in learning. Therefore teachers should always pronounce words correctly.*

**Key words:** Language, phonology, semantic, syntax and pragmatics

Language is so freely used among people that there is a tendency to forget that development of the ability to speak and communicate with people is not easy task. Language development is one of the outstanding achievements in child development. Children irrespective of the environment and culture they may find themselves in, learn language and its proficiency within a shortest period of their life. They become amazingly proficient communicators during the first three years of lives. Within this period, children use many forms of language to communicate such as facial expression, dance, signs, within the first three years of life.

One may ask how come children at age of three are proficient communicators. The answer is not far fetched. Children are active listeners right from their days in the womb; it is in the womb they learned to recognize the speech patterns, tunes and tones of the language used in their home (Chomsky, 1968).

Language theory, learning theory approach, shows that language development in young children is influenced by many factors, among them is, having sensitive adults and older children around them who listen and attend to their expressions, and also use and model appropriate language for them. Children all over the world babble during their first year and the sounds of they make are found in every language of the world.

In general, boys acquire language more slowly than girls (Chomsky, 1968); and as such care should be taken to involve boys more in activities designed to promote early language development and literacy. This paper will therefore consider

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the concept of language, theories of language development, functions of language, the faces of language, factors that affect language development and the educational implications of language.

### **What is Language?**

The term language is medium of communication and takes the form of signs, symbols or words. Lefrancois (1977) stated that language involves the use of “arbitrary sounds that have accepted referents that can be arranged in different meanings”. Lindzey, Hall and Thompson (1978:270) stated that “language is a tacit agreement to use certain external behaviours (speech sounds) as signals for certain inner experiences (meaning)”. Language, according to Nnachi (2007) is a vital technique for communicating feelings, sentiments or thought and through it, individuals transmit ideas and skills. Jersild, Telford and Sawrey (1975) viewed language as a vast repertoire of words that is organized by grammar and syntax. Language is one of the highest forms of behavioural development which is only peculiar to human organism. Nkwocha (2007:169) saw language development “as a systematic improvement in the art of communication”. It involves improvement in the production of accurate sounds and improvement in the use of the grammar and syntax of the language.

Furthermore, language development goes hand in hand with motor development. This is because language is a function of speech and it is centered on the brain functions. The cerebral hemisphere of the brain determines speech and powers other structures and organs of the body to produce the sounds containing words (Nnachi, 2007). The sounds produced become a language when the words are meaningful, can be joined with other words to form a sentence or sentences, governed by rules, organized by grammar and syntax and could be understood and used by a group or members of groups.

Summarily, Nnachi (2007:208) defined language as a cultural property, fashioned for the ability of a group or members of groups which enables the members to have social interaction, knowledge and skill transmissions. Examples of language are Igbo, Hausa, Yoruba, Dutch, and Italian etc.

### **Language and Speech**

Language and speech are very much related. Speech is a co-ordinate sound made with the help of the tongue and controlled by the brain. It is a vocal communication that uses words or oral symbols. Language on the other hand is made through speeches. Every other form of communication takes its root from speech. Nnachi (2007) therefore opined that speech could be convened in writing or any other express language.

Thousands of languages in the world are expressed in speech and are learned by the owners and foreigners. Universally, all human languages have true basic characteristics of expressive power, productivity and displacement (Bootzin, Bower, Crocker and Hall 1991 in Nnachi 2007). The expressive power of the language refers to the ability of the language to communicate any situation such as safety, feeling or idea. It looks into the feelings, internal state of the organism, ideas, thoughts etc. The productivity of language concerns the rules governing the language –grammar. The displacement of language discusses events that are present or absent and makes it possible for human beings to attain civilizations.

### **Theories of Language Development**

Language development has been traced to nature-nurture syndrome. Scholars, Lindzey, Hall and Thompson (1978) and Mcnell (1977) recorded that theories of language development can be broadly categorized into three (a) learning theory approach (environmentalist approach) and (b) innate capacity theory. This some times called the inherent ability (cognitive approach) and (c) an interactions approach.

**(a) The learning theory approach:** The theorists in this group stress that language is learnt through interaction with the environment. These theorists also state that language development follow the principles of operant conditioning. They emphasized that language is learnt through reinforcement of correct utterances and the individual is punishment for the use of wrong ones. Their view is that language is learnt through imitation of models- mothers, family members, members of the community and teachers. Theorists in this group are Skinner (1957); Bijon, (1976), Whitehurst, (1980), and Bullock, (1983).

It must be pointed out that the learning theory approach is with a lot of criticisms. One of such criticisms is that mothers are more likely to reward their children for telling the truth even if the grammar is incorrect than rewarding a child whose grammar is correct but not telling the truth. That is to say, parents often respond to the child's meaning and to the grammar. Additionally, language affords an enormous degree of creative latitude which is not accounted for by learning. This group of theorist sees the child as playing a passive role in the language acquisition process.

**(b) The innate capacity theorists:** According this group, language is innate or inborn. That is to say that a child is born with the ability to speak or communicate. One of the theorists of this school is Chomsky who proposed that human nervous system contains a mental structure that includes an innate concept of human language (Chomsky, 1968). This ability, Chomsky called Language Acquisition Device (LAD). It then follows that a normal human child is in some way, biologically ready or

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predisposed to learn any human language with ease. Language is therefore, an abstract system of rules that is not learned by way of traditional learning principles (Bloom, 2003). It must be noted that as the child matures, the linguistic endowment begins to unfold. The neural system increases in its capacity to acquire more sophisticated words and enhance the more effective use of words (Nnachi, 2007).

To support the fact of innate abilities to learn language, it is clear that humans learn language far more easily and quickly during a certain critical period of biological development (from infancy to puberty). Before puberty, a child can achieve the fluency of a native speaker in any language or even two or more languages simultaneously without any special training. After puberty, it is difficult to learn a first language (Lenneberg, 1967).

It is noteworthy that Chomsky recognizes that both environmental and biological factors influence language development. Chomsky notes that language learning involves learning of rules that enable the speaker to generate new sentences in the way a listener will understand (Nkwocha, 2002).

**(c) An Interactions Approach:** This is a group of theorists that recognizes that language is learned in the context of spoken language and that humans are biologically prepared for learning to speak. The human organism is specifically prepared for learning language but extensive experience with expressed language is also a condition of language acquisition. Unlike learning theory account, where the child is seen as passive, the interactionistic approach emphasizes that the child is an active participant in acquiring language.

### **Functions of Language**

In day to day experiences, the use language is an integral part of human existence. Summarily, the functions of language could be outlined as follows:

1. **Instrumental function:** Language permits the child to satisfy her needs and to express her wishes. This is the “I want” function.
2. **Regulatory function:** Through language, the child is able to control the behaviour of others. This is the “do that” function.
3. **Interpersonal function:** Language can be used for interacting with others in the child’s social world. This is “me and you” function.
4. **Personal function:** A child expresses his/her unique views, feelings and attitudes through languages. It is through language that the child establishes his/her personality and identity.
5. **Heuristic function:** After a child begins to distinguish herself or himself from the environment, the child uses language to explore and understand the environment. This is the question of “tell me why” function.

6. **Imaginative function:** Language permits the child to escape from reality into a universe of her or his own thinking. This is the “let’s pretend or poetic” function of language.
7. **Informative function:** Children can communicate new information. This is “I have got something to tell you” function.
8. Since language is culturally based, it creates and deepens relationship among people of the same or related group as well as others that could understand the group using the particular language. It equally helps to establish other cultural variables.
9. Language also determines the thinking pattern of a group. Such perception had been noted by Smith, (1995), Feldnean (2000) and Nnachi (2007). The originality of a concept in a setting makes the people to think about that concept and its usability or applicability.
10. Language makes the categorizations that humans utilize in the construction of their views about people and events in the world. Communication provokes thinking.

#### **Four Faces of Language**

The study of language can be divided into four stages namely: phonology, semantic, syntax and pragmatics.

##### **(a) Phonology of Languages**

Phonology describes the system of sounds for a language. It is how the basic sound units (phonemes) are put together to form words and how the intonation patterns of phrases and sentences are determined. Phoneme can be defined as the shortest speech unit in which a change in the phoneme produces a change in meaning. For instance, the difference in meaning between ‘bat’ and ‘cat’ is accounted for by the different initial phonemes. Also, “bat” and “bit” differ in their middle phoneme. Phonological rules, like rules at other linguistic levels, are generative. Speakers and listeners know the proper stress and intonation patterns for novel sentences they have never heard before as well as the sound relationships allowable in novel words. The rules of phonology form a system and they are general rules in the sense that they are applicable beyond the cases from which they are derived. The phonological rules are sound rules. Bootiz (1991) in Nnachi (2007) opined that phonemes are identified by their ability to show differences in word meaning. It is important to study phonemes so as to be able to distinguish between two or more similar words, through their different pronunciations e.g. rice, rise pig, big.

Wrong use of intonation can make the child to misunderstand what is being said to him. Stresses should be properly placed to avoid misunderstanding. Therefore, phonological rules constrain the permitted sequence of phonemes, example, ‘port’ is an

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actual sequence, 'plort' is a possible sequence but 'pbor' is an illegal (ungrammatical) sequence in English.

### **(b) Semantic of Language**

This is the study of the meaning of words and sentences. The study of developmental semantic involves two primary issues. Firstly, when and how does the child understand the meaning of different words and sentences? Secondly, how does the child learn to use words correctly to communicate her meaning?

Semantic component of language equally deals with the acquisition of vocabulary and it is the preoccupation of the child in language learning. Learning of abstract concepts is usually more difficult than learning of concrete terms (Nkwocha, 2002). Semantic of language can be analyzed at the level of morphemes and at the level of sentences. Morphology refers to the rules for combining phoneme into morphemes which are the basic units of meaning in language and consist mainly of words. Other morphemes are prefixes and suffixes like "de" or "re" and "s" respectively.

Knowledge of the many aspects of meaning requires not only experience with words themselves but also an understanding of features and relationships in the world. Semantic knowledge continues to increase substantially throughout the school years as the child matures intellectually. With full understanding of semantics, one can differentiate the meanings of words and sentences in a grammar according to the sounds and usage (Nnachi, 2007). For example there are differences in the use of "court" in sentences like; "The court sits today. There are so many spoilt vehicles in the court yard.

### **(c) Syntax**

Syntax describes the structure of a language, the underlying rules that specify the order and the functions of words in a sentence. Syntax specifies how the meanings of individual words in a sentence are to be combined to determine the meaning of the sentence. It refers to the rules for combining words into phrases and sentence. Syntax is first a part of grammar. Language have sentences that are made up of joined words or phrases and if not well combined, the sentence will make no meaning e.g. (I) the dog chased the boy.(II) the chased dog boy. The first sentence is correct but the second is wrong because it has no meaning.

Another important syntactic rule is word order. This is of great significance for understanding language. As stated in the examples above, syntax and semantics are closely interrelated but they are distinct. Sentences have sounds and meanings and syntax refers to the structure which relates the two (Gross, 1993). Language learners

consider the effective ways of combining words so that the hearer would make meaning out of the combinations. The syntax makes it possible for a language to be effective in communicating ideas, feelings, thought and actions (Nnachi, 2007). Each language has specific syntactic rules for expressing grammatical relations such as negation, interrogation, possessing and juxtaposition (Hetherington and Parke, 1996). There are so many underlying vast complexity of syntactic system. The acquisition of the basics of syntactic competence is nearly completed by 4 to 5 years of age unlike semantic. In learning of syntax, children find passive voice more difficult than active voice. Words of their native tongue may also affect their learning of syntax in another language.

#### **(d) Pragmatics**

This is the fourth fact of language. It is defined as rules governing the use of language in context by real speakers and listeners in real situation (Bates, 1976). The manner in which children speak or talk at different occasions have emerged out of the recognition that much of child language, even adults, cannot be understood without the knowledge of the context and setting in which it occurs. Context refers to such things as information about the identity of the speaker's goal and the immediate physical setting. Pragmatics concerns how children learn conversational rules. They take turns while discussing though their conversation may seem unrelated. Pragmatics provides a clear link between language development and communication.

One principle about language is important to remember. Children often understand more than they can produce. Receptive language abilities from the beginning exceed productive language skills. This is true in all ages and for the process of first language acquisition as well as in learning a second language.

#### **Factors That Affect Language Development**

- (1) Listening skill of the child. Children that have good listening skill while the adults speak are better users of the language.
- (2) **Sex difference:** Research shows that in general, boys acquire language more slowly than girls. This means that the girls may stop learning through hands on exploration. Lafrancois (1977) noted equally that there is need to consider very carefully how to involve boys in activities designed to promote early language and literacy.
- (3) Children, who are taught more than one language at infancy, are poorer in language development than those who are taught one language at a time.

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- (4) Twins tend to be more retarded in language development because they are not given individual attention by their nurses like single children.
- (5) Children who are brought up in child care homes suffer material deprivation and this has negative impact on language development.
- (6) The size of the child's family affects his language development. Where there are more siblings, the child can interact with a number of people that will enhance the language development.
- (7) Socio-economic class of the child affects his language development – those families where such facilities like radio, television, newspaper are available develop in language more than those that have not.
- (8) Intelligent children are faster in language development than less intelligent ones.

### **Educational Implications of Language Development**

1. Language acquisition grows from simple to complex and as such, lessons should be planned accordingly.
2. Teaching methodologies that stimulate language development such as dramatization should be used in teaching small children.
3. Words should be pronounced distinctly and sentences said with proper intonation to enhance understanding.
4. Phonemes children find difficult to pronounce such as ch, sh, v,f,z,s, should be taught properly and the outcast between the sounds highlighted.
5. Gestures, drawings and oral expressions can be used for teaching since they can be used to communicate ideas.
6. Learners should be helped to develop listening skills. The language laboratory should always be in use.
7. Vocabulary acquisition lessons and lessons on syntax formation should be made stimulating to make learners develop interest in them since they need to express what they have learned and understand lessons.

### **Conclusion**

Language development in children is one of the wonders that can be seen in children. There are so many theories about how children develop communication ability. This paper has looked into these theories, the structure of language and the factors that affect language development. The paper recommends and believes that there is need for the proper guidance of the child in language development.

### **Recommendations**

In this paper, language development has been x-rayed from its conception, theories, and functions among other things. In view of the foregoing, the following recommendations are made:

1. Since language is a powerful tool for communication, learners should be encouraged to learn more than one language since the study of the other school subjects' hinge on communication ability.
2. Teachers of language should teach with instructional materials like photographs, charts etc.
3. The level of maturity of the learners should be considered in preparing what to teach them.
4. Debating clubs, literary societies and democratic principles where learners are allowed to express their opinion should be encouraged to make for easy language development.
5. The use of correct pronunciation of words helps in language development since imitation is important in learning. Therefore, teachers should always pronounce words correctly.

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