



# Theories About Language Development

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### **Theories about Language Development**

The earliest theory about language development assumed that children acquire language through imitation. While research has shown that children who imitate the actions of those around them during their first year of life are generally those who also learn to talk more quickly, there is also evidence that imitation alone cannot explain how children become talkers. For example, in the English language, young children will say 'We goed to the shops' – they are very cleverly inventing the past tense of 'go' based on the rules they have absorbed.

Skinner, the Behaviourist theorist (see above), suggested that children learn language through reinforcement. In other words, when a parent or carer shows enthusiasm for something a child tries to say, this should encourage the child to repeat the utterance. But again, even though reinforcement may help, this theory cannot account for children's inventions of language.

Some argue that it is not just hearing language around them that is important, it is the kind of language – whether it is used responsively (for example, following a baby's input, such as the baby making a noise or doing something). It is also clear that babies need to hear language to develop this themselves. This point is of great importance in relation to young children with impoverished language experience (see for example Ward 2000). The idea of *motherese* (Snow and Ferguson 1977; Trevarthen 1995) – accentuated, tuneful, accentuated speech to babies and repeating their own language (often extended) back to young children – was posited as a basic human requirement. However, other research (see Bee 1989) indicates that while motherese can be used to explain how aspects of individual children's environments help or hinder them from talking, it does not explain the underlying causes of language acquisition. We can at least suggest that talking in motherese attracts and holds babies' attention and that it allows the infants themselves to take part in enjoyable turn taking exchanges, the beginnings of conversations (see also chapter 5).

Chomsky (1965; 1975) proposed that babies are born with an inbuilt *Language Acquisition Device* (LAD). He suggested that language then simply

emerges as the child matures. Slobin (Ferguson and Slobin 1973; Slobin 1985) continued this line of thought, proposing that just as newborns come into the world 'programmed' to look at interesting, especially moving, objects, so babies are pre-programmed to pay attention to language. One problem with this theory is that children seem to have great proficiency in acquiring whatever language/s they hear around them and during their first year of life they will gradually discard from their repertoire of vocalisations sounds which they do not hear in the speech of those with whom they spend their lives – but of course the pre-programming does not need to be thought of as tied to a specific language. Like Trevarthen and others, Chomsky indicates the centrality of interactions with familiar adults and older children from the earliest days of life. Parents and practitioners need time to enjoy '*proto-conversations*' and as we will see later, research has shown that treating babies as if they understand talk and involving them in conversational exchanges are essential experiences on which later abilities are founded.

Piaget argued that language is an example of symbolic behaviour, and no different from other learning. One of his colleagues, Hermine Sinclair (1971), proposed that a child's ability to nest a set of Russian dolls uses the same cognitive process as a child needs for understanding how sentences are embedded in one another. Nelson (1985) and others, using this cognitive processing explanation, think language is an extension of the child's existing meaning making capacity. This seems to fit with the fact that children will generally begin to engage in pretend play at about the same time as their first words are expressed, indicating that they are using symbols in the form of words and also symbolic pretend objects (for example using a block as a pretend cake).

Following on from Vygotsky's social learning tradition, Bruner (1983) stressed the importance of opportunities for babies and children to interact with, and observe interactions between, others. As we explained above, this idea is supported by research showing that mothers who behave as if their babies and young children understand language right from the start, make eye contact with them and engage in dialogue, responding to their babies' reactions (kicking, waving arms, smiling, etc) are laying the foundations of conversation.

Karmiloff and Karmiloff-Smith (2001) argue that none of these theories about language is, on its own, adequate in explaining language development and learning in the first three years of life, and that we need to take account of each of them for their ability to explain part of the story.

### **Theories about Early Childhood Education and Care**

While our aim in this chapter has been to present outlines of the main influential research and theories about children's development which have been adopted by those working in the field of ECEC in Britain, practitioners