

## Language Acquisition

The question of how we learn a language has always ignited interest across the group of researchers, psycholinguists and even educationists as they design resources and plan lessons.

For the first language (native language), the learning is believed to be subconscious, continuous and immersive. The child starts from understanding various sounds around, reproducing similar sounds and attaching objects to the sounds. The grammar is also learned more through the experience of communicating than through the grammatical rules. Hence, the child often addresses herself as the third person in the initial speech, makes mistakes in gender identification, mispronounces the words. As the exposure to words and languages increases, the child goes on mastering the basic grammar.

The child picks up language from the interactions happening around herself. However, when it comes to learning a second language, learning takes a different approach. The diagram below summarizes the process of language acquisition.



However, how this language acquisition happens in a child itself has invited multiple views. There are some theories that are widely accepted as the researchers continue to explore whether it is a combination of all of these or just one of these that is making it possible.

**There are four major theories about language acquisition:**

**Behaviorism, Nativism, Constructivism and Social interactionism.** The first theory is based on the concept of stimulus- response behaviour and the theories of nativism and constructivism are

based on the way cognition supports language development. The theory of social interaction is based on the principles of socio-psychology and sociolinguistics.

## **Behaviourism**

The behaviourist theory suggests that language is constructed through continuous exposure and positive reinforcement. Initiated by Pavlov through his experiments, the theory was articulated with higher affirmation by **Skinner (1957)**. Skinner argued that languages are acquired through a process of stimulus-response-reward. He shared that the child imitated the parents by creating associations between words and the real-world objects where the object was the stimulus and parents' validation was the reward.

## **Nativism**

**Chomsky (1959)** proposed another theory called- Nativism. He gave the concept of Universal Grammar: an idea of innate, biological grammatical categories, such as a noun category and a verb category that facilitates the entire language development in children and overall language processing in adults. He also suggested that there was a Language Acquisition Device which allowed Universal grammar to work effectively. Chomsky (1965) described the adult speech (from where the child is supposed to acquire language) as degenerate. On his view, the child is exposed to a range of speakers, with different voices and accents encountering performance examples. Hence, the child acquires competence, which allows him to produce grammatical sentences. Chomsky addresses that “possessing a language enables us to produce an infinite number of sentences.

## **Constructivism**

**Piaget** developed a theory called **Constructivism**, which has three different components ascribed to Language learning: Assimilation (introduction to the information), Accommodation (making room for the information by even altering the existing information) and equilibration (mental restructuring of information). According to this theory, a child's concept of the word differs from that of the adult's concept and the child goes through different stages that will end in adult understanding.

## **Social Interactionism**

It is the theory that claims that communicative interactions are necessary for language acquisition. This theory was based on the work of Jerome Bruner about social learning and claims that language is acquired as the result of interactions that help the infant develop language. Furthermore, what this theory stresses is the functional aspect of language. What is more, it discusses that language learning happens due to the process of socialization; hence the child is learning to be part of the community. Bruner argues that it is interactions that provide the infant with language acquisition support structures.

With advanced research techniques such as **FMRI (Functional Magnetic Resonance Imaging)**, the psycholinguists are trying to understand this better. However, it is evident from the research as well as the theories shared that there are two essential aspects to language Acquisition: Innate ability (which comes from neuro-functionalities) and repeated exposure to the language. For creating resources for Language learning, hence, focusing on giving sufficient practice, exposure through sound and script are some of the basic needs that we need to keep in mind. The role of social interactions, dialogue and exposure thus become important for language learning.