

YOUNG CHILDREN BEGINNING TO SPEAK IN A SECOND LANGUAGE

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Annotation: In this article it is informed that children's facility with language may be due to a language instinct (an innate ability for language learning) which fades in adulthood. Children's ultimate attainment is superior to that of adults. Early language learners develop native-like fluency and don't fossilize pronunciation and grammatical errors. The neurological processes involved in language learning work differently in adults and children.

In one important way, second language learning is different from first language learning. Unlike first language learners, young children who start learning a second language have already acquired some mastery of their mother tongue. This accounts for a communicative strategy used by some young language learners when they are immersed in a second language environment. Researchers report that when some children first find themselves surrounded by speakers of a language they don't understand, they make an attempt to go on using the language they already know. Some young children have been reported to go on speaking their first language to care givers and their playmates hoping that this strategy will enable them to communicate.

Sometimes if young children and adults are confronted with situations when they don't have a common language, they resort to a communication strategy known as bilingual discourse. When bilingual discourse is being used, young children initiate an exchange in their home language and adults or other children respond in theirs. Speaking in two different languages with one another is not always ineffectual. For instance, the strategy may work when children play a game which involves manipulation of an object or when young language learners'

intended message is clarified by context. At other times, when the context does not clarify what is being communicated, bilingual discourse does not go far and leaves interlocutors frustrated. Both home language use and bilingual discourse have only been observed during the initial period of young children's exposure to a second language.

Not all children go through the home language use stage and resort to bilingual discourse. Children fairly quickly come to realize that their interlocutors do not understand them, and at this point many second language learners stop speaking altogether. The duration of the silent period varies from child to child. Some children will start speaking after just a few weeks of second language immersion; others take up to several months or even a year before they are comfortable enough attempting first words in a second language. A study describes a Japanese girl who informed a Japanese-speaking interviewer that English was too hard, so she was not going to speak to people who spoke English. She actually followed through with this plan and did not speak any English during the course of the yearlong study.

It should be emphasized that the silent period is by no means unproductive. During this stage of language learning, children become sensitized to the sound system of a second language. As the silent period progresses, children develop fairly evolved comprehension skills; they become proficient at following directions or learn to recognize the names of common objects and actions.

In some instances, the silent period is accompanied by the so-called rejection period, the stage when children grow socially isolated and reluctant to interact with other children or adults. Contrary to popular perception, some young second language learners may feel dismayed, uncomfortable, or frightened by the need to converse in a new language. For instance, a study describes a Japanese child who during his first months in an American nursery school, spent most of his time on a tricycle as far as possible from other children, especially English-speaking children. Every time the observer spoke to the boy in English, "he ignored her, turned away, or ran out of the room."

When children first begin to speak a second language, they produce telegraphic speech which is not unlike telegraphic speech of first language learners. Just as is the case with first language learners, second language learners' telegraphic speech is made of verbs and nouns and lacks grammatical elements, such as endings of auxiliaries. During the emergent stage of language use, children also produce the so-called formulaic utterances, unsegmented chunks of language that children perceive as whole and undivided rather than made out of several words. They use these undivided chunks of language as a single word.

Apparently, young children use the copula "to be" or a pronoun "it" as part of unanalyzed, grammatically unpacked phrases long before they have learned to extract these target language items from speech and to use them in syntactically well-formed utterances. Eventually, children begin to do the grammatical unpacking of formulaic utterances and come to realize that these chunks of language are really made of several words. A few months or more go by before children start using language creatively—that is, produce phrases and sentences they have not heard.

In summary, Children learn everyday words best as a result of incidental exposure. Here is evidence that children learn grammar in natural stages which cannot be affected by instruction. Contrary to popular assumptions, older learners outperform young children during the initial stages of language learning.

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