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First Language Acquisition Case of a Dabawenyo Bisaya Three-Year-Old Child

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ABSTRACT

This research intends to track the first language acquisition descriptions of a three-year-old child speaking the Cebuano (Dabawenyo Bisaya) language in the Philippines. This research used naturalistic observations and interviews to gather data. The descriptive qualitative approach is the methodology employed in this study. Some important characteristics of the child's language development were revealed. The child acquired the language through the principle of language innateness coupled with socio-factors. The exhibition of linguistic and communicative inputs of the child was derived from the representation of environmental sounds and speech intelligibility from the adult speeches. Primarily, the child used modeling and imitation to acquire language inputs used in household-level interactions. Cognitive, affective, competence, and performance factors were demonstrated to be enablers of the first language development of the child. However, there were also factors that inhibited the child from forming comprehensible language inputs such as phonological errors, and incorrect utterances, among others. The child also showed features of comprehension through the framework of sentential levels of adult speech. Clearly, a child's earliest years are greatly influenced by nature and the surroundings. Language learning development is crucial in the earliest years so parents and early childhood educators ought to have crucial roles as vehicles in the formation of speech and comprehension of the children.

INTRODUCTION

Language is a natural gift that people enjoyed and benefit from the most to maintain social significance and keep the bloodline of society-communication. Of its delicate and complicated network of the ideally disturbing system of rules and functions, languages are able for people to create, maintain, and study for further analysis and reference. It is a prestigious effort that linguists devote time to research in understanding, addressing, and repairing questions on the nature of language since the conception of humans. Foundationally, the study began with the child beginning to acquire his/her native language and mystically or amazingly how these children are able to master and acquire the language system.

Apparently, studies show that children have a linguistic period in the time of their development where they activate senses and connections allotted to acquire and master the language native to the family and society.

This period is said that children subconsciously perform such complex tasks as conjoining sentences, asking questions, using appropriate pronouns, negating sentences, forming relative clauses, and inflecting verbs and nouns (Fromkin *et al.*, 2010).

Intriguingly, children in their linguistic period have lapses and imperfections in forming their utterances. Despite these inhibitions to the child, they still manage to respond to questions and interrupt conversations. Such astonishing phenomenon made linguists and the immediate family of these children think about how these young children are able to use the complex structure of language without going to training first such as schooling and formal instruction.

Although not all children have the same issues, they all follow the same core phonological standards to enable difficult sounds. From the ages of three to five, however, the difficulty decreases. As the morphological development advances, the child will be able to produce more than two-word utterances and even a word that reflects a sense of ownership. In this instance, all domains of phonology, morphology, and syntax exhibit interdependent growth.

As per the findings of the study of Friska *et al.* (2021), the child learned her first language mostly through biological means (nature). In addition, the subject was able to speak effectively and responsibly due to an atmosphere that assisted to activate her intrinsic ability to acquire the language. Therefore, both nature and environment play an essential part in the acquisition and development of children's first language.

To illustrate another case in first language acquisition, Rohimajayaa and Hamerb (2020) concluded that physiological and psychological processes have a significant impact on the language development of children. As a result of a 3-year-old child's imperfect articulation, the child's speech was not flawless. Psychologically, the child then encounters something solid or concrete, such as the nature of objects or actions, which will expedite the language acquisition process and render spoken words meaningless. Moreover, due to a bilingual language environment, a 3-year-old child is able to master two languages simultaneously, a phenomenon known as simultaneous bilingualism because both languages are absorbed simultaneously on occasion.

Theories on first language acquisition attempt to explain

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the overwhelming phenomenon of how these children acquire and master the language at the earliest stage of their development. For Chomsky, language is “species-specific” in which individuals given their natural and normal condition are capable of language learning, acquisition, and development (Green & Peil, 2016).

It is further noted that this nativist explanation of first language acquisition is deemed to have had a specialized cognitive term known as LAD (Language Acquisition Device) which everyone has and just needs to be activated in order to acquire the native language. Other linguists primarily voted for reinforcement and conditioning, with reference to interactions and situations of children where they have opportunities to demonstrate language competence, as an intricate explanation as to how children are able to acquire language (Tahriri, 2013 and Islam, 2013).

Theoretical approaches explain the first language acquisition mechanism which can be supported by evidence. One way to reconcile the behaviorist, innate, and sociolinguistic theories is to recognize that each helps to explain a particular component of the language development of children. The acquisition of morphemes and vocabulary may be explicable by behaviorist hypotheses. The most likely theories for the acquisition of complicated grammar are innatist ones. Sociolinguistic techniques may be helpful for comprehending how children relate to form and meaning in language, how they engage in dialogues, and how they acquire the ability to use language effectively.

The prior perspectives on child language development shifted from extreme to extreme, from behaviorism to nativism, before adopting a sociolinguistic approach that represents a reasonable medium ground. These theoretical approaches are landmarks in the study of language learning. They provide a foundation and inspiration for contemporary linguistic study and language instruction. They have had and will continue to have an impact on language teaching and learning theories (Zhao, 2022).

On the other perspectives, the language-as-knowledge perspective distinguishes language acquisition significantly from skill acquisition in general. As a result of viewing the child as a mini-linguist attempting to build an acceptable theory of the language based on the linguistic material she receives, many theorists have assumed that little learning is feasible.

In contrary, Chater and Christiansen (2018) examine a contemporary alternative perspective in child language acquisition. According to the ‘language-as-skill’ approach, the child’s challenge is practical, not theoretical: the children learn to understand and produce the language by engaging in practiced conversational encounters. Thus, language acquisition can be viewed as a sort of skill acquisition, using comparable mechanisms to those involved in learning to ride a bicycle, play a musical instrument, or draw a picture; and the necessity to learn the abstract structure of language is eliminated. This viewpoint deemphasizes biological adaptation as the

primary driver of language evolution in favor of the cultural evolution of linguistic structure.

Of the abovementioned opposing views on how children are able to acquire linguistic inputs of the native language, it boils down to the fact that first language acquisition is a product of two powerful factors— nature (heredity) and nurture (environment). It had been a long fact-finding journey for linguists as to which factor really attributes to language development. Questions as to what extent our language is hardwired to our brain and to what extent interaction develops first language acquisition are still of the hotbed issue psycholinguists continue to establish a prominent answer. The concept of whether parents or the immediate ecosystem of the child teach the language or the unfolding of the genetic program of the children is differentiated by Varshney (2003).

To him, language is a maturationally controlled behavior and child language is rule-governed, at every stage. Moreover, he argued that both factors are important frameworks for first language acquisition. This study confirms and validates the truthfulness of the theories and principles with the identification of problems/ challenges of first language acquisition of a 3-year-old child. Primarily, this study aims to answer the following questions:

1. How does the child acquire his first language?
2. What are the factors that affect his language acquisition?
3. What difficulties the child encounters in language acquisition?

The answers to these questions should add to the corpus of information already available on language learning and acquisition in a particular setting. Language learners at the earliest stage of language development have diverse needs and personalities. By better understanding and being more aware of the children’s needs and interests, parents and early childhood education care support will help the children in assisting and developing their capacities in language learning and acquisition.

MATERIALS AND METHODS

This study used a descriptive qualitative approach to gather the data. Data from qualitative descriptive research are produced that provide a subjective account of the “who,” “what,” and “where” of events or experiences (Kim *et al.*, 2017). This research strategy is most compatible philosophically with constructionism and critical theories that employ interpretive and naturalistic techniques (Lincoln *et al.*, 2017). As anchored in this study, the researcher was interested in comprehending each individual human experience in its own setting in qualitative descriptive research. The subject of the study is a 3-year-old boy whose native language is the Cebuano language (Dabawenyo Bisaya variation) in the Philippines. For the purpose of this study, the subject is pseudo-named “Yogi”. The majority of the data was acquired through observations and interviews. The researcher witnessed the personality and communication styles in

verbal and non-verbal interactions with his parents and siblings.

The information gleaned via observational notes, conversations, and interviews was examined in light of the ideas and tenets of first language learning. The data analysis was grounded in the viability of language learning theories and similar studies. For it to be theoretically sound and true, other studies' results and analyses were incorporated into this study to broaden knowledge of the case understudied.

RESULTS AND DISCUSSION

Based on the observations and interviews conducted with the child and the parents, some important characteristics in his language development were revealed. With reference to the first research question, Yogi acquired the language through innateness. He perceived linguistic units and communicative outputs in various linguistic tasks. It is innateness that made him capable of communicative interaction and understanding since without the brain, (the processing unit of humans) enables Yogi to correspond to some linguistic units. When Yogi's mother is asked about how did her child come up with the bits of linguistic units, she expressed:

Iya-iya lang mana. Siguro madunggan niya sa amo. Pero tanan tao mn jd makasabot og makatu-on ug language.

It is only him. I think he heard some words from us, but I think all people are capable of learning a language. -Translated

It was also observed that Yogi learned new words and sentences that are faulty (this is the fact that the child has no formal language instruction). Some faulty sentences (utterances)

Yogi: Kuba ako... mama...

(Which he intends to mean that he will get his toy asking her mother)

Yogi: Taban... mama abli...

(Which he intends to mean that the door shall be opened)

Yogi: Tubig...ko inom...

(Which he intends to mean to drink water)

Another observation made is that Yogi can already identify different sounds from the environment or from his parents. Such manifestation is exhibited in the scenario where Yogi was called by his father and he responded in gesture and with little utterance:

Father: (Utters the name of the child)

Yogi: (Turns to his father-smiling) Papa

Yogi had already a manifestation of visual-sound representations of some objects in the house. The researcher personally had the drill to the child:

Researcher: TV

Yogi: (points to the TV)

Researcher: Bangko ... Aha man ana (Which is the chair?)

Yogi: (points to the chair in their living room)

Researcher: Unsay pangalan ani? (Baso)

(What is the name of this object? 'Glass')

Yogi: Baso (Glass)

Yogi has also verb-noun distinctions based on his father's account. The child can now discriminate an action from a

name of a person. For example, when Yogi is instructed to "get" a thing, he moves towards the location of the object and have it transmitted to his father rather than having it just pointed by the child.

Father: Dance...

Yogi: (The child shows movements even without rhythm and sounds)

However, Yogi has also difficulty pronouncing phonemes at his age. Some letters were hardly sounded while other letters were acceptably pronounced based on his age. On mere observation, the child has no speech defect apparent in his communicative inputs and outputs. He is also starting to write by drawing lines forming eminent letter structures. Without his intelligibility to discriminate and produce sounds plus his comprehension, it would be impossible for him to acquire the language. Thus, innateness played a crucial role in his early language development.

The nurture or the environment of the child is not underscored but is also given importance in his first language acquisition. Imitation, correction and reinforcement, analogy, and structured inputs have significant roles in the child's first language development. In the case of Yogi, imitation worked out for him to pick up linguistic units from his environment. He used to make use of words that he heard and understand from his family. For instance, during observation, his father uttered a vulgar expression which he then uttered promptly despite his incomprehension of its meaning. As illustrated:

Father: Buang!! (Crazy)

Yogi: Buang (Crazy!) Promptly imitating his father's word.

Despite his imitative ability on the speech sounds he heard from the environment, not all speeches can be imitated by the child due to some structural vagueness or difficulty of sound pattern relationships. Occasionally, he failed to imitate some words and utterances from his parents. Per observation, Yogi tried to imitate the sound of his older sister who is 7 years old:

Sister: This is an apple.

(Reading in her book towards Yogi.)

Yogi: Dis apol (Yogi omits words in the utterance and is unstable in his phonological conditions)

Meniado (2016) identified factors that affect the subject of his study in the acquisition of a first language. Applicably, it was also found in Yogi based on observation. The first factor he considered that affects his first language acquisition is the cognitive factor. Although Yogi had some linguistic units already formed and stored in his repertoire of language development, he is still limited to covering and perfecting the strings of utterances. Chiefly, this is because he is only 3 years old. His delimitation is still under normal conditions due to brain capacity and complexity. Per an interview with his mother, she believed that her child is normally at range in terms of linguistic development. Yogi's words are just fitting for his age and cognitive development.

Meniado also pointed out the affective filter as a significant factor in the acquisition of the first language.

This affective filter hypothesis of Krashen states that when motivation and self-esteem are high and anxiety is low, the affective filter will also be low which means that the rate of language acquisition is faster. In the case of Yogi, on personal observation and confirmation from the parents, he was an overt child showing much of his energy to the people around him. He is loquacious when his parents and older sisters are having conversations with him.

This personality of the child made him equipped for first language development. When the child expresses his language, the more it is good for the person to develop the total speech mechanism and pragmatism because of frequent elicitation. Moreover, another factor mentioned by Meniado is the issue of competence and performance. The linguistic competence of the child is the internalized knowledge system of the target language, and performance is the observable realization of the competence of the child. As in the case of Yogi, his macro-linguistic skills (reading, writing, speaking, and listening) are under linguistic progression.

He cannot still demonstrate strong and accurate competence-performance-related functions of language due to his age. His listening skill is very active as he fetches information on speech sounds and combinations thereof in the production of speech sounds, lexical and minute discourses.

As to reading and writing, Yogi can still hardly recognize speech sounds in sound-letter correspondence. However, on the visual-print association, he can fairly cite and produce sounds and words. On the other note, his speaking rate and fluency are stable given that his age is pre-operationally progressing towards creative acquisition. Words and sounds are not excellently produced but maintain intelligibility to the people around him—family. Additionally, Meniado also mentioned in his paper the communicative competence of the child towards the progression of language acquisition. Communicative competence is the ability of the child to convey a message efficiently using the target language in the appropriate context. Yogi has no full knowledge of the rules of the language though he can construct basic formations with high chances of ambiguities (grammatical competence). He is also unable to comprehend long stretches of utterances and cannot totally feedback to the person he is interacting with (discourse competence).

On the sociolinguistic competence of Yogi, he is still not spontaneous and conscious of his role as a speaker in the conversation often holding back responses or terminating or avoiding conversational frameworks. On contrary, Yogi is lightly positive about his strategic competence as he is able to find modifications in his language to express intently matter he desires others to comprehend. In one of the observations, he developed strategic competence in this conversation:

Yogi: (Pinpoints to his robot toy)

Father: Unsa man? (Which is then?)

Yogi: bot... bot... bot... (Uses deletion on half of the word robot)

Father: Abb... Kining robot? (Abb... This robot?)

Yogi: (nods) O. (Yes)

The study of Hutauruk (2015) revealed significant findings in her case study on children's problems learning their first language aged 1-3 years old. These identified problems, according to her, depend largely on vital factors such as the environment and exposure to prints, or the family itself. Moreover, she emphasized that children acquire the language using the sequential stages of native language acquisition (cooing—babbling—holophrastic—two-word—telegraphic—later multi-word). Her research findings are also experienced or embodied by Yogi during observations and interviews with him and his parents. Such are elaborated below:

Phonological Errors

Removing one or two letters of the word, changing the letters of the word into the other letters. Such is experienced by Yogi as illustrated in the verbatim below:

Sister: Unsa mana? (Pointing to the dog.)

Sister: Dog na sya. Dog. (That is a dog. A dog!)

Yogi: Og.

Incorrect Utterances

Parents always think that the child will more understand if they say the word such the way the child pronounces it. They do not pronounce something genuinely or correctly.

Yogi: big (Pertaining to water)

Papa: Inom ka big? (Will you drink water?)

Yogi: O. Big. (Yes. Water)

Papa: Oh inom na big ob. (You drink now the water).

Imitation

The child is sensitive to imitating the words in his environment such as on Television or from the people around her/him. In an interview with his mother, the child idolizes the cartoon "Pokemon" from the television.

Pikachu: Picca.. Picca...

Yogi: Pika Pika (Imitating the sound from a famous pokemon character Pikachu)

Repetition

This repetition is to indicate his/her request. Yogi is trying to approve his mother to give him some food.

Pikachu: Picca.. Picca...

Yogi: Pika Pika (Imitating the sound from a famous pokemon character Pikachu)

Correction

The child will get frustrated if his/her parents cannot understand what he/she is talking about. To Yogi's parents, the child cries if he was not understood well and when he was teased pretending they do not understand him. Such a circumstance was given example by her mother.

Yogi: (scared) Ma, aw aw aw.. Akkk.. (He means: Mom, the dog. It might bite me.)

Mother: Ha? Aw aw aw? Hababa (Teasing her child on the dog's sound)

Indicating the Question

The child always uses the word “ha?” to indicate the question which is still unclear and wants to repeat it again. In Yogi’s style, most of the time the way he indicates a question is through nonverbal gestures. He will be just looked puzzled.

Mother: *Asa man nimu gbutang imong dulaan ganina?*

(Where did you place your toy a while ago?)

Yogi: *(puzzled)*

Learning by Experience

Naming something based on her/his experiences. From her mother’s account, she continues to expose her child to visuals and names and have him remember things slowly, little by little. These drills could help him improve his vocabulary and language.

Mother: *Unsay tawag ani? (What do you call this?)*

Yogi: *TV*

Mother: *Kini unsa mani? (How about this?)*

Yogi: *Bol. (Ball)*

Laziness

Giving a response or information with a single word to simplify his answer. Such can be rarely seen in Yogi according to his mother. Might be that her son is still unable to use language or express himself clearly or did not fully understand the utterances of his fellow interactants.

Mother: *Unsay pangalan nmu? (What is your name?)*

Yogi: *istian (Christian)*

Mother: *Kinsa papa nimu? (Who is your father?)*

Yogi: *Siya ob. (Him)*

On the other note, the case study of Samosir (2018) revealed conclusions about the first language acquisition level of the understudied 1.8- and 4.2-year-old children learning the Bahasa language of Indonesia. The findings of the study revealed linguistic markedness with a significant difference due to the range of their age gap. The analysis uses frameworks that are linguistic in nature. As such a framework of analysis was also evident in the case of Yogi.

Declarative Sentence which Yogi used to state information. However, given his age, he cannot fully construct perfectly word-ordered.

Mother: *Humana ka kaon lang? (Have you finished eating?)*

Yogi: *Mana. (I’m done.)*

Imperative Sentence was used by Yogi to request his mother for his desire.

Yogi: *Kuha ‘laan. (Get my toy.)*

Mama: *Kini? (This?)*

Negative Sentence was used by Yogi to refute something that is untrue or to warn someone that something is bad or disapproval.

Mama: *Lakaw na mama uy. Biyaan ka. (I will now leave. Will leave you)*

Yogi: *Nono. (Which means “no”)*

Interrogative Sentence was used by Yogi to ask questions to his parents.

Mama: *Lakaw na mama uy. Biyaan ka. (I will now leave. Will leave you)*

Yogi: *Ma? (Referring to his mother.)*

Substitution was evident to Yogi in most cases on the phonological aspect of his language.

Mama: *Inom ka? (Will you drink?)*

Yogi: *Nom ko. (I will drink.)*

Assimilation was observed in Yogi as there are cases he fuses words in small connected speech.

Mama: *Oh pagdula didtoa ob. (Just play there.)*

Yogi: *lako... (Bola nako) (which he means “my ball”)*

Omission was rampant in Yogi’s phonological skills.

Mother: *Ligo na. Pag.shampoo. (Take a bath. Have a shampoo.)*

Yogi: *Ampoo ma. (Omitted “sh” sound)*

CONCLUSIONS

The study of language is one of the complexities the human world could have. With the intricate sound-symbol and visual-print combinations, one cannot really foster the language he or she intends to learn. Despite these, linguists hardly tried to understand the mechanism and instrumentation of language to explain the detriments people are facing. With respect to first language acquisition, the interplay of forces between nature and nurture always goes together to an individual acquiring it. It is a baseless argumentation if one pushes for nature over nurture and vice versa. Language is really innate to each of us, but it is mainly shaped by our environment which greatly steers us in the direction of both acquisition and learning.

The study is only limited to a single case; one 3-year-old child was the subject of this qualitative inquiry. It is recommended to secure samples that are conclusive and would define the tenets of first language acquisition and learning. Besides, the study followed a cross-sectional research dimension. The data-gathering procedure was done at one point in time. Longitudinal studies are recommended to future researchers to track the development of language skills and comprehension.

The data was analyzed through the lens of a single case in this research. With that, the research result is weak and inconclusive. Incorporating multiple cases can make comparisons to whether children exposed to the same environmental literacy acquire the same amount of linguistic inputs, strategies, and methods of speech. Considering the method, naturalistic observations, simple prompts, and interviews were only utilized as data acquisition techniques. Hence, many aspects of child language development were not recorded during the one-shot observatory procedure.

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