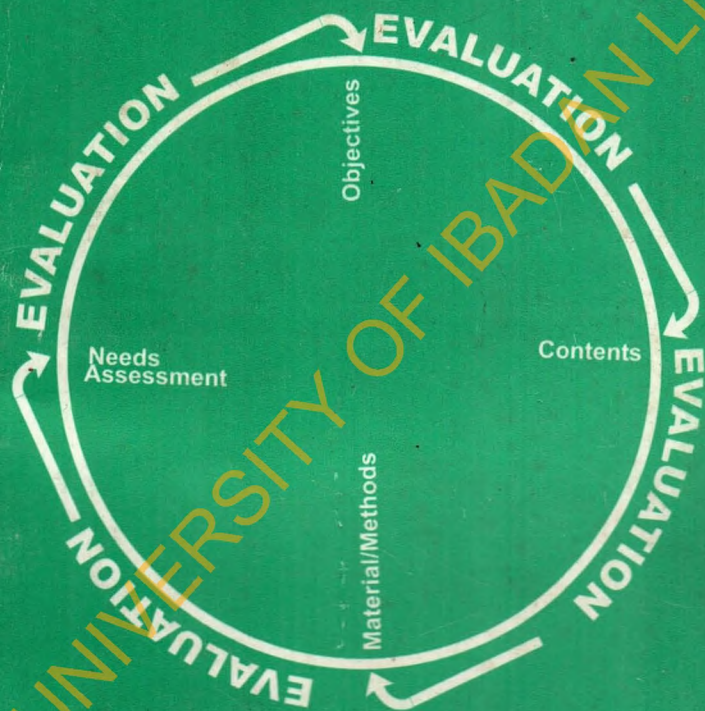


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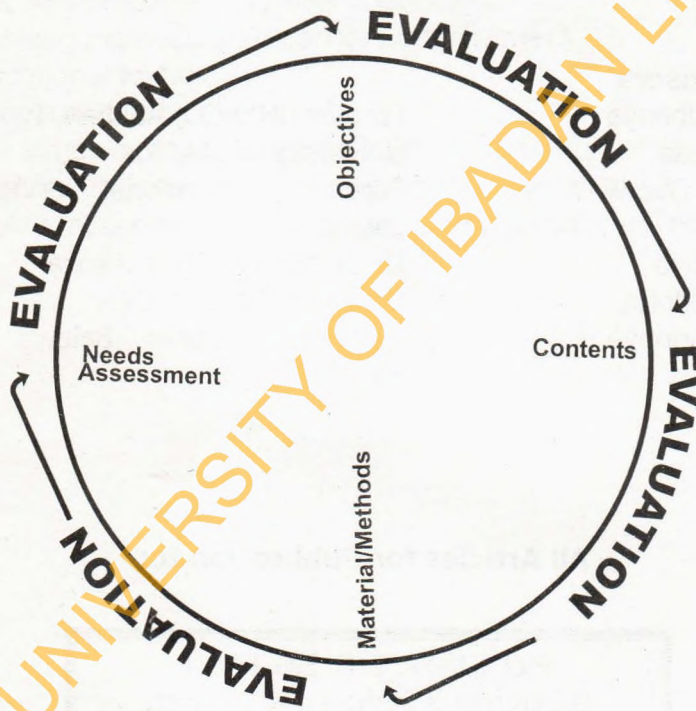
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Analysis Of “Baby Talk” And Its Implications For Language Teaching And Learning

Odiaka, Stella Ifeyinwa

Abstract

“Baby talk” is an integral part of a child’s language acquisition process. From what appears to be a child’s empty babbling, the acquisition process takes the child through other overt stages of pronunciation of syllables, morphemes, words, phrases and sentences all of which are relevant to language pedagogy. With the child totally immersed in a rich literacy environment, coupled with reinforcement by parents and relations, the capabilities exhibited at each learning stage are strengthened to prepare the child for further language learning. This paper is an attempt to explore the richness of the stages of the child’s language acquisition stages with a view to linking it up with language learning thereby equipping the child for readiness in the different language skills. The study aligns the natural acquisition processes of the child with existing learning theories and suggests the whole language approach for home and classroom applications.

Introduction

“Baby talk”, an action that precedes every individual’s articulate speech has hardly attracted the attention of many language educationists, yet it has the potentialities of presenting the language teacher with a lot of insight in relation to language teaching and learning. Much of what the infant internalizes in the process of language acquisition is grasped from its immediate environment. This internalization process also involves a complex cognitive process which manifests overtly as meaningless babbling that metamorphoses into syllables, morphemes, words and then intelligible sentences. All these enable the child to carry out various possible functions as it deems fit.

The Functions of “Baby Talk” as a form of language

The infant child is naturally endowed with the ability to produce various sounds which are certainly not articulate. Initially, these “noises” appear illiterate as they occur amidst smiles and cries. Gradually, it becomes obvious that monosyllables like “da”, “ba”, ‘ta’ and ‘ma’ are produced. This is naturally done in preparation for gradual language learning and literacy.

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A child who is completely immersed in a rich literacy environment (an environment that is replete with stimulating items and responsive adults) will move faster along the continuum as it approximates adult speech.

According to Wray and Medwell (1991) the speech of an infant is merely used for interaction, expression of its emotion as well as communication. This assertion, perhaps is very relevant to a three year old toddler who already has the ability to construct meaningful sentences which adult hearers can comprehend and reinforce. Before this time, the child manages to interact and express its desires using monosyllabic words and "one word sentences". A large portion of 'baby talk' before the age of two years is interactive. Satisfaction comes from enjoying the tutelage and the approval of the adults. Meaning is not the major priority of the child at this stage even though it can observe some relationship between some signifiers and objects signified.

Apart from the interactive use of language, the child expresses sudden outburst of emotion using short sentences that are made up of mono-syllabic words.

Examples are:

"No! go out"

"See it"

"Give me water (babbles a little)

"Mummy, see it

This stage gradually diminishes until the child begins to communicate its desires to its caring adults, though not in perfectly articulated sentences. It is at this stage that an explicit process of language learning becomes noticeable in a child, both at home and at school.

The process of Language Acquisition in Children

It is not possible to present an accurate picture of the stages that children undergo during language acquisition, particularly where a child is actively learning English language as its first language. This is so because infants differ from one another depending on their genetic make up, exposure and home environment. However, language acquisition among toddlers and children is done naturally in an environment dotted with literacy items like unique objects in the home, books, electronic media, pictures, posters and more importantly, adults who act as teachers. Children, in their process of language acquisition, are naturally apprenticed to adults and through trials and errors, reinforcement and approval, the child gains access to correct forms (Hudson, 1982). Where a child is learning its mother tongue within its native community, this consciousness may not be obvious.

Two theories explain how the child acquires its language at this stage (that is, the age of infancy to about 3½ years of age). One of the theories is the Stimulus-Response theory. In Skinner's (1953) theory of operant conditioning, it is stated that operant behaviour – erroneous attempts – are eliminated through the absence of reinforcement; the conditioned response, which is an acceptable response, is sustained through reinforcement. In language learning, the acceptable or conditioned

responses could be the production of correct words and sentences and could take the form of praises from adults.

The second theory which explains a child's process of language acquisition is the cognitive theory which Gestalt's approach typifies. This theory states that learning is done in wholes and not in parts. It argues that learning is said to have taken place when the relationship between the whole and the part is properly understood.

In line with the cognitivists views are the views of Chomsky (1972) which indicate that the child does not learn a language through habit formation. According to him,

'The normal use of language is innovative in the sense that much of what we say in the course of normal language use is entirely new, not a repetition of anything that we have heard before, and not even similar in pattern – in any useful sense of the terms "similar" and patterns to sentences or discourse that we have heard in the past'. P. 12

This assertion shows that the cognitivists debunk the possibilities of language learning through imitation, association or any social contact. Instead, they, especially Chomsky (1972) attribute fluency and competence in language acquisition to an internalization of a system of rules that naturally gives rise to creativity and correct sentence formation. He therefore asserts:

The person who has acquired knowledge of a language has internalized a system of rules that relate sound and meaning in a particular way. The linguist constructing a grammar of a language is in effect proposing a hypothesis concerning this internalized system. P. 26

The cognitivists theories have brought about a general belief that oracy and even reading need not be taught. According to Pidgeon (1984) and Hudson (1982), no explicit instruction is needed by children in their acquisition process since it is natural that they must acquire the language through peers and adults. Both scholars however mentioned that few grammatical corrections are needed, which could be given by parents and adults. The question at this juncture is: are these remedial instructions not teaching instructions? The thrust of this paper therefore is to identify how the stages of language acquisition can be enhanced to create speaking, reading and writing readiness in the child for meaningful language learning in subsequent years.

An objective view of these theorized processes of language learning can give one the indication that traces of both processes already discussed are evident in the child's language acquisition process. There are instances where the child does imitate its parents' speeches and there are instances where the child randomly produces utterances – words, phrases, sentences and anecdotes that are peculiar to it,

revealing some kind of idiosyncratic approach to the use of language. The stages of a child's approximation to adult's speech were investigated by this researcher using her three year old son N.D as a case study. The essence of this is to see where the language educationist can possibly help instruct parents and teachers of children at the preoperational stage (2-7 years) on certain language learning issues.

Stages of Language Learning as Reflected in a Typical Infant

Stage	Period	Language Acquisition Stage Attained
1	0-7 months	Complete babbling with a show of silence or watchfulness when talked to. Listened attentively to mother's sounds
2.	8-9 months	Could pronounce some syllables like /da:/, /ba:/, /ka:/
3.	10-13 months	Could mention some words with missing syllables or wrongly pronounced sounds. E.g. "fly" for "fry", / / for 'torch' / /
4.	14-18 months	Became interested in repeating words and short sentences produced by siblings and parents. E.g. Mummy see cupboard; see pencil; mummy, eat rice, etc.
5.	18 months to 2 years	Began to make sentences which were expressive of his desires; showed an average level of 'conservatism'.
6.	2 years to 3½ years	Complete and meaningful sentences were produced. Anecdotes produced were sometimes disjointed in their meaning. The child's level of 'conservatism' increased a little.

The child whose language acquisition pattern has been described above has English Language as his first language even though Ibo is his parents' mother tongue. His language background is relatively rich since he has enough resources for language learning. However, one can still see some "dents" or inadequacies at this foundational level, which, if not properly handled, could affect the child's readiness for language learning generally.

The Implications of the Analysis of "Baby Talk" for Language Teaching and Learning

Pedagogically, the information derived from observing and assessing the developmental stages of children's speeches are invaluable. Evidently, the child's acquisition sources are its environment and its mental capabilities. It has been established in this write-up that the child benefits from the adults around it. Within the unstructured environment of the home therefore, the child must be encouraged

by parents, siblings and friends so as to speed up its language acquisition process. The child must be talked to, played with and shown various objects that can stimulate language learning. The first indication of a child's I.Q is its ability to use language. These experiences which indirectly build up the child's schemata will create room for logical reasoning.

At the stage of the production of syllables, more mono syllables particularly those that stand for meaningful objects should be mentioned for the listening pleasure of the child. Such syllables could be /ga:/ for 'garden', /ma:/ for 'market', /daed/ for 'daddy' and other similar syllables.

The most important stage is the stage of conservation which is characterized by the child's stubborn adherence to structures already internalized including erroneous ones. The child also learns at a very fast rate at this stage. Here, much effort should be made to initiate strategic language learning that can enhance speaking, reading and writing readiness for subsequent years. An avoidance of such strategic language learning can lead to a kind of extinction. These strategies are achievable by adopting the holistic or whole language learning approach.

The Whole Language Approach

The whole language approach to language acquisition empowers the learner to achieve maximally in language learning through the integration of the four language skills and the use of authentic texts. It is an approach that involves learning from whole to parts rather than starting to learn from parts to whole (Freeman and Freeman 1992). It utilizes discussion, story-telling, reading, dramatization, listening and writing to the maximum benefit of the child.

At the complete sentence formation and conservative stage, a parent or a kindergarten teacher can read a story to the child, ask him to dramatize it, after which he can write something down. Such writings may be mere scribbles or pictures but they prepare the child for reading and writing readiness. After this, errors stubbornly adhered to can be corrected explicitly by the parent or teacher.

Conclusion

The language activities of children including "baby talk" are vital sources from which much can be derived with a view to planning for the speaking, listening, reading and writing readiness of a child. The analysis of children's "baby talk" will enable parents and teachers to identify certain grammatical and phonological errors that are capable of hampering a child's reading readiness and general language learning. It will help strengthen the language awareness of the child.

Through the philosophy of whole language, a wholesome view of language learning can be derived by parents, teachers and language policy makers. By so doing language learning will be enhanced at home and at school. The encouragement and building of "baby talk" through a holistic approach will enable the child to cope with language learning generally. In addition, such encouragement

will enable the child to move smoothly into the primary school level where much talk coupled with team work can enhance learning even in other fields.

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