

A CHILD FIRST STEP'S IN LANGUAGE LEARNING

Συντάχθηκε απο τον/την Άννα Ειρήνη

Παρασκευή, 23 Δεκέμβριος 2011 04:15 - Τελευταία Ενημέρωση Παρασκευή, 23 Δεκέμβριος 2011 04:27



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J. Doug McGlothlin

Children learn new languages very easily, almost too easily. Most adults find foreign languages quite difficult. They must toil and struggle and put in long hours of hard work to make even small gains in their ability in a new language. But a child seems to just pick it up out of thin air.

To a child, it is all play and no work. And, to make it even more frustrating for the adult learner, the results of a child's language play are superior to the results of an adult's language struggle. It does not seem fair.

One commonly held theory to explain this phenomenon is this: God has given young children a magical ability to learn new languages. This ability slowly disappears, and is completely gone by the time an adult begins the task of learning a new language.

This theory is attractive for two reasons. First, it explains the phenomenon. Children learn a new language easily and adults do not because, according to the theory, the magic is limited to childhood. And second, this theory helps adult learners to accept their fate. With the magic gone, they find it a little easier to buckle down to their difficult studies, knowing that now there is no other way for them to learn a new language.

But before we accept this theory in its totality, that is, before we accept the proposition that this magic of childhood completely disappears in an adult, we should observe in detail how a child learns a new language. If the theory is true and all the magic has fled from an adult, we will at least have observed the magic as it functioned in the mind of a child. This, in and of itself, should make a very interesting study. But if some of the magic of childhood remains in the mind of an adult, we might learn some secrets for waking that magic up and using it to make our task of language learning more enjoyable and more productive.

As the father of three children, I have the opportunity to observe in detail the language development of these children. But because the burden of parenthood rests not in observing the intricacies of language development, but rather in changing diapers, getting the food into the mouth before it gets onto the floor, wiping the food off the mouth and off the floor, and on and on, the details of language development often happen without being observed by the parents.

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So my wife and I, in an attempt to more closely observe the development of the spoken vocabulary of our second son, Colin, put a sheet of paper on our refrigerator door. When we would hear him use a new word, we would try to write it down on that sheet of paper, along with its meaning and the date it was first used. We did not attempt to keep track of his listening vocabulary, nor did we put a word on the list unless we heard him say it without any prompting. What follows is that record of his early speaking vocabulary.

From his Birth in September 1985 through April 1987

No words with understandable meaning were detected in his spoken vocabulary during this period. He did his share of babbling, and he was able to understand a number of our simple commands, but we could not understand anything he said.

May 1987

bah (ball)

no: He would say this in response to a question.

no way: The same as no, but he uses it with more feeling. It was picked up from his older brother.

bay ball (baseball): A baseball game. He learned it while watching baseball on TV. Later, it also came to mean the baseball itself.

eye: His first body part.

uh (yes): He would use this in a reply to a question, and always put with it a slight nod of his head.

June 1987

dodeedah (thank you): The origin of this word is a mystery to us. He seemed to feel a need to say something when he received something, so he said this word. Later, he also used it when he gave something to someone else.

mimo (milk): His favorite drink. This probably came from the transposition of the sounds that he heard when we would ask him, "Do you want some MOre MIlk?"

Neal: Neal is his baby brother, who arrived in this world at the end of May.

baby: Another name he learned for his new brother.

kahku (cracker)

nana (banana)

kookoo (coo coo clock)

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July 1987

dabuiya (apple juice): This seemed to be his honest attempt at saying apple juice.

dayday (good night, bye bye): When he would go down for his afternoon nap, we would say to him dayday instead of night night as it was not night. So he learned it as something to say when someone goes to bed. He soon began to use it as bye bye when he was parting from someone.

kah (clock): We let him play with a clock that was normally up on a high shelf, and he soon began to request it using this word.

August 1987

ohwai (water): As it was summer, he loved to play in the water outside. So this word first meant water to play with, but later it also meant water to drink. Origin unknown.

babu (bubble)

bapu (diaper)

tea

September 1987

Mommy: His first love.

hi! (hello)

hahu (water): This meant drinking water. Though he used this word for a month or two, it soon dropped out of his vocabulary, as he used his word ohwai instead. Origin unknown.

eehu (furikake: a Japanese seasoning that is put on rice): One of his favorite foods is rice, with this special seasoning on it. This was first a request for that seasoning, and later he also used this word to mean rice.

Nanny (grandmother): His grandmother had visited in August, and we had called her Granny. This was his way of saying Granny.

appo (apple): He used this word when referring to an apple, but he still used dabuiya when he wanted apple juice.

hi (yes): This is the Japanese word for yes. He learned it from one of his older brother's Japanese friends, and it replaced his previous word, uh.

taytoh (potato chips): Another favorite food, often requested.

Daddy

ka ka ka (trains and train tracks, both toy and real): While playing with his toy train set, his

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brother's Japanese friend would make the sound ka ka ka to represent the bells that ring at a train crossing when a train is approaching. Later he shortened and changed it to gaga and applied it to anything related to trains.

nai nai (night night, good night)

mimi (hammer): Origin unknown.

wow (lion or bear): This came from his attempt at a roar. It is always said with spirit, though he uses it as a name.

Mah (Tom, his older brother): Possibly a reversal of the sounds of the last two letters in Tom.
key

la la la (bicycle): His attempt at imitating the most loved part of his brother's bicycle, the bell. The sound is not exactly la la la. Rather, it is made by moving the tongue from side to side as rapidly as possible. But the word was applied to all bicycles.

October 1987

bih (bib)

dai dah dahp (Please come to the table. It's time to eat.): Though the origin of this word is unknown, it is always said with an intonation that mimics his mother's call to bring the family to the table, "Supper's ready!"

bahpy (potty, children's toilet)

puppy (puppy or dog)

Eeyore: From the character in the Winnie the Pooh books.

boy

doo doo (garbage truck): The garbage truck that picks up the garbage in our neighborhood plays the Japanese melody "Akatombo". This word comes from the first two notes of that melody, and they are always sung, not just spoken.

kahki (clock): This replaced the word kah which he used in July. It is related to the words tick tock, which he seems to get reversed.

moon

Here! (As he offers something to someone): We tried to teach this to him in place of dodeedah. He learned it, but quickly forgot it.

knee

teeth

eeuu (dirty diaper, as it is being changed): His imitation of the sounds his father would make while changing his dirty diaper. This was not so much a name for a dirty diaper, but just something to say while it was being changed.

tar (star)

duwee (tree)

nay nay (bed): Because we would say night night when he went to bed, he would use this version to mean bed. But he would still use nai nai to mean good night as we put him to bed at night.

ear

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bye bye: This began to replace dayday as the word he used when he parted from someone or something.

dirty

moo (cow): Both the sound of a cow and his name for cow.

arrow

Duwee (Julie): This is one of his little friends.

guwai (quiet): When he says this word, he always puts his finger up to his lips, then says it in a loud voice. (I wonder who he learned that from?)

dayday (airplane): This word previously meant bye bye, but it changed in meaning after he learned to say bye bye. When he would see an airplane in the sky, he would always bid it farewell as it flew away using his word dayday. About this time, this word was shorn of its previous meanings, and became his name for an airplane.

wow (vitamin): The children's vitamins that he and his brother take come in circus shapes. As his brother's favorite shape is the lion shape, all vitamins were given the name related to the sound of the lion.

Bye bye Daddy. (or Bye bye Mommy/Mah/Neal/Baby/Duwee): This was his first two word sentence.

Pooh: From Winnie the Pooh.

Owl: From the character in Winnie the Pooh books.

November 1987

bow wow: The sound for the bark of a dog, as he plays like he is one. But when he refers to a dog, he does not use this word. He uses the word puppy.

choo choo (choo choo train): Gaga means trains in general, but the steam locomotive received this special name.

doll

neigh (horse): This refers to both the sound of a horse and the horse itself.

boo ee (birdie, bird)

kinkee (a dirty diaper): This came from his attempt to say the word stinky, the name we use in our home for a dirty diaper.

eye bow (eye brow)

nose

read (Please read this book to me NOW!): Always used as a command.

bee

houf (house)

key ho (keyhole)

ah hoo (flower)

by (bicycle): This replaced his previous word for bicycle, la la la.

zjizji (scissors)

my my my (Please let ME have it or let ME do it): Always said with a feeling of great urgency.

door

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duce (juice)
hello

December 1987

oop (soup)
moo moo (cassette tape): From one of his favorite tapes which contains the sound of a cow. In requesting that tape, he used that sound. That sound then came to refer to any cassette tape.
hand
wall
nail
turtle
haku (Huckle): A character in one of his books.
hay (haystack)
ma (moth)
nail (snail)
toast
rice: A replacement for his word eehu when referring to rice. But eehu has continued as a part of his vocabulary, now with only its original meaning of Japanese seasoning.
ear
honey
paka (pancake)
hot: His first adjective
mimo my (my milk): His first possessive construction.
ro (a dinner roll)
pill
ah choo (a sneeze)
gee oh (cereal)
bahkee (coffee)
amen: What he always adds after we say grace at mealtime.
paper
wah doo (water): A replacement for his word ohwai that slowly gained acceptance.
hah kah (helicopter)
mouf (mouth)
bus
pickle
walk: The command, Take me for a walk outside.
angel
okay
zisch (fish)
zuzes (shoes)
pray: The command, Let's pray so that we can begin eating.

We chose the end of December as the date to end the recording of his vocabulary for three reasons. First, it seemed to be a convenient time. Second, Colin was beginning to play with words and word sounds, repeating and changing what he heard around him in such a way as to make it difficult to know what he was using as a meaningful word, and what he was just using as an interesting sound. And third, the new words were beginning to appear at a rate that was hard to keep track of.

One comment needs to be made about the words in his vocabulary that have no linguistic relationship to their English counterpart. Colin has the proper English word in his listening vocabulary. We have tried to use the correct English words when speaking to him, and he hears them and understands them. But when he speaks, he translates them into his own language. Roughly speaking, the process of language learning can be divided into two parts. The first part of this process deals with how the new language comes to the learner. In other words, it is concerned with the language environment that surrounds the student. The second part deals with how the learner comes to the new language. It is concerned with the different strategies that the student uses in his attempt to increase his language skills. With this division in mind, let us first look at a child's language learning environment, then take a look at the different strategies that he uses to help him learn the new language. Please note that in the following sections, I have presented my observations about Colin's language environment and learning strategies as if they were true of all children. I am assuming that Colin is a normal child, and that normal children are sufficiently alike in their language learning to be able to safely make this generalization. But the reader is warned that this is an assumption, and he is welcome to replace "a child" and "the child" with "this child" where he thinks it is more appropriate.

The Child's Language Environment

Below are ten features of a child's language environment. They have been selected because they are important elements in the language environment of the child, and because they are often missing from the language environment of the adult learner. They deal primarily with the language that the child hears, not the language that he produces.

First, no pressure is brought to bear upon the child as he learns the new language. There are no tests. There are no grades. And there is no standard that the child must meet in order to be approved by his parents. Though the parents might feel pressure to help their child develop his language skills more rapidly, they cannot transfer this pressure to the child as a motivating factor in his language learning. Children just do not respond to this kind of pressure.

Second, there is all the time that the child needs to learn the language. There is no given period of time in which the child must learn or fail. Rather, there is enough time even for the child who takes a rather leisurely pace in his learning.

Third, there is no possibility of escaping into a language that the child already knows. It just cannot happen. Though he has no external pressure to study, there is no bell to let him out of class and no vacation when he can get away from the new language.

These first three points relate a child's motivation to continue learning. Tests, grades and the pressure of time help to keep an adult at his language learning task, and when these motivating factors are removed, progress often comes to a halt. But a child who does not have these

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pressures also has no way of escaping from the new language. He must continue to learn if he is going to ever understand anything.

Fourth, the language a child hears is not sequenced by grammar or vocabulary. No one decides when he is ready to hear a new word or a new construction. Parents do not use a textbook or a word frequency study to help them decide how to speak to their children.

Fifth, there is lots of repetition in the language around him. He does not go from one chapter to the next, always having to deal with lots of new material. Rather because daily life contains lots of repetition, the language a child hears reflects that repetition.

Sixth, both the words and the world around the child are new. Thus, his learning of the new language coincides with his discovery of the world, and the curiosity that he has toward the world becomes a powerful force in his language learning.

These last three points deal with the order or sequence of learning. In a normal foreign language class, the textbook or the teacher decides the sequence of the material. Fortunately for a child, he does not have a textbook to provide this sequence. Instead, his environment provides two ways that his language learning can be naturally ordered. The first comes from the natural repetition in his life, and the second comes from the natural order of his interest in the world. In other words, though a child's language environment might seem too rich, too unstructured and too confusing, the environment does contain within itself the ability to tell the child where to begin and how to proceed.

Seventh, all the language is spoken in the context of the world around him. The new language is not a translation of something he already understands in another language. And the new language is not a secret code that must be translated into another language to reveal its hidden meaning. Rather, the language that he is learning is related directly to the world around him. It is always presented as a living language.

Eighth, the child has lots of opportunities to listen to the new language as it is spoken by native speakers. Here there is considerable variation. Some children have more language around them than others. But even those children who spend relatively less time listening to the new language still get lots more listening opportunities than an adult studying a foreign language from a textbook while living in a culture that does not speak the language that he is studying.

Ninth, the language environment of a child gives him many opportunities to speak the new language and be understood. His parents and older brothers and sisters are native speakers of the language, so that when he speaks, he can immediately get the reinforcement that his words deserve.

And tenth, much of the language he hears is simplified especially for him. When a person is speaking to a young child, he does his best to get across his meaning in language that the child can understand. Because the child can communicate by his actions how much he understands, the speaker can tailor his language to the child's level. This is quite different from listening to a radio or tape, and to a lesser degree, it is different from listening to a person speaking to a group. It is very personal, and the many small problems of communication can be quickly detected and solved before they become real hindrances to learning.

This finishes the list of the main elements of a child's language environment. In this list, one can immediately see how rich a child's language environment really is. He has no pressure, and all the time in the world! He has the language all around him, and his teachers are native speakers who live with him (and love him)! He does not have to study from a textbook in a classroom!

Rather his private tutors use the world around him as his textbook! It is a situation that any adult learner of a foreign language should truly envy. But there is more to the magic of a child's

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language learning ability than his language environment. Let us now look at ten important language learning strategies that a child uses to help him so easily master his native language. The Child's Learning Strategies

First, a child is not in the least interested in language for its own sake. In fact, a young child never focuses his attention upon language at all. He is too interested in his toys, in his playmates, and in the things that he can find that are not to be played with. Language is always of secondary importance, and all of his early language learning is peripheral learning. To a child, the value of language is measured by its ability to help him better enjoy his primary interests. If he breaks all the imaginable rules of grammar and pronunciation, and yet gets the response he wants, he feels as if he has been completely successful. In Colin's case, this explains why he is perfectly happy to use words and constructions that he does not hear from anyone else's lips. He has continued to use the words wow, eehu and gaga precisely because we understand what he means. They function for him, and that is all he cares about.

Second, a child does not let language that he does not understand confuse him. When he hears something he does not understand, it disturbs him about as much as water disturbs a duck's back. This is related to the fact that language is never the center of his attention. So he just does not care about what he cannot understand.

Third, a child enjoys the repetitive events of his life, and uses this enjoyment to help him learn the new language. These repetitive events give the child a sense of security and order, and as he begins to understand the order in the events of his life, he also begins to understand the order in the language that is associated with those events. Conversely, rare events rarely leave much of a mark on a child's language ability. For an illustration of this, one only needs to look at the words that appear on Colin's vocabulary list, and compare it to the words that did not make it.

Fourth, a child uses his primary interests to help him learn the language related to those interests. Whatever captures his attention captures it all. He focuses his attention on that one thing, excluding the rest of the world for that moment in time. And thus, the language associated with his object of interest is brought to the front and center, and all the rest of the language around him is temporarily pushed back into the shadows. This can be illustrated from Colin's speaking vocabulary by looking at one of his earliest words, eye. When I would lie down on the couch, Colin would lie on my chest and use his hands to play with my face. His first point of interest was my eyes. When I would try to redirect his interest in my eyes, interest that he expressed by putting his fingers in my eyes, to some other part of my body, he would have none of it. He wanted to touch my eyes, not my ears or my hands. And because his interest was so strongly focused on my eyes, he learned that word first.

These last three points are closely related. They deal with how a child focuses his attention. He does not simply let the language pour over him and slowly ooze into his mind. Rather, he is very selective about the language he pays attention to. An adult learner tends to become first confused then discouraged when he receives too much new information at one time. He tries to take in all that is presented to him, often with the result that he does not learn any of it well. Because of this, special care must be taken not to present too much at one time to an adult learner of a foreign language. The excess causes the adult learner real problems. But a child never tries to take in all that is around him. He is the one who is in control, and he selects what

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he likes best, ignoring the rest. A child is very picky about the language he listens to, just as he is often very picky about the food he eats. But precisely because he is so effective in shutting out what does not interest him, his mind is not cluttered or divided, and he can bring to bear the full resources of his mental facilities for the purpose of learning what he has selected. This ability to focus on the material at hand while effectively excluding the rest is a very important ingredient in learning.

Fifth, a child directs his attention to things that are easy to understand. He does not think about the world economy or foreign cultures. He thinks about the people around him, and the things around him. And these things can easily be given a name. One of the interesting features of Colin's vocabulary is the lack of verbs, adjectives, adverbs, and prepositions. The words are mostly nouns. Late in the list, some verbs appear (read, walk), and one adjective (hot), but the great majority of his first words were simple nouns that were easy to learn from context.

Sixth, a child possesses a natural desire to call an object by its name, and he uses that natural desire to help him learn the language. He receives real joy from just pointing out something and calling it by name. He never thinks it is stupid or silly to say something that others might consider obvious. For him, it is delightful. When Colin learned the words for star and moon, he would point them out to us at every opportunity. He could not play with them or eat them, but he loved to call them by name.

Seventh, a child uses his natural desire to participate in the life around him to help him learn new language. He wants to do what he sees others doing, and when that includes language, he want to speak it too. Here a child often says things he does not understand at all. He is simply imitating others. He has learned that in a given situation, a word or phrase is always used, so he tries to use it too. In Colin's case, his word dodeedah illustrates this point. We did not try to teach him the word thank you. He was too young to learn it then. But we had taught his older brother how and when to say thank you, and were (and still are) trying to get him to use it more consistently. So Colin, in his attempt to imitate those around him, felt that he should say a word when he received something. At this point in his language development, most of his sounds were still babble, so he merely selected one set of sounds from his babble and elevated it to the position of a word to say after receiving something. His words hi and bye bye were also first learned in this way.

Eighth, a child adds words to his speaking vocabulary more easily if he already knows how to pronounce them. In other words, he can attach a new meaning to a sound sequence that he already knows more easily than he can learn both a new meaning and new sound sequence. For example, Colin's words for nail and snail, which are both pronounced as nail, became a part of his speaking vocabulary at about the same time. They had both been in his listening vocabulary for quite a while, but it was not until he had learned to say the word nail for nail that he was able to point to the picture of a snail in one of his books and give it a name. He used related sounds to help him learn. Another example of this comes from the Colin's word for tree and the name of one of his friends, Julie. Julie and Colin have not spent a lot of time playing together. He has other friends that he has spent more time with. But he learned Julie's name first because the sound of it is related to a word that he already could say, tree. Duwee has become his word for both tree and Julie.

Ninth, a child immediately puts to use the language he is learning, and uses his success in communication to build up his confidence. He does not try to store up his knowledge for use at a later date. He applies it in context as soon as he can. And every time he uses a piece of language successfully, it is reinforced in his mind and his confidence grows. And this confidence

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encourages him to use the new language even more, thus bringing him more success, more reinforcement, and more confidence. This confidence cycle built upon successful usage of the language is difficult to establish and keep going in an adult learner. But a young child is able to get it going and keep it going in the face of a lot of obstacles. All of the learning strategies mentioned are important, but this one, it seems to me, must be one of the most important. A learner without confidence is in trouble from the very beginning, but one who possesses the confidence that comes from success, even when the success is limited, can overcome a host of other learning problems.

And tenth, a child brings tremendous ingenuity to the task of learning a new language. He has no fear of failure. He is not inhibited by what others might think. He just plunges in head first, attacking the problems with all the resources that he has. Just one of the many places where a child's ingenuity is evident is in the associations he makes between objects and words. Many of these associations are obviously wrong (to us), but he does not know they are wrong and he does not care. He sees the world through different eyes, and orders it in different ways. Who can say that our ordering of the world is any more logical than a child's? For a child, why should the word train be any better than the word gaga? After all, gaga more closely represents the sound that you hear when a train is approaching the railroad crossing where you happen to be waiting. And why should the word airplane be any better than the word dayday? When we see an airplane in the sky, it is soon leaving us, so why not call it a dayday (which came to mean good bye by a similar application of ingenuity)? Colin's ability to use language in this way is not at all exceptional, as any parent can testify. But because this ingenuity is common among children, it is no less wonderful, and no less important in helping them to learn their first language.

This concludes the list of learning strategies. It also concludes my observations on how a child begins to learn his first language. To end this report, I will make one comment and ask one question. First the comment: God has certainly endowed the young child with the magic of a rich environment in which to learn his first language and the magic of a wonderful ability to acquire that language from his surroundings. Now the question: Is this magic limited to childhood, or does some of it remain long after childhood has ended, waiting to be used again, this time to help tame a foreign language?

Summary of the Child's Language Environment and Learning Strategies

The Child's Language Environment

There is NO DIRECT PRESSURE to learn (no tests, no grades, etc.).

There is NO TIME LIMIT for learning (no end of the semester).

There is NO WAY OF ESCAPING into a different language (no vacations).

The language is NOT SEQUENCED BY GRAMMAR OR VOCABULARY (no textbook).

There is LOTS OF REPETITION. His life contains repetitions and the language around him reflects it.

Both the LANGUAGE AND THE WORLD ARE NEW (and therefore interesting).

All the language is spoken IN THE CONTEXT OF THE SURROUNDING WORLD.

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THE LANGUAGE IS ALL AROUND. The child has native speakers of the language speaking to him often.

The child has MANY OPPORTUNITIES FOR USING the language to communicate to those around him.

Much of THE LANGUAGE IS SIMPLIFIED to the level of understanding of the child. It is tailor-made for the child.

The Child's Learning Strategies

The child is NOT INTERESTED IN LANGUAGE for its own sake.

The child is NOT DISTURBED by the language he does not understand.

The child ENJOYS THE REPETITIVE events of his life, and uses this enjoyment to help him learn.

The child USES HIS PRIMARY INTERESTS to help him learn.

The child directs his attention to things that are EASY TO UNDERSTAND.

The child possesses a natural desire TO CALL AN OBJECT BY ITS NAME.

The child uses his natural desire TO PARTICIPATE IN THE LIFE AROUND HIM to help him learn new language.

The child adds words to his speaking vocabulary more easily IF HE ALREADY KNOWS HOW TO PRONOUNCE THEM.

The child IMMEDIATELY USES the language, and his SUCCESS IN COMMUNICATION BUILDS CONFIDENCE.

The child brings TREMENDOUS INGENUITY to the task of learning.