The 3rd Internastional Conference on Language and Communication 2011

December 15th - 16th 2011

Interdisciplinary Discourse in Language and Communication

Editors

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My Child's Language Development Inspires My Foreign Language Teaching

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Abstract

In the available literature on human language development child language developmental studies have been undertaken in a monolingualistic or bilingualistic context. The current study was aimed at observing the language acquisition development of an under-one-year-old child named Willy Arafi who was raised within a multilingual family (Javaneses – local dialect, High Javanese, Low Javanese, Indonesian, and English). The research method was longitudinal observational. The data, speech sounds and/or speech products, along with the baby's behavior, were collected through observation and informal interviews with the mother and baby's caretaker. The data were analyzed by examining the products development and, then, comparing the result with the existing theories of human language. The main findings among others were: (1) domination of certain languages used by people close to the baby gave great influence to his language acquisition; and (2) the baby's first languages were oriented simultaneously to two, Javanese and Indonesian, with "nenen", belonging to neither Javanese nor Indonesian, as the first meaningful word uttered. This word was spoken by the mother when asking if the baby was in need of a suck. Implications in relation with the teaching of foreign and second languages can be put forward based on the current research study findings.

***Key words**: acquisition, multilingual family, speech sounds/products*

Human language development has long been a phenomenon worthy of investigation, and, though a great number of studies on it have been conducted, much about it still remains a mystery. Some big questions, among others, are: Is it true a newly-born baby is equipped with a special device for language acquisition? Is it true language acquisition takes place systematically, rather than randomly, even though the language input is far from adequate? (Kusmanto & Pulungan, 2003).
For some reason people near to babies do not pay attention to natural processes happening in them, such as what word is first uttered by the baby, whether the first utterance is produced intentionally or randomly, and how clear its utterance is. So far, researches on language acquisition and language development have been done within monolingualistic and bilingualistic contexts. In multilingualism, people never ask which language most influences the baby's first produced utterances. Some theories have been proposed by experts and researchers to explain the human language development (http://www.ling.udel.edu):

1. Theory of Imitation
A child imitates what he has heard. But, in this example the child does not imitate his parent

Child	: *My teacher holded the baby rabbit and we patted them.*
Parent	: *Did you say that your teacher held the baby rabbit?*
Child	: *Yes.*
Parent	: *What did you say she did?*
Child	: *She holded the baby rabbit and we patted them.*
Parent	: *Did you say she held them tightly?*
Child	: *No, she holded them loosely.*

2. Theory of Reinforcement
A child learns a language through reinforcement from the environment. But in this example, reinforcement fails
Child : *Nobody don't like me.*
Mother: *No, say "Nobody likes me."*
Child : *Nobody don't like me.*
(Dialogue was repeated up to eight times)
Mother: *Now, listen carefully, say "Nobody likes me"*
Child : *Oh, nobody don't like me.*

3. Innate Hypothesis
A newborn human baby is ready for language acquisition. The language acquisition period is very short, starting with his first word around the age of one until most grammatical items are mastered at around year three.

4. Critical Period Hypothesis
Lennerberg (1967) argued that the human's language acquisition occur within a certain period of life, i.e. since birth till puberty (-/+ 12 years). After this period language syntactical and inflectional morphology systems do not take place any longer.

5. Theory of Analogy
Part of the human's language system is learned from what has been heard and this is made as a model in making other sentences.
Beside those five theories above, Nativist Theory, which was first proposed by Noam Chomsky, stating that a newborn human baby was equipped with Language Acquisition Device (LAD) and Universal Grammar, arguing that a baby, with its biological equipment was ready to internalize any language grammars used in its environment –h ence, there being no "by birth" language, has been accepted for a long time.

Stages of Language Acquisition

Language skills include listening, speaking, reading and writing. Listening and reading belong to receptive/perceptive skills, while speaking and writing are of productive skills. Listening skill develops before the others (http://www.ling.udel.edu). Only after approximately the seventh month of life are babies able to produce speech (e.g. ma...ma, da...da).

Some experts believe that human undergoes language acquisition from birth. Some others, however, claim that language acquisition takes place even before birth (http://home.cogeco.ca/~monicafitz). Based on an experimental study using Fetal Heart Rate Test, it was known that during pregnancy a baby is able to respond to sound patterns outside. Another experiment using Infant Sucking Test has confirmed this finding. The experimenter claimed that a two-day-old baby has been able to recognize its mother's voice.

Speech production itself takes place immediately after birth. However, the speech uttered, which is more like noise, is beyond consciousness. It includes cries, coughs, and babbles, each in accordance with the baby's physical conditions. At ages two and six months babies have started to respond to smiles and are able to distinguish tone of anger from that of kidding (http://www.revision-notes.co.uk). At this stage babies also coo. During the second half of the first year of life, they start to control their own voice by babbling. This is how they try and train their own speech sounds,

intonations, and rhythms of language. They repeat utterances heard and move tongue and lips in such a way that the produced sounds become different. They control their speech that sounds like shouts or whispers. Then, they babble towards stimuli, and finally make use of babbles for communicating needs. At this stage babies also start to recognize calls addressed to immediate people such as "Mom" or "Dad".

Some babies have been able to produce utterances before their first birthday, more specifically within the last quarter (Foss & Hakes, 1978: 234). When they are at age one, they produce one-word utterances (http://www.revision-notes.co.uk), that are easier to understand than babbles. Moreover, at this stage of life babies often accompany their utterances with point-outs, gazes, or movements to the direction of referents. The same words are used for multi-purposes – naming, requests, questions, emotional intentions, etc. For example, "Dada" (this might be used to say *Here comes Daddy*!; *This is for Daddy*; *That is where Daddy sits*; *This shoe is Daddy's*.). Due to babies' speech organs development and mental condition, the so-called "holograph" is at times imperfectly produced. For instance, "boo" is intended for "book" or "wee" for "wheel". Interestingly, sometimes a certain utterance is produced to address a seemingly irrelevant referent. For example, "dee" is intended for "car". Therefore, people that are close to babies, in particular the mother, give most influence to the development of baby's language. In relation with this, a researcher of child language acquisition, Du Susan Plessis (http: //www.Audiblox2000.com), suggests parents, especially the mother, talk a great deal to their babies:

> "The mother, who does not talk continually while feeding, bathing and dressing her baby, is laying the foundation for a late talker. The baby learns language in one way only, and that is by hearing language as the parents talk and talk to it. The more a parent can talk to a child, often repeating the same words, the same phrases, the same structures over and over, the sooner the child will learn language."

Between ages 1.5 and two, babies start to acquire two-word utterances. At this stage the utterances produced are still limited to content words, rather than functional ones, e.g. "allgone milk" , "more wet", "byebye boat", "baby sleep", "Mommy sock". At about age two, utterances produced by a child becomes more complicated. From two-word utterances now a child's language comes into the so-called Telegraphic Stage. Example,

"What that?"	"Cathy build house"
"No sit there"	"Daddy like book"

It is possible at this stage words are reversed. For example, "chicken eat" -- "eat chicken".

Between ages three and four the babies' language production increases very rapidly, even though some of the acquired items disappear either permanently or temporally. Asking and answering dominate child's language activities with his environment at this period of life (Palupi, 2006).

The focus of the current research is on language production rather than language perception. The babies' language perception has been examined generally through experimental methods, which are reliable to control variables. Language production within the first year of life is seemingly more interesting to public. In addition, it becomes the foundation for later language development.

Based on the aforementioned theories, the current study has been aimed at answering the following questions: (1) how is the language production of an under-one-year old baby born and raised in a multilingual family? and (2) among the languages used by the baby's family members, which one contributes most influence to its language production?

Methodology

This study is longitudinal observational in nature, observing the development of a child's language production from birth to a certain age (Gleason & Ratner, 1998: 353-354). The baby under investigation was a male named Willy Arafi, born physically normal on 17 October 2006. In this study, the immediate environment (family) where the baby being observed was born and raised used three languages for communication. The languages were used at different intensity. The table below describes the use of the three languages.

Table 1

Language	Speaker	Frequency
Indonesian	mother, father, brother & sister,	occasionally
	1st and 3rd caretakers	most of the time
High Javanese	mother & father	occasionally
Low Javanese	brother & sister,	occasionally
	2nd caretaker	almost all the time
English	Father	rarely, especially with children

The family had three children. Willy Arafi was the third. The father, who was also the observer, exclusively spoke English to the baby. To his wife, or the baby's mother, he spoke Indonesian and only a little Low Javanese. To the baby's elder brother and sister, he spoke Indonesian. The father used Indonesian and High Javanese for communication with each of the caretakers.

The first caretaker of the baby had taken care of him for the first four months. In daily communication she spoke Indonesian to all members of the family. The second caretaker had taken the position over for only a month. Low Javanese was her language of choice. And the third had been taking care of the baby for three months when the observation was ended. This young woman spoke Indonesian almost all the time. Code switching and code mixing had at times taken place within every speech event among adults and children in the immediate environment.

Data on baby's language development were mostly collected through observation and mother's and caretaker's reports. Observation and note-taking had started since the baby was born up to age eight months. The data collected were speech production, utterances, as well as behaviors. Non-verbal behaviors were noted to help interpret the utterances produced by the baby. Note-taking was based on progress instead of frequency. Every single daily progress was reduced into monthly inventory.

Findings and Discussion

1. Months I – III

Within this period the baby produced cries and coughs, depending on its physical condition. Of the two, cries were more frequently produced, i.e. when being wet or urinating, needing a suck, or feeling sleepy. Hence, the information was still relatively the same as that of the existing theory. The baby was lain down on a bed most of the time. Once in a while, the mother or caretaker approached him for body wash, cloth change or a suck. The adults and siblings made no communication except for few facial expressions (such as smiles) and verbal ones (esp. words of praise). The baby did not seem to show responses.

2. Months IV–V

Up to this far, the baby had started to coo, i.e. produced whisper-like noise. It was obvious that the noise was produced beyond the mental control of the baby. This could be seen from his blank stare when producing the noise.

3. Months VI –VII

It was about this period that language development was quite dramatic. The utterances produced belonged to babble. Babble, which contained mostly lengthened vowels (such as "aaaa", "eeee" pronounced /ɛ/ as found in the Indonesian word "*nenek*" or English word "pet") or diphthongs that fluctuated in intensity, indicating that the production was under the baby's control. The presence of control was also confirmed by the fact that babbling paused when there was noise or movement nearby. However, up to this period coos were still frequently heard.

4. Month VIII

Several consonant sounds had been clearly heard at this period, such as /d/, /b/, /w/, /h/, /k/, /n/. A few of them, even, had been produced with variety of distribution. The majority of utterances constitute combination of vowel and consonant sounds, monosyllables such as "*heh*" /hɛh/, two syllables such as "*hauh*", "*dada*", "*maem*" /maəm/, and three syllables such as "*ibuwe*", some of which were uttered clearly enough, some were with babbling style, and still some others were with cooing style. Some were uttered smoothly, while others were not fluently uttered. Utterances of combination are, for example, "a...da...da" and longer "yaya... yayai... iya...iya...iya".

Even though they seemed random, as can be seen from manner of uttering (cooing and/or babbling), articulation, intensity, and non-verbal behaviors in times of production, either the smooth utterances or influent ones described above constituted foundation for later meaningful utterances. A good example for the case is as follows. On 1 June 2007, when Willy was just 7.5 months, he uttered "*adek*" [pause] and, then, "*nenen*" /nɛnɛn/ clearly enough. At that moment the baby was crying, being fed, and in the baby-walker. Based on the note, previously, on the same day, the baby uttered "*nenen*" (while crying over and stopped as soon as breast-fed) and, later, "*ade...ade*". So, the utterance "*adek...nenen*" at that moment might have meant "Mom, **I** (*adek*) am **thirsty** (*nenen*)" or the like. On the following days, in addition to new and the same old utterances, the baby still uttered "*nenen*" and its variation. At first, the utterance "*nenen*" was uttered while crawling towards the mother. Later, "*nenen...nen*" was produced while crying over. Since then, in spite of irregularity, the frequency of its use tended to rise.

Though at later moments the baby had been introduced to baby food, he apparently uttered for the same purpose – when feeling like thirsty. This was supported by the fact that he stopped crying over (even looked cheerful?) when seeing the milk bottle being handed to him or the mother preparing the breast for a suck. However, once, the utterance was produced not in exactly the same situation. The baby seemed to need someone to be near.

The utterance "*nenen*" itself does not belong to vocabulary of any languages used in the family. The "word" had been used by the mother when trying to ask the baby whether he needed to suck. Can the "words" uttered by the baby be categorized into his speech vocabulary? If the answer is yes, which language did the vocabulary belong to?

Though the utterances produced such as "*ibuwe*", "*ada*", "*dada*", "*emoh*" /əmoh/, "*buwah*", "*titah*", "*wawah*", "*mamah*", "*papah*" and "*ayah*" were all part of the languages used in the multilingual setting where the baby lived, it was hard to say that up to this point they had become the baby's vocabulary, as it was quite possible that they had been uttered randomly or just in response to his environment without understanding the meaning. For example, the utterance "*dedek*" once was spoken and continued by repeating after the mother. Those early utterances were partly Javanese words and partly Indonesian ones. This fact is easy to explain, i.e. dominant use of the two languages over English in the baby's life setting.

Conclusion

Some conclusions can be drawn from the current research data. The conclusions that are directly related to the research questions were as follows:

In general, results of the observation have still been consistent with what exists in the literature on child's language acquisition. Just as any other babies, Willy at first produced cries, coos, and coughs, depending upon his physical condition. Later, babble was also produced. Babble started with monosyllabic utterances constructed with vowel sounds, diphthongs or glides, and then a combination of consonant-vowel sounds. By the end of the observational period, the baby under investigation had produced word-level utterances. The first word to be used for communicating intension was /nɛnɛn/. In its context, this word referred to time for a suck of breast-feeding, or need for closer attention or care. Under one year, though the baby had produced word-level utterances, the dominant use of Javanese and Indonesian by people present in the baby's life showed its significant effect on his language acquisition.

Other important conclusions:

In language acquisition, it is quite possible that two or more first languages are simultaneously acquired. The following has not been confirmed in any other preceding researches. Human child's language development is a continuum instead of discrete. So far, this information has been vague. People may perceive that language acquisition advances discretely by age. In the literature on child's language acquisition, it is said that cooing occurs when a baby is at the age of x, babbling at the age of y, and the first word at the age of z. With this information it seems as if the progress took place fully one after another. In this current research it was found that when Willy was 7.5 months, when the first meaningful word was uttered, coos remained present (though in reduced frequency).

Suggestions

Based on the current research findings, the following can be put forward:

In language teaching, especially of foreign/second language, at early levels the learners with their weaknesses badly need guidance and help. Also, errors in language learning should be seen as something natural. This research has shown that domination of certain languages used by people close to the baby gave great influence to his language acquisition. It implies that in second/foreign language learning, use of the target language should be given emphasis. In Indonesia, most teachers of EFL use the source language in the classrooms. The writer, however, is not in favor of this common stand.

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