INFLUENCE OF ENVIRONMENT ON LANGUAGE ACQUISITION AND LANGUAGE LEARNING ON NIGERIAN BASIC SCHOOL PUPILS

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Abstract

Language is a symbol which organizes the word permanently in the human brain. Accordingly, the way an individual uses language is largely determined by his/her linguistic environment. Thus, language studies centres on the nature of human behaviour as a result of the communicative role language plays at every level of social interaction within a speech community. Language acquisition is therefore the basis of discussion in this paper. The paper is particularly concerned with how the child's immediate environment (home and school) affects the process of language acquisition and language learning. The paper posits that environment affects language acquisition and language learning of pupils in Nigerian basic schools especially due to differences in number of learners versus teacher, poor sitting arrangement as well as insufficient instructional materials and game facilities. However, learners with poor ability to learn in an overpopulated class can influence fast learners. The paper recommends that average students/teacher proportion, independent sitting arrangement, adequate teaching aids and play gadgets, and the use of English as medium of communication at home and in the school have positive impact on the child's language learning.

Key words: language, language acquisition, language learning, environment, basic school children

Introduction

Words are built into language; they are the basic building blocks in the process of language acquisition. Young children gradually learn to use words to describe what they see, hear, feel and think as they make mental, emotional and behavioural leaps in life. Children utter their first recognisable word around the age of one. Even before the child utters the first word, a long process of growth and language development has already started. These include biological growth, necessary for the neuromuscular coordination of the vocal organs; social growth, necessary to use language as a tool of social

interaction, psychological growth, necessary for the child to organize and adapt to the environment, and linguistic growth necessary to master the sounds and their associated meanings in language (Wesley, 2003).

In this study, we shall discuss the language acquisition and language learning in Nigerian basic schools. This will avail us the opportunity to assess the current state of child development in Nigeria vis-à-vis the government's policy on education.

Language Acquisition and Learning

Linguists made an important distinction between language acquisition and language learning. Children acquire language through subconscious process during which they are unaware of grammatical rules. Therefore, language acquisition is a process by which human beings learn to understand, produce and use language intuitively with less attention to grammatical rules. It is a natural process that begins at a young age involving learning words and rules. It is partly innate and partly learned through interaction with people in the environment, particularly in children as they interact with other people and the environment. On the other hand, Language learning is an active process of absorbing target language's sound system and structure. It is a conscious, formal process of mastering a target language typically in a classroom where teaching aids such as the chalkboard, computers, textbooks, charts, language laboratory, compact disks, projectors, television sets and the like are used.

The only way children learn language is by hearing as their parents talk with or to them. The more a parent speaks to a child, often repeating the same words, the same phrases, and the same structures over and over, the faster the child learns language. Acquiring a first language is something every child does naturally and successfully, in a matter of a few years and without the need for formal lessons. Almost all children learn the rules of their language at an early age through use and at a period of time without formal instruction. Thus one source for learning must be genetic (Foppoli, 2006).

Children's need to communicate paves way for language acquisition. Experts suggest that there is an innate capacity in every human being to acquire language. By the age of five, children can express ideas clearly and almost perfectly from the point of view of language and grammar. Children utterances express an amazing command of intricate rules and patterns of language. This implies that it is through exposure to the language and meaningful communication within the environment that a first language is acquired, without the need of systematic studies of any kind (Chasse, 2005). Children learn the specific variety of language or dialect that the people around them speak hence, the environment is a significant factor.

The Communicative Art of Children

Communication is the means of sending and receiving information; it is a process of sharing ideas, information, and messages with others in a particular time and at a specific place. Communication can be verbal: speaking and writing

or non -verbal such as facial expressions, body language, or gestures (Lievrouw. 2006). Children, from infancy learn to communicate with the people around them and continue the process as they grow. Immediately after birth, an infant begins to vocalize mainly of reflexive crying to express feelings as a process of communication (Chasse, 2005). At this point, it is imperative to continue speaking with the baby, responding to her communication, and reacting to her cries leading her to speak. These interactions foster behaviours that contribute to their emerging identities (King and Park, 2003).

Before speaking words, babies practise the sounds, intonations and rhythms of language (Fitzpatrick, 2002). Through interactions with other members of the speech community, babies learn language early and become linguistically and culturally competent members of their community. Much of this lies on the way caregivers react and respond to the communication attempts of the baby. By around 14 to 20 months of age, a child usually begins with simple words they have often heard, such as "mama" or "dada." These words eventually turn into two-word phrases, which is the next step on the journey of speech. When a child is able to link two words together, it shows an understanding of both words and content. Language socialization research provides important insight into young children's linguistic and cultural development, which helps us understand the relationships between the cultural context and the use of language with and around children (King and Park, 2003).

The Home and the School as Determinants of Language Acquisition

Socialization is the activity of mixing socially with others and behaving in an acceptable way in the society. It is the process through which children acquire the behaviour, skills, motives, values, beliefs and standards that are Characteristic, appropriate, and desirable in their culture" (Newcombe, 1996). Children learn social skills in two distinct relationships which are vertical relationship and horizontal relationships. Vertical relationship entails an attachment to someone who has greater knowledge or power, such as a parent, teacher or an older sibling. Such relationships are usually complementary rather than reciprocal. On the other hand, Horizontal relationships are reciprocal as the individual involved have equal social power (Hartup, 1989). Vertical relationships provide protection and security to the child while horizontal relationships ensure acquisition of social skills that can only be learnt in association with equal cooperation, competition and intimacy (Bee, 1999).

The Home

Early language development does not begin when a child starts school, but, language development must begin at home. Children are born with curiosity to talk and communicate with people around them, especially their parents. The first year of life is critically important for language development, even though many babies do not say any words during this period. The home environment is where children have their initial exposure to speech and many other

activities that are the foundations of literacy. Various factors in their environment contribute to their language development processes. Child language development happens best in a language-rich environment where parents and caregivers talk to children frequently. A language-rich environment is a setting in which the child is surrounded by talk and has plenty of opportunities to communicate with others. Toddlers whose parents frequently talk with them develop better expressive and receptive language skills than children whose parents talk less with them and use limited vocabulary (Kurtz, 2008). A safe and comfortable environment is crucial to the child's language development. Warm and caring relationships at home promote a healthy environment for learning. Research has shown that the language environment of children greatly influences their individual differences in language acquisition (Williams, 2002).

The family environment and experiences are undeniably central influences shaping the child's learning and language development, emotional and social development, competence and happiness (Davidson, 2007). Family relationships also shape the personality of children especially when they spend a good portion of their time with parents and siblings. However, when the child becomes physically, linguistically and cognitively more independent, the need to instruct and control becomes more central aspects of the parents' tasks (Bee 1999).

The Concept of Basic School

Early childhood education is considered by many societies and individuals to be beneficial to young children for their educational development from school-entry age. Modern societies show serious concern for the education of their young ones for obvious reasons. It is common practice in most societies to make provision for early childhood education programmes of various sorts mainly to prepare them for education in primary schools. Basic school education is generally the educational group experience for children in basic school (lower and middle).

It usually refers to the education of boys and girls from ages five or six, depending on the admission requirements of schools in the area. Many educationists stress that the basic school age is a sensitive period which necessitates care and attention. At this period, in addition to mastering language, young children have also intellectualized the essential properties of the world around them. For instance, they have the basic grasp of colour, shape, form, weight and height; and have also acquired the fundamental notions of time, space and capacity (Lindberg, 2006).

The growing literature on basic education suggests positive outcomes in children's physical, cognitive and language development. Many educators have found that children who have been enrolled in basic school develop positive self-concepts and basic understanding and skills that make them better. Children's readiness to learn is highly predictive of better academic performance in future. Consequently, children who are enrolled in basic

schools are found to be significantly advanced academically and in other fundamental key areas of development (language and literacy, creativity, music and movement, initiative and social skills. (Phillips & Dawson, 2005 and Okunola, 2004). Children in basic school have the ability to work better with others (both their peers and teachers) and are also very eager to complete tasks and assignments.

The School

Sociologists generally posit three social classes as upper class, middle class and working or lower class. According to Karl Marx, a social class is a group of people who share a similar income and living situation. Goldthorpe categorises people's occupation in terms of their sources and levels of income, their degree of economic security and chances of advancement and their location within the system of authority. Therefore, school can be classified into three (3) groups, perhaps based on the social status of the parents: the upper class schools, the middle class schools, the lower class schools. This classification became necessary as the difference in the schools was quite obvious and it also accounts for the pace in the language acquisition processes of the young children as well as their language learning patterns.

Therefore, an understanding of what is obtainable in these locations and classes is required. The rural, urban classes of urban set up is easily comprehensible. For that reason, the discussions that follow would centre on the classes of schools. The upper class schools are attended by children of highly placed members of the society such as government officials to Chief Executive Officers (CEOs), managers of different companies, organizations, banks and high ranking business men and women. The environment of the school depicts such affluence as the educational and play facilities used in such schools are of high quality and numerous. The school fees being paid are high (exorbitant) and can only be afforded by such people as aforementioned. In most cases, only professionally trained teachers are employed to teach. This class of schools is located mostly in cities. Children attending these schools have appropriate learning conditions and conducive learning environments. English is the only language of instruction except in a situation whereby another foreign language such as French or any of the Nigerian languages is the subject being taught. As such, learning and acquisition of the English language runs smoothly among basic class pupils attending such schools.

The middle class schools are attended by pupils whose parents are successful in their respective fields of study and desire a good educational environment for their children. These include lecturers, medical practitioners, engineers, legal practitioners, civil servants and business tycoons. Their fees are also reasonable and affordable and the school environment is structured for effective learning, with relatively adequate educational materials and play gadgets readily put in place for the children. The major difference between

the upper class and middle das schools is that the pupils of the upper class school have better up-to-date modern and technologically inclined facilities and equipment for teaching and learning. However, the difference does not in any way affect or alter the language acquisition and language learning processes of the middle class schools. These middle class schools are mostly located in towns and cities.

The lower class schools, usually situated in villages (rural areas) are structured and purposed to cater for the educational needs of the children in these communities. Usually their parents cannot afford high fees charged in the city schools coupled with difficulties the distance between these locations pose. The school environment is usually set up or established to suit the community hence, uncompleted buildings or open spaces are used for classrooms. Teaching aids and play facilities are uncommon and the language of instruction is a combination of English and a native language (of the immediate environment), as the teacher first teaches in English language and translates into native language for easy understanding and comprehension. Consequently, the utterances of basic school children are laden with instances of the Mother Tongue interference thereby hampering the language acquisition and language processes of the English language.

Class-size

Class-size is simply an educational tool that can be used to describe the average number of students per class in a school, in order to impact and measure their academic performance. The concept of class-size has been given series of definitions in different contexts by educationists. Class-size as the number of students per teacher in a class (Hoff 2017). Class size is a tool that can be used to measure educational system (Kennedy 2019). In relation to class-size, there are approved norms of class-size, 40 students per class for the grade 1 to 8 (Stepaniuk 2019). This is in line with the National Policy on Education under section 5 subsections 27 which states that the ratio of teacher and students in the class for secondary school should be 1:40 meaning that as far as Nigeria is concerned, the approved number of students in a class should be 40 students per teacher. Pupils in moderate class population learn language faster as they interact with classmates and with the teacher who answers promptly pupils' questions and provide adequate attention.

Conclusion

The environmental conditions of the school had effects on the rate of language acquisition process and language learning patterns of children. For example, children in schools with adequate play facilities exhibited such traits like sharpness, team spirit, composure in class and other school activities, and they display higher intelligent quotient. On the contrary, children in schools with few or no play facilities tend to be restless in class, and this is inclined to affect their vocabulary development patterns.

The sitting arrangement in class is also a feature of interest in the language acquisition process and vocabulary development patterns of the children under study. Schools with individual chairs and

tables for their pupils showed a relative amount of independence on the part of the pupils in basic schools. These children were usually able to handle tasks on their own without much supervision from their teachers. On the other hand, pupils in schools using joined tables and chairs displayed high dependence tendencies on their sitting mates as well as on their class teacher. However, there was better team spirit among such pupils in basic schools than those with separate tables and chairs.

The availability and adequacy of teaching aids and materials was also a predominant factor affecting the rate of the language acquisition process and vocabulary development patterns of the children under study. Schools using appropriate and adequate teaching aids produced brighter and more intelligent pupils who have a wider world view and were able to attach properly the sense of a word to its referent better than their other mates. On the other side of the continuum, young children attending schools with poor or no teaching aids encountered difficulties in attaching the sense of a word to its referent. This affirms that teaching aids and materials help to expedite the vocabulary development process of children because they tend to easily remember what they see more than what they hear.

The language of instruction in any school also contributes significantly to the language acquisition process and vocabulary development patterns of its pupils. Consequently, the study showed that children attending schools where a combination of English and Yoruba languages are engaged in the teaching process revealed incidences of MT interference. This practice was shown to hamper the vocabulary development process of the child. Pupils in schools where English language is strictly the language of instruction were however, more fluent in their use of the English language. This inevitably promoted their vocabulary development process.

The teacher-pupil ratio is another important feature determining the language acquisition process and language learning patterns of pupils in basic schools. Children in schools with both a class teacher and an assistant teacher were noted to perform better than those in schools with only a class teacher or where the classes were over-populated. This has been attributed to the fact that children in schools with an additional teacher in their classrooms are given better attention than children attending schools with only one teacher per class. Consequently, the vocabulary development processes of children in the former category were quicker.

This paper posited that children who came from educated backgrounds (that is, belonging to the upper and middle classes) experienced faster growth in their vocabulary patterns. Invariably, their speech patterns were more consistent with adult forms than children whose mothers are uneducated (that is, belonging to the lower class). Also, children with mothers who are educated were better able to care for themselves. Additionally, children with mothers who are better involved in their educational and social development fair better than their mates with regard to the language development processes. The extent to which English language is spoken at home

was also found to be a contributing factor that enhances effective vocabulary development in children. Consequently, the home background of the child affected the rate of the language acquisition and the language learning process.

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