

# Chomsky's Language Development Theories: Rescuing Parents out of Dilemma

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## Abstract

Being a language teacher to foreign language learners in China for 11 years, the author has developed thorough understanding of many language learning and teaching issues in China. Casting deep insights into the fundamental language learning theories developed by Chomsky, the author provides suggestions to parents, not only in China, but parents of diverse language and culture backgrounds, about how to handle children's language development issues based on the inspirations from these theories.

**Keywords:** Language acquisition; Language development; Foreign language learning and teaching; Bilingual children

## 1. Introduction

Being a miscellaneous scholar, Noam Chomsky is predominantly known by people for his linguistic theories and the views of children's language development. Chomsky's linguistic theory has changed the traditional way of studying language and he is generally considered the founder of modern linguistics. Although Chomsky's linguistic theories have never been free of controversies, they are still considered useful by many linguists (Crain, 2010). Many people used to believe what behaviorism and empiricism say about language acquisition. Chomsky fiercely challenged such beliefs by developing his belief of language being innate to humans. His theoretical contributions also cleared the mists before foreign and second language learners and teachers on their way to speed up language learning. Actually, Chomsky has identified many facts that have been neglected by numerous linguists and psychologists. In this paper, the author identifies several problems in children's language acquisition and foreign language teaching in China. With the application of Chomsky's theories of language development, the misunderstanding will be straightened and feasible solutions will be provided to solve the problems. Hopefully, this paper will provide newer insights into some of Chomsky's language theories and help to solve some actual problems in children's language acquisition and language development.

## 2. Kindergarten Children: Pushed Too Hard to Acquire Languages

Much progress has been in language teaching and research in recent years in China but there still exist problems of various kinds that affect or even hinder young children's language acquisition. Most Chinese parents wish their children become dragons and phoenixes (outstanding and successful) when they grow up. Some of them try to realize such goals by

cramming their children's schedule with lots of activities. Many of them take their children to various talent-developing classes, such as music, arts and sports. Children are often busily rushed to and from different classes and made to practice these skills in their "spare" time, regardless of their free will or interest. Parents actually leave very limited time and chance for children to develop their language skills. There are also some parents who believe that kindergarten and schools are the right place for children to receive authentic language education while home is not. So they solely count on the teachers in kindergarten for their children's language development. Unfortunately, not all kindergarten teachers have the professional background of language teaching and many of them do not have an integral understanding of language teaching. As a result, children's normal language development is very likely to be delayed or deviated from the right path. Some other parents go to the other extreme by putting too much effort into developing their children's language abilities. Since their children just start to pronounce and remember words, these parents try to make their children recite poems or rhymes in Chinese and some parents try to let their children recite words in English. Such rote learning, which is detached from using the language in life, tends to wear off children's interest in learning the language, either native or a second one.

Then how should we teach young children to learn a language? Or rather, how do we, as humans, come by this knowledge of language; how do we learn our native language? According to Chomsky (1986), one of the fundamental aspects of human language is its creative nature. We can create a limitless amount of sentences that have never been produced in the world before and we produce them in the correct way. Chomsky says the linguistic accomplishments of the ordinary child are too great to be explained in terms of any kind of input from the environment. Children hear only a limited body of speech, much of which is poorly formed, yet they rapidly and uniformly develop an intricate system of rules for creating an unlimited number of sentences. Their knowledge extends far beyond their experience. Chomsky argues that something specifically about human language must be innate—that is, available to us by virtue of being human, specified somehow in our genetic makeup. Experience of one's culture, language, etc. does not fill a blank slate, but instead interacts with the innate properties to form "competence" in these different systems of knowledge. Therefore, those Chinese parents with high expectations of their young children don't need to push their children too hard by overwhelming them with many training classes or rote practices for language skills. On one hand, they should believe that the ability to acquire a language is innate with their children and it is not something they can inject into the children with later efforts. On the other hand, experience of life and culture of the language to acquire is as important as the innate ability for language development. It is the experience of life and culture that interacts with or sparks the innate properties of language acquisition so that children would "naturally" or "automatically" pick up the language.

### **3. "Dumb English": A Result of Over-Emphasis on Grammar**

Another problem in language teaching, especially in foreign language teaching in China, lies mostly with English teaching at secondary school level. Instead of focusing on developing students' skill of using the language for communication, too much attention has been laid upon teaching grammar to the students. Grammar translation method has been traditional in foreign language teaching for decades (Zeng, 2009) until significant changes were made to the textbooks about twenty years ago to answer the call for "quality education". Ongoing adaptations have been made to the textbooks and testing systems at national level ever since. Nevertheless, to enable students to master the language structure more "effectively" and to pass the College Entrance Examination with the highest score possible, many teachers still embrace the idea that grammar goes ahead of everything in learning a foreign language. So do many students, particularly those at senior high level, to whom the College Entrance

Examination is the most crucial step that determines whether they can go to their ideal university. As teachers are not supposed to lecture on grammar all the time and leaving little time for activities by doing so in formal school hours, most of the senior high students take after-school classes, which are illegitimate according to the regulations by the education administration. Those teachers, who work there secretly, focus entirely on explaining grammar rules and test-taking skills in these classes, often lecturing in Chinese. The students' role is to pay careful attention to the teacher's explanation and corrections, memorize rules and vocabulary lists, and carefully do the practice tasks the teacher assigns them. Some students might benefit from getting a high score in the subject of foreign language in the College Entrance Exam but do they really in the long run? They might be good test-takers and they remember well about grammar rules but what they have learned about the language is nicknamed "dumb English." Many of these students cannot use the language effectively in communication. Therefore, university language teachers often find that many high-scoring students have difficulty in understanding and speaking English in college English classes. While having to speak it, they often feel shy and lack of confidence. The discrepancies between English teachers at college level and secondary level persist largely as a result of the inconsistency between the testing systems for selecting college attendees and the goals of secondary and higher education.

After all, does grammar outweigh any other element while learning a foreign language? According to Chomsky's theories, we don't need to explain the grammar of the language to children before they can acquire them. Chomsky (1972) argues that humans possess an abstract system of unconscious knowledge about our language. This system of knowledge includes, for starters, knowledge about sentence structure and word order. It also includes knowledge about meaning and sounds. The properties of this knowledge system are composed of principles and parameters — what is called "Universal Grammar"— principles being universal to all human languages, with cross-language variation accounted for by parameters each of which can be set in any of a small number of ways. Therefore, when children master a grammar, they are guided by an innate knowledge of Universal Grammar; they automatically know the general form any language (usually their native language) must take (Chomsky, 1986). In other words, one can conclude that children do not build grammar primarily from the evidence they hear, but according to an inner design—a genetic program (Chomsky, 1972). If we apply Chomsky's theories to the problems mentioned above in China, a solution would be that given sufficient linguistic input, young children or language learners in general are capable of acquiring the language, be it the native or a foreign language because humans are born with such an inner structure. Those foreign language teachers and parents who focus too early and too much on grammar teaching should relocate their emphasis onto communicative methods in children's language learning. More class hours should be devoted to students' practicing language skills instead of explaining and memorizing grammar rules. Grammar- and test-oriented teaching should take up only a small fraction of language education. As long as the learners are exposed to sufficient language input, grammar would not become a barrier for their language learning or students' Achilles' heel in their tests.

#### **4. Language Development of Bilingual Children: Two Together or One at a Time?**

Many new parents, especially those who are staying in a different country than their homeland, are faced with the question of whether or not to develop their children bilingually and when to start if they choose to. Some parents want their children to learn two languages at the same time but they are worried that their children would be exposed to less amount of input and their children might get confused and protracted in the development of both languages (Blom, 2010). For instance, children might get confused with the two grammar and phonological systems and they might be slow in acquiring the lexicon of either language. The main reason is

that they are likely to have less exposure to either one of the two languages than their monolingual peers (Paradis & Genesee, 1996). In comparison, those monolingual children would not undergo such problems. So these parents tend to decide to develop one language on their children first, either their mother tongue or the language of the host country. They might intentionally maximize their children's exposure to only one language and minimize the exposure to the other. They would "allow" their children to learn another language only when they believe their children have already mastered their "first" language and the learning of another language would not "impair" the development of the first one. The result of doing so often leads to the fact that the children miss the best time and opportunities to develop both the first and the second languages.

Actually, these parents might as well abandon those worries and let their children be exposed to both languages. Bilingual children would not be "left behind" in their language development in the long term. In Chomsky's first book (1957), *Syntactic Structures*, he opposed the traditional learning theory basis of language acquisition. In Chomsky's view, children are born with an inherited ability to learn any human language. Chomsky believes that every child has a "language acquisition device" or LAD which encodes the major principles of a language and its grammatical structures into the child's brain. It is undeniable that every language is extremely complex, often with subtle distinctions which even native speakers are unaware of. However, all children, regardless of their intellectual ability, become fluent in their native language within five or six years. Children acquire language skills more rapidly than other abilities, usually mastering most of the basic rules by the age of four. Then they only need to enlarge their vocabulary and learn to form sentences by applying the syntactic structures using LAD. Besides, Chomsky's theory applies to all languages as they all contain nouns, verbs, consonants and vowels and children appear to be "hard-wired" to acquire the grammar. Although Chomsky's theories mainly deal with the acquisition of the native language, the rules for children to acquire languages obviously apply to any language. Children are ready to acquire any language with the innate LAD so there is no justification for intentionally reducing the input or delay the acquisition of a second language so as to "make room" for the development of the first one. Synchronous bilingual development would not impair children's language acquisition, let alone affecting their intelligence growth. In fact, a new study done in Toronto found that bilingual children perform better than their monolingual peers in some cognitive tests and the benefits of bilingualism outweigh any drawbacks (Bialystok, 2012).

Nonetheless, due to the variation in the amount of language exposure and some other external factors, children may show different rates in developing two languages. In the short term, they might appear to have a "stronger" and a "weaker" language. As stated above, this is not the result of developing two languages at the same time. To add to the conclusion drawn from Chomsky's theories, studies of the dual systems model in language acquisition have found that bilingual children develop separate language systems for each language and that these systems do not interact (Keshavarz & Ingram, 2002). Therefore, the best option for these parents is to expose their children to both languages at the same time and let them develop bilingually.

## **5. Conclusion**

Chomsky's unique and innovative insights have clarified much confusion and mystery people have about language acquisition. As discussed above, his theories of Innate Hypothesis, Universal Grammar and Language Acquisition Device help dissolve the misunderstanding and enigmas that teachers and parents have about children's language learning and development. Chomsky's theories might not provide specific solutions to all questions but they do help people gain deeper insights into the root of problems. Actually, Chomsky's theory is an empirical science and his method is largely based on linguistic empirical data, which greatly adds to the feasibility of his theories. His theories about language and mind can also be

considered a branch of brain science. Chomsky's theory of mind aims to determine the properties of the initial state and each attainable state of the language faculty, and the brain sciences seek to discover the mechanisms of the brain that are the physical realizations of these states. So Chomsky (1986) believes the linguistics and the brain science will eventually converge. Chomsky's critical examination and constant rectifications or even denials of his previous theories is actually a painstaking yet devoted process of moving closer to the universal principles of human development.

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**Glossary**

LAD: Language Acquisition Device.

UG: Universal Grammar.