

## AN ANALYSIS OF LANGUAGE DEVELOPMENT IN CHILDREN

**Question:** Language development in children is essential because language is how we represent our thoughts, feelings, and ideas, and, more importantly, communicate our thoughts, feelings, and knowledge to other people. The benefit of children's understanding and acquisition of language is generativity; the idea that by using the finite set of words in their vocabulary, they can create infinite sentences expressing an infinite number of ideas (Siegler, DeLoache, Eisenberg, & Saffran, 2014). This opens a whole new world of communication for children. Understanding the development of children's language skills is important in diagnosing and helping children who have difficulty acquiring language skills, but is also helpful for parents and educators so they can teach and encourage speaking and other language skills to aid children in normal development. In an attempt to understand language development in children, we ask ourselves: Is there a difference in the language skills of children in preschool and kindergarten, with respect to syntax, gesturing, comprehension, and production? The exploration of this guiding question will shed light on how children learn, through observation and guidance, basic language skills.

**Context for addressing the question:** Naturalistic observations were conducted because they would provide more accurate results of children's language skills, since the actions of the children would not be interfered with. Naturalistic observations also increase the external validity of the study as the results can be more easily generalized since the children were observed in an everyday setting. The observation of preschool children, with an average age of 50 months, was conducted on Monday, November 13, 2017, from 12:00 to 12:45 PM in a classroom at the Children's School (see Figure 1 and Figure 2 for diagrams of the classroom settings). Seven children were observed in this age group, with three females and four males. Observations for the preschool children were conducted in two classrooms, with one classroom for activities and another for lunch. The first classroom had different stations, such as the blocks station, puzzle station, and megaphone station. The megaphone station helped children with their production skills, as the teacher demonstrated what to say into the megaphone and the children repeated. The setting of the second preschool classroom greatly encouraged the development of language skills, as seen through activities such as singing time, where the teacher sings a simple song while playing the guitar, and the children repeat after her. Lunch time was also set

up to encourage communication and language skills (specifically comprehension and production), as children were placed in a small group with five other children so short conversations can take place, and everyone at the table can hear the conversations even if they do not speak as often. The teachers aided in the development of the children's language skills by responding to children using proper grammar (and emphasizing it) if the child spoke without using correct grammar. Each teacher was also assigned to one lunch table, where they helped facilitate conversation and engage all the children in conversation.

The observation of kindergarten children, with an average age of 61 months, was conducted on Tuesday, November 14, 2017, from 11:25 AM to 12:10 PM in a classroom at the Children's School (see Figure 3 for a diagram of the classroom setting). Six children were observed in this age group, with two females and four males. The observation was conducted during the children's lunch time. The children were free to have their own discussions and the conversations were not facilitated by teachers because the children were able to begin their own conversations. However, whenever a teacher interacted with a child, they used several gestures to accentuate their point, which helped the children understand them better. On this particular day, two older boys (around 9 years old) were in the classroom during the children's lunchtime and were interacting with the children at one of the lunch tables. The younger children clearly looked up to the two boys and were primarily talking to the two older boys, rather than each other.

**Observations as relating to specific theories or concepts:** In order to capture and explain language development in children, three concepts must be discussed: Piaget's concept of collective monologues, the idea of scaffolding and adult influences on language development, and Chomsky's assertion that language cannot be learned through reinforcement. These concepts overlap in many ways, and are effective in describing language development together rather than separately.

Piaget's concept of collective monologues describes how the conversation between children consist of non sequiturs, where the content of each child's comments have little or nothing to do with what the other child just said (Siegler et al., 2014). In the observations conducted, collective monologues were extremely apparent, more so in the preschool children than the kindergarten children. For example, one preschool girl said, "You say hi and I say hello," to another little boy. The boy responded with, "Jamie and a robot sit on each other all day long." Clearly, the boy's comment has nothing to do with what the girl said, thus expressing collective

monologue. However, there were some individual differences, in that some children participated in collective monologue more often than others. In another instance, the same girl and boy mentioned above had another conversation, where the boy began by asking, "Why do you have a new water bottle?" To this the girl replied, "Mommy bought me a new water bottle to drun-drink out of." The girl responded to the boy's question, and spoke about her new water bottle. While this shows better language skills than the boy, the girl still did not answer why she got a new water bottle. She simply responded that she got a new one. This suggests that her comprehension skills are still not fully developed, as she did not answer the question completely appropriately. Kindergarten children, however, have fewer collective monologues, and are able to respond more appropriately to another child. For example, a little boy, when speaking to the teacher said, "Amelia pushed her lunchbox on my sweater and her peaches fell on the floor." Amelia, hearing this, responded, "I will get the broom." Then the boy in turn replied, "We can do it together." Both children clearly understood the other child and responded with a sentence relating to the issue at hand. Kindergarten children also have more reflective language skills,, which is apparent through their appreciation of the multiple meanings of words. This gives rise to puns, riddles, and jokes, which children receive great delight in sharing (Siegler et al., 2014). The kindergarten children at one table shared several knock-knock jokes with each other. In one exchange, a child said, "Knock-knock." Another children responded, "Who's there?" The first child said, "Interrupting cow." The second child began, "Interrupting cow—" "Moo!" Where the other child interrupted the child in the middle of the sentence as part of the joke. Both children laughed, which shows how they both are beginning to appreciate the nuances in language. Jokes were not exchanged between the preschool children, as their conversations were more straightforward. Thus, Piaget's concept of collective monologues was displayed by preschool children more than kindergarten children, showing that preschool children's language skills are less advanced than kindergarteners.

The concept of scaffolding was clearly displayed in the preschool classroom, but was not apparent in the kindergarten classroom. Teachers in the preschool classroom would respond to children by repeating what they said or by responding to them in such a way where they correct the child without explicitly telling the child they are correcting them. For example, one preschooler said, "Is that mine?" The teacher replied, "Yes, this is yours." This method is more effective than simply replying, "Yes," because by gesturing to the item the child is

referring to and using a complete sentence helps the child follow the subject of the conversation. In another instance, a preschool teacher subtly corrects a child's incorrect grammar. The child, holding up a gorilla figurine, said, "It made of plastic." The teacher replied, "Yes, it *is* made of plastic." The teacher emphasized the word "is," to correct the child. At one of the crafts stations where the children made megaphones, the teacher modeled how to use the megaphone and what to say into it. The teacher would say, "Hi, my name is Rowan, everyone," and the child would mimic the same words. Through all these methods, teachers expertly scaffold children's language skills by correcting grammar and syntax, using gestures, and using complete sentences when replying rather than providing one-word answers. There was one bilingual child observed in the preschool classroom, and the observations revealed that this child had difficulty picking up the language. He used gesturing frequently by pointing to what he wanted to help the teacher understand what he was trying to say. The teacher aided him by speaking slowly to him so he can understand and pushing him in the right direction. In one instance, the teacher said, "Go wash your hands." The child looked at her because he did not understand. She then said, "Go. Wash. Hands." She said this slowly, accompanied by a hand washing gesture. The child also did not participate in singing time with the other children. This showed how bilingual children have a more difficult time picking up English because they are exposed to another language at home.

Grammatical errors were observed in both preschoolers and kindergarteners, but more so in preschoolers. One preschool girl, for example, said, "I write them," while holding up a list she wrote. This shows she has not yet mastered the use of past tense, else she would have said, "I *wrote* them." Another preschool boy said, "It made of plastic." Here, he did not use the word "is," showing that he has not mastered the use of grammar. In contrast, most kindergarten children had almost perfect grammar, with some exceptions. One kindergarten boy said, "Why Rowan not here?" Similar to the previous example, this boy did not use the word "is," showing how he has not grasped grammar either. In yet another instance, a preschool girl said, "Mommy bought me a new bottle to drun-drink out of." This shows how the girl corrects herself when she realizes she used past tense incorrectly. While both kindergarten and preschool children have several grammatical errors in their speech, they do not seem to have any issues with syntax.

Chomsky's assertion that language cannot be learned through reinforcement and punishment (Siegler et al., 2014) was also displayed in both kindergarten and preschool children. With sentences such as, "I am so

happy Mr. Lunchbox is not here because he is Mr. Mean,” and “I pressed a button to activate him. I activated Mr. Ow Ow Ow,” it is clear that children can create sentences they have never heard before. This reinforces the idea of generativity as well because it shows how an infinite number of sentences can be created from a finite set of language rules.

**Conclusion:** Thus, in concordance with the observations and the concepts of language development, we have learned that there is, in fact, a difference in the language skills of children in preschool and kindergarten, with respect to syntax, gesturing, comprehension, and production. Preschool children have difficulty with production, seen through their grammatical mistakes, shorter sentences, and sentence mimicking. Preschool children also use more gesturing to accompany their speech to make up for their unclear language and to help others understand them. However, preschool children have almost fully developed comprehension skills, because they are able to follow instructions. Bilingual children, however, have difficulty with comprehension skills and use significantly more gesturing. Kindergarten children have almost mastered grammar, but individual differences are apparent. Kindergarten children also use fewer gestures to augment their speech because they are able to express their thoughts and ideas through their words, and do not have much of a need for gesturing. They have also fully developed comprehension and production skills. Additionally, kindergarten children experience less scaffolding and adult influence than preschool children, as they are able to carry conversations themselves and are more sensitive to words and grammar. Both kindergarten and preschool children also seem to have mastered the use of syntax. The concepts of collective monologues, scaffolding, and Chomsky’s nativist view of how language cannot be learned through reinforcement illustrate how language development is a complex, yet intuitive process which all children experience, while aided by teachers, parents, and peers.

**Works Cited**

Siegler, R., DeLoache, J., Eisenberg, N., & Saffran, J. (2014). HOW CHILDREN DEVELOP (4th ed.). New York, NY: WORTH .