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Child Language in the Early Years

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CHILD LANGUAGE IN THE EARLY YEARS

Chapter objectives

- To describe how children acquire their first language in the early years
- To describe how children learn a second language in early years' settings
- To outline the main theories of first and second language acquisition
- To examine a number of adult support strategies for first and second language acquisition and for children with language delay

Introduction

Language is something we use all the time, but we may never reflect on how we learned the languages we know or how we can help children acquire language(s). Language is a powerful tool for thinking, expressing feelings and emotions, communicating and learning. It appears effortless but the process is neither simple nor automatic. It requires a great deal of effort from children and supporting adults/other children to accomplish this complex task and practitioners in early years' settings can play a significant role in developing child language.

Language acquisition is the term used to describe the process by which children learn languages subconsciously. The views of several theorists will be discussed later in the chapter but we take the general stance that children construct linguistic knowledge from the talk they hear in their natural environment and that they are active contributing partners in this process (Owens 2011).

Children are born with a natural disposition to communicate and this disposition takes the form of the languages used in their language community. Children can tune in to the sounds of all languages but gradually narrow down the focus of what they perceive to the sounds that are dominant in the languages they hear. Language development is intrinsically connected to physical, neurological and cognitive development. Environmental factors also play an important role in language development. Secure, warm, responsive relationships with caregivers are necessary to maintain motivation and to provide feedback. Children need interaction with familiar and non-familiar adults and children. Familiar people and events provide security and the necessary repetition to enable acquisition, while new people and new events stimulate growth of experience, vocabulary and language structures.

Play is one of the most facilitative ways of trying out new roles and experiences and through them acquiring new language. As play is not goal oriented (Hayes 2010), there is no pressure to achieve a definite outcome, so children are free to experiment with ideas and with language. The other children who are playing with them are by definition also involved in the game, so they are sharing ideas and plans for the game, a shared focus of attention. Child-led

games generally involved some turn-taking and sharing of roles so turn-taking in play is providing practice for turn-taking in conversations. Play and language develop interdependently based on underlying cognitive development. This development moves from play with concrete objects, and associated vocabulary to more complex and abstract ideas and language. Children are free to experiment, to play with language and with ideas (Owens 2011).

Sammons (2010) found that attendance at a high quality early years' setting significantly improved young children's language abilities in comparison to children who stayed at home and that duration, the length of time children spent at preschool was significant. The positive effect of duration was likely to reflect the benefits of mixing with a wide range of children and adults that exposed them to a broader and richer range of languages experiences. This positive effect was even more marked in relation to children learning English as an additional language as these children showed particular strong improvement in English language development over the pre-school period (Sammons 2010). Siraj-Blatchford (2010) in the same study also found that highly trained staff played a significant role in developing children's language skills especially through engaging children in sustained, shared thinking and collaborative play.

Aistear: the Early Childhood Curriculum Framework

Communication is one of the four main themes in Aistear, the Early Childhood Curriculum Framework (NCCA 2009). The theme of Communicating is about 'children sharing their experiences, thoughts, ideas and feelings with others with growing confidence and competence in a variety of ways and for a variety of purposes.' Language is one of these modes of communicating. Aistear stresses the importance of adults empowering children to be good communicators through listening to them, interpreting what they are saying, responding and by modelling good communication skills within a stimulating and supportive environment. The aims and learning goals for child language within the Communication strand include the aim that children will use language to:

1. Interact with other children and adults by listening, discussing and taking turns in conversations
2. Explore sound, pattern, rhythm and repetition in language
3. Use an expanding vocabulary and show a growing understanding of syntax and meaning
4. Use language with confidence and competence for a range of language functions
5. Become proficient in one language and have an awareness and appreciation of other languages
6. Be positive about their home language and know that they can use other languages in different contexts (NCCA 2009).

Aistear, the Early Childhood Curriculum Framework, provides guidance in regard to language development through sample learning opportunities. In order to assist students in supporting child language development, it is necessary to understand the process of learning first and second languages.

Process of First Language Development

Young babies cry in response to physical states such as hunger or tiredness. The production of sound is dependent upon physical growth and babies are physically capable of making some, but not all sounds of their native language. Babies gradually become interested in other people and linguists think that they can communicate intentionally by at least six months (Owens 2011). Babbling is the typical pattern or sound that we associate with six month old babies and this pattern gradually develops into more meaningful sounds. Adults respond to a child's babbling as though it has meaning and through this process, meaning is attached to sounds in the child's mind and becomes fixed. Babies gradually understand tones of voice, their own name and the names of toys and objects that are used often. They begin to vocalise when talked to and start to learn the rules of turn-taking in conversations (Buckley 2003). By one year of age, they can use gestures to wave good-bye, they can point and use eye gaze to direct attention to something they are interested in and they can play briefly with toys and objects.

Age 1-2 years

Joint attention between a child and an adult or other child is the basis of much development in the second year of life. This is when both people are focusing on the same object, event or action. Young children can focus on only one aspect of a situation or one quality of an object, e.g. the shape of a block, rather than the way it can be moved. Adults can tune in to a child's focus of attention and use the child's interest as a language learning opportunity. The child is most receptive to language when the adult's language follows his/her interest.

Children begin to categorise their own experiences and feelings. They start with broad concepts and begin to name categories such as animals. The categorisation usually needs some fine-tuning as the categories may be too broad (over-extension), when all animals are called 'horsies' or too narrow (under extension) when 'dog' only refers to the family pet. At this stage children also begin to play with objects in line with their original purpose, e.g. brushing their hair with a toy hairbrush, pretend eating/drinking with tea sets. This early playful behaviour is laying down the foundation for future development. Children of this age are usually context-bound, that is they can recognise or relate to objects and experiences only in their original context. If they see a picture of a banana, for example, they may not recognise it as a type of food they eat.

Age 2-3 years

Children of this age begin to develop their sense of being **communicators** and are fast acquiring the words and structures in which to talk about their interests and feelings. They

begin to broaden their understanding of concepts between two and three years of age. In addition to broad categories, they begin to understand opposites such as hot/cold and big/small. They also begin to understand spatial concepts, that is how one object is situated in relation to another. We use prepositions to show this relationship, the sand is in the bucket, the doll is sitting on the chair and the teddy is under that table. The child has begun to understand the concept of colours and begins to use colour words for items and objects that he/she uses often. Children of this age develop their sense of being communicators and are fast acquiring the words and structures in which to do the telling.

Cognitive development precedes the child's ability to name the object or concept (Owens 2011). This is also true in relation to understanding and then asking questions. Children first understand questions and during the third year of life, age two to three, they themselves begin to ask questions by using intonation. They could ask where their father put the buggy by saying 'Dada buggy?' with rising intonation. Children then develop the ability to ask simple questions and finally can ask more complex question. Questions using the words 'What', 'where' and 'who' are simpler to understand than 'why' and tend to be acquired in that order. It takes a little longer for children to understand perspective, the view of the speaker or listener. This is shown in the difference between 'here' and 'there', 'come' and 'go' as the perspective of the speaker and listener could be quite different. Children also begin to express feelings and emotions and can use phrases that adults use with them in an appropriate way, e.g. 'I'm very cross with you.'

Age 3-5 years

By four years most children can understand and use all basic grammatical structures. Their **vocabulary** continues to expand in line with their experience and by five years of age children can use up to 5,000 words. They can understand many more but in the case of new or complicated words, the context is very important in aiding comprehension. Children of this age begin to express their thoughts in more elaborate ways by using more elaborate sentence structures. They can understand simple passive sentences and can use the active construction, 'The boy kicked the ball' but still find it more difficult to use the passive construction, 'The ball was kicked by the boy'. They are also able to take part in longer conversations and to keep on topic for longer. Their sentences are increasingly longer because they have increased cognitive understanding and have acquired words such as 'and', 'because', 'that', 'if' and 'is' to express connections and consequences. Developmental errors may continue for some time as children have begun to think about the rules of language and are trying to make irregular forms of verbs and nouns conform to a regular pattern. Examples could be 'Yesterday I *runned* very fast,' 'the *mices* in the story were tiny,' 'Susan *taked* my biscuit.' These are called developmental errors because they are part and parcel of the process of language learning. They are best corrected by adults modelling the correct form in a later turn in the conversation as young children cannot yet learn grammar intentionally (Saville-Troike 2006).

Children have acquired most sounds in their native language by 4.5 years, including consonant clusters such as 'tr', 'cl and 'gr', but a minority will continue to substitute sounds

that they can say for those they cannot. ‘Train’ can be said as ‘twain,’ ‘cloud’ is ‘loud,’ ‘green’ is ‘geen.’ More complex sounds such as ‘sch,’ ‘j’ and ‘sh’ may appear a little later. When children are acquiring new grammatical structures, sometimes their thoughts run ahead of their ability to articulate coherently and stuttering may appear for a time. This is usually a passing phase until the grammar becomes stabilised, and unless a child becomes anxious, it is likely to pass without any additional problems.

Personal Narratives

Children can also use language to do more elaborate things such as tell stories. They begin to tell stories in a very simple way, sometimes with one or two words, and the stories can be about their own personal experiences. These are called **personal narratives** and often reveal a great deal about their understanding of the world, attitudes and feelings. (Hudson and Shapiro 1991). Two-year old children rely heavily on cues and prompts from adults to recall a particular event and three- year old children can report details of past events without much adult help. As children reach 4-6 years, they are able to tell stories independently, leaving them free to focus on aspects of experience that are important to them. They gradually begin to report more information and more elaborate description when asked to remember specific events. They increasingly add more orientation information as they have begun to understand that the listener may not know the details of the participants/events and the number of the complicating events or details of the story also increase with age. Three-year olds tend to evaluate their experiences by comparison with similar events, ‘like I do at home.’ Four-year olds use emotional reactions, e.g. ‘I was really scared,’ while five-year olds use intensity/quantity marker in addition to comparisons and emotional reactions. (Hudson and Shapiro 1991). Very often children tell more elaborate stories in the course of a conversation than when asked to tell a story. This is also true of the imaginary scenarios they create in their play. They also revel in the enjoyment of listening to other people’s stories and to listening to story books. (See chapter on Children’s Literacy).

Language Delay

Most children become capable and confident users of language especially when helped by competent adults. However some children may **progress at a different rate** due to biological or environmental factors. Problems could arise in relation to a child’s capacity to articulate words or to process meaning. This could be due to a language specific impairment or to causes such as hearing loss, neurological impairment or emotional and behavioural difficulties. The term *Language Delay* is used to describe these cases in general. Children who are difficult to understand or show signs of being at a level of language development appropriate to a much younger child should be referred to a speech and language therapist for assessment. (See chapter on Inclusive Practice).

Second Language Acquisition

Second Language Acquisition is the term used to describe the process of **acquiring a second language** in addition to a person's first language (Baker 2011). The second language can be acquired at the same time as the first (simultaneous acquisition), or it can be acquired at a later stage, (sequential acquisition). In Ireland, some children acquire English and Irish at home simultaneously. Other children speak Irish or Polish at home and learn English sequentially when they attend an early years' centre or go to school. Based on current understanding of sociocultural theories (Lantolf 2000), the context in which language learning takes place and the affordances and opportunities provided are of great significance in providing input and support to young children acquiring a second language.

Most children who are learning a second language have age-appropriate competency in their first language and know how to use language in a variety of ways, e.g. to make requests, describe events and express their feelings. It is of the utmost importance that they maintain and continue to develop their first language as this may be their main means of thinking, forming relationships with key people in their lives and expressing their emotions.

Bilingual babies follow the same basic pattern as monolingual babies in each of their languages. Both languages tend to be kept fairly separate with regard to grammar and sentence construction, but some mixing of words will be likely to occur. Mixing tends to follow the same pattern of language mixing that people around them use. By age three most bilingual children realise that they have two ways of speaking at their command and can move freely between the two languages. They can also judge which language to speak to which person and adjust their language accordingly.

Children who acquire a second language in addition to the first can use that language learning experience to good effect. They can already communicate through language in an age-appropriate way and can transfer this knowledge to the new language. Where their first language is recognised and valued the second language is regarded as an additional bonus (additive bilingualism). Children who speak a major European language at home, French or German, would be in this category. Children who speak a less highly valued language such as a minority or regional language, could be in a subtractive situation, struggling to learn English, if society appears to place little value on their home language (subtractive bilingualism). This negative situation can have major implication for the child's and the family's self-image and self esteem. The transmission of family values and culture may be lost as the parents may not have sufficient English to pass on their beliefs and understandings in the new language. It may lessen the bonds with the extended family in their home country as the children may not be able to communicate with their grandparents and other family members in their native language.

Pattern of Second Language Acquisition

Many children acquiring English as a second language in an early years' centre will go through a **silent period**. This is the time in which they pay attention to the sounds and meanings of the new language and try to work out the patterns for themselves. They may try

to speak in their first language and depending on how this is received, may continue to speak that language (English in a naíonra or gaelscoil, for example) or stop speaking Polish or Yoruba in the early years' setting (Tabors 2008). This should not be confused with developmental delay as it is the natural path of progression in learning a second language. Children will continue to communicate through non-verbal means, gesture, signing, pointing, facial expression etc. They will observe what the other children are doing and imitate them, giving the impression that they know more than they actually do. Gradually they will begin to use **single words and rote phrases**, very often useful words and phrases to gain attention, request toys or express wishes. They may also use advertising slogans and jingles as they feature very often on children's TV. Rote phrases that they have learned as a unit might include 'My turn,' 'sharing is caring,' 'can't do it.' Other phrases that could be useful are sentences that have slots that can be filled with different words, such as 'I want ----.' These phrases are immediately useful and grammatically correct. When the child has built up a sufficient stock of these words and phrases, he/she can begin to speak more creatively but as they are now processing the language independently, they may appear to be making more mistakes than before. Over time they will acquire an age-appropriate level of competency in English. It is estimated that children can build up communicative competency in about three years but that it takes learners five to seven years to gain more academic competencies in a new language.

Theories of First Language Acquisition

Many theories have been proposed to help our understanding of how children acquire their first and second languages. Some of these theories are closely related to theories in Psychology and others are more focused on language learning itself. The theories range along a continuum, moving from an emphasis on correct form or grammar to appropriate language use in context. According to Skinner, all **behaviour**, including verbal behaviour is learned and is changed or modified by the consequences of that behaviour. When an adult responds to certain sounds in a child's vocalisations, the child learns that this produces the desired effect and continues to use these sounds. A child hears a word in the presence of that object, learns to associate the sound with the meaning and continues to use the word because it works. More complex words and phrases are learned through approximations or good guesses. Language is according to Skinner learnt by modelling, imitation, practice and selective reinforcement (Owens 2011).

Skinner's Behaviourist theory was critiqued heavily by Noam Chomsky who found no evidence by which the Behaviourist theory could adequately explain the 'logical problem of language', i.e. how children learned to say novel utterances. His main argument was that young children produce many novel and innovative sentences that they have not heard before, including many that adults would not use. In more recent times the role of input and the linguistic environment has been reassessed and valued. Chomsky proposed a psycholinguistic theory for language acquisition, looking at how the brain processed language. He held that the human brain is hardwired for language, that it has a separate facility for language

processing which he called the **Language Acquisition Device (LAD)**. Chomsky thought that all human languages differed only superficially and there was a common underlying deep structure beneath them. He called this structure Universal Grammar. A child must hear the language spoken and then work out the rules of his/her native tongue by applying the general principles of Universal Grammar to the particular language. However this theory does not adequately account for the meaning of words and sentences (semantics), nor does it explain the consistent pattern of child language development across languages. Chomsky did, however, provide a new model of describing language and language development that shows how the human brain is actively processing language in novel and creative ways (Owens 2011).

Sociolinguistic models of language acquisition emphasise the larger units of language, the communication units required to convey information, and places language acquisition in its **social and cultural context**. Children acquire language in the everyday contexts in which they use it, that is learning by doing. The role of the child's communication partners, adults or children, is crucial as they provide the input and support to the child learner. Not only does the child learn the rules of speech, he/she also learns the rules of language interaction. Vygotsky and other socio-cultural writers prioritise the role of the social environment in language learning. They state that language is learned through social interaction and is then internalised by the child. Children continue to learn language that meets their language needs, i.e. children learn language through their interactions with other people and language learning is embedded in its social context. This model explains the social nature of language learning and language use, but does not explain the link between the child's intentions and the process by which they acquire means to express those intentions.

Saville-Troike and other theorists hold that the first language must be learned by a certain period in life. The **Critical Period Hypothesis** states that the basic structures of a child's native language must be acquired by the onset of puberty as the brain's plasticity changes after that time. While difficult to prove, tragic examples of linguistic deprivation such as the French boy Victor, the American girl Genie or abandoned children show that without appropriate linguistic input in early and middle childhood, the full system of first language acquisition is unlikely to develop. Linguists now believe that the brain's plasticity begins to decline earlier than previously thought, at about five years of age, but that a great deal depends on individual differences and context.

The next section in this chapter outlines some useful strategies for putting understanding of child language and of Aistear into practice.

Strategies for Supporting First Language Development

Children must participate in language interactions in order to acquire language(s). The more experience they have, the more proficient they become. Some of the following strategies apply to first and second language learners but it should be borne in mind that interaction and

input with children should suit the individual child/group of children and should be age-appropriate.

The process of treating babies and young children as **conversation partners** in their first language begins with very young babies, through gaining their attention, by talking about things that interest them and by regarding any vocalisations as their turn in the conversation. Adults in our culture typically use a higher pitch of voice when talking to young babies and this tone indicates for the child that the conversation is directed at him/her. Adults slow down the pace of the conversation and adapt their language by simplifying the vocabulary, using short sentences and exaggerated intonation, emphasising key words and using a great deal of repetition. This style of talking to babies and young children is called 'Child Directed Speech' or 'Motherese' and is used in many Western cultures but not universally (Lightbrown and Spada 2006).

Action songs and games, such as peek-a-boo and tickling games are important because it is through repeated experiences that the child can learn what is expected of him/her regarding actions and speech. Through playing games and routines with a child or adult, he/she will learn to participate and then to take the lead.

As children develop their language, the adult's language also changes and less use is made of this style of talking. The adult can use the proper names of objects instead of baby words, but children still love to hear and use onomatopoeia and fun words. Adults can expand on children's one or two word utterances (age 1-2 years) and extend the topic by giving more information. Explanations can help children understand cause and effect and we can help children verbalise their feelings by giving simple descriptions for happy events, upsets and distress. Weitzman and Greenberg (2002) also suggest using questions to include the child in the conversation. They advise asking open questions when possible that show your interest as children can spot 'test' or closed questions easily and become bored. Closed questions are those which require a 'Yes' or 'No' as an answer while open questions are real questions to which we don't know the answer. As they get older, children can participate more fully in conversations and learn to become clearer communicators. They realise how much background information it is necessary to give about people and events to enable the listener to understand and they learn how to add information that is relevant to the topic of the conversation. In this way children can be supported to go beyond the here and now and use language to play, learn, predict, imagine and reflect on their experience.

Theories of Second Language Acquisition

Cognitive theories include Skinner's Behaviourist theory, discussed above and Krashen's **Monitor** model. Krashen (Lightbrown and Spada 2006) held that there was a natural order of language acquisition, that understanding input was important and that learners monitored their own speech to see if it was correct. He also held that motives, attitudes and emotions played a significant role in second language learning. While both these theories have been critiqued, it is also true that repetition plays a large role in language learning and that learners

do self-correct. Long went on to state that **comprehensible input** was critical to successful language learning and therefore that the modifications made by adults/native speakers to aid understanding were crucial (Lightbrown and Spada 2006). The relationship between the learner and the native speaker is considered important and the role of the wider social environment in determining contexts and opportunities for language learning is significant. Children learn languages through the interaction of their own cognitive processes and through interactions in the social environment.

Lantolf (2000) holds that the **social, economic and political environment** provides the opportunities for language learning and for benefiting from knowing a second language. The situation of newcomer children learning English in Irish early years' settings illustrates this theory well. Many of their parents came to Ireland to work during the Celtic Tiger years and settled down here. Now their children are growing up in Ireland. The children are learning English in early years' settings, they will be able to benefit from the Irish education system and contribute socially and in time economically to Irish society just as their parents are doing. However the full benefits of bilingualism are only available to those who attain a high level of competency in their two languages.

Strategies for Supporting Second Language Development

Adults can support second language learners through a range of **scaffolding strategies**. Children who are learning English as an Additional Language already speak the first language and should not be treated as though they were younger. Most talk with young children is about the immediate context. This makes it natural and authentic to speak about the current task, game or event with a child and to use the ongoing actions as the focus of talk, a form of running commentary that is self-explanatory. The adult can speak at a slightly slower pace than usual and emphasise key words in the sentence. He/she can repeat what has been said and demonstration can be used to show what is meant. The adults can expand the one word utterances of the child, thus showing acceptance of the child's comment and by giving more input in an incremental way. A child may talk about a car. The adult can expand this first to a phrase such as 'Yes, that's a red car' and then proceed to mimic car noises. As the children become familiar with one set of words and phrases, the adult can provide input for the next stage and praise the new effort being made by the child. This changing focus of support, moving on from something that is known to a new item is termed dynamic scaffolding and supports a child in making progress (Owens 2011). It is also important to give a child enough time to process the language and to think. Mistakes should be corrected through modelling the correct form rather than correcting the mistake directly, as young children are not yet capable of learning directly about correct forms of grammar (Saville-Troike 2006).

Environmental Scaffolding in Early Years' Settings

Weitzman and Greenberg (2002) and Tabors (2008) offer practical advice on how language learning opportunities can be facilitated within early years' settings. Strategies should be tailored to the individual needs of the children/whole group and the particular environment.

Children will be more inclined to listen and talk in an interesting, calm and well organised physical environment and in an affective atmosphere that accepts, respects and supports them. By showing a real interest in what children have to say as well as how they say it, adults show that they value children as communicators. Weitzman and Greenberg (2002) advise practitioners to wait for children's initiatives at the beginning of an activity and to follow the child's lead by commenting on children's initiatives and joining in with their make-believe. They advise adapting daily routines to make time for talk, by planning them in advance and organising staff and space. Practitioners should consider how best to manage staff resources, the number of children in the group for particular activities/routines and the daily schedule or timetable. Perhaps groups could be split if the number of children is large as all children rarely have to do the same thing at the same time. Smaller groups are easier to manage and time to talk can be built into the routine. Equipment can be stored near where it is used or placed on a trolley that can be moved when needed.

Tabors (2008) refers to a range of scaffolding strategies for second language children. As is the case in all aspects of working with young children, she advises starting with the child and gathering basic demographic information about their family background, including the languages that they know. Early years' settings use a range of methods for giving information to the parents such as meetings, booklets in English and translation into the most common languages required. The practitioners in a small-scale study by Mhic Mhathúna and Hill (2007) said that they felt the strategies they used with English as Additional Language children were an extension of those they used with Irish children. They named what the newcomer children were doing and described the ongoing action. This provided the opportunity to describe the current activity that the child was involved in. The staff could also encourage the child to observe what other children nearby were doing. Some staff learned basic words in the children's language and found that this was very useful when new children were settling into the nursery. They sandwiched the foreign language word between two English words when talking to the new children and this helped to build communication quickly. One of the most useful tools they found was photography, which they used as part of the High/Scope Plan-Do-Review routine. It facilitated independent choice and play and could be used to document many forms of play and learning. The photographs could also be shown to the parents to explain what the children had been doing and to show that they were happy in the setting. One setting also used the photographs to make books about the centre and asked the parents to provide translations of the English captions in their native languages.

Tabors recognises the language opportunities in the physical environment and suggests that physical /manipulative play is particularly suitable for newcomer children as it is age appropriate but not language dependent to the same degree as other types of play. This includes block play, dressing up, sand and water play, jigsaws, Lego, etc. The 'safe haven' of

physical play may also develop into parallel play and so provide the opportunity for social contact and language input from other children.

Consistent routines allow all children to work out what to do by observation and by following other children. Some second language children may in fact appear more competent than they actually are by observing the other children closely and by imitating them. Small group activities which at times include both First and Second language children, offer many language opportunities for peer-assisted scaffolding as children can be very understanding of the language needs of their peers. Lunch times can also provide a lot of context embedded talk about food, likes and dislikes and other topics. Staff can encourage children to participate in Circle Time by keeping to a stable and predictable routine within the structure, by singling action songs and rhymes and by giving other children the opportunity to respond before asking second language children for their turn. This practice gives the second language children the opportunity to hear the question and response several times before they are called on to participate.

Strategies for Supporting Children with Language Delay

Due to complex factors, some children may be delayed in their language development and may require **differentiated support** from early years' practitioners. Practitioners should make every effort to communicate with the child and treat his/her responses as communication. They can gain the child's attention through gestures and animated play and maintain it through eye contact. They should encourage turn-taking and questions. By focusing on the child's interests, they can develop joint attention with the child and use toys or items that interest him/her to play one-to-one games. This will help to develop turn-taking in concrete ways. Social routines are very useful to build up predictable sequences for the child, and repeated, predictable routines around greetings, mealtimes, games, tabletop activities, moving from one room to another or outside are very useful strategies. Songs, nursery rhymes and games offer stability and predictability as the child receives cues as to what is expected of him/her in relation to participation, turn-taking, actions and gradually through words. Speech and Language therapists will be able to advise on specific strategies for the individual child and on ways to adapt the daily routine to suit the language delayed child.

Conclusion

Language is an essential tool for thinking, communicating and learning. Every child is unique, but the general process of language acquisition offers a useful guide to language development. Early years' practitioners can play a significant role in supporting young children in their language learning through understanding the process of first and second language learning and by using this knowledge to devise language support strategies for all children.

Many theorists have sought to explain the process of language acquisition and while the emphasis placed on theories changes over time, current thinking favours acknowledging that language is a complex match between cognitive processing and a supportive environment. This involves a strong bond between the children and the caregivers, regular interaction with a small number of key practitioners and takes place in a social and cultural context.

Language is one of the most rule-governed systems we use and at the same time it is one of the most creative and imaginative ways of communicating. We should try to bring the resultant sense of fun and endless possibilities to our work with young children.

Key Learning Points

- There is a general process of language development, moving from simple one word utterances to complex sentences
- Children learn language by participating in language interactions in age- and developmentally-appropriate ways
- Theories of first and second language acquisition help our understanding of aspects of the process of language acquisition
- Regular contact by the child with a small number of key people provides a stable base for routines and interactions that support language development
- Children with language impairment need differentiated support and predictable routines and activities
- The management of time and space can be organised to support language interactions

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Useful websites

www.ican.org.uk : An information portal with information on supporting children's speech and language development.

www.talkingpoint.org.uk : An information portal with information on supporting children's speech, language and communication development.

<http://www.nacell.org.uk/ideas/index.htm> : CILT, Centre for Information of Language Teaching and Research.

http://www.education.bham.ac.uk/research/projects1/bilingualism_database.shtml: University of Birmingham bilingualism database.