

READING I

LANGUAGE ACQUISITION

1. Nothing is more important to a child's development than the acquisition of language. Most children acquire language quickly and effortlessly, giving the impression that the entire process is simple and straightforward. However, the true extent of children's achievement becomes evident when we compare their success with the difficulties encountered by adults who try to learn a second language. Understanding how children over the world can master the complexities of human language in the space of a few short years has become one of the major goals of contemporary linguistic research.

2. When we commonly refer to the emergence and learning the skill of language in children as 'language acquisition', we actually mean going through a process of building up a mental system that allows people to speak and understand a language. There are at least two reasons for believing that the development of linguistic skills must involve the acquisition of such a mental system with all rules and structures. First, mature language users are able to produce and understand an unlimited number of novel sentences. This can only happen if, as children, they have acquired the structure for their language. Simple memorization of a fixed inventory of words and sentences would not equip learners to deal with totally new sentences. A second indication that children acquire structural rules comes from their speech errors, which often give the researcher valuable clues about how the acquisition process works. Even ordinary errors such as *childs, *womans, and *foots can be informative. Since adults don't talk that way, such errors tell us that children don't just imitate what they hear. Rather, they create rules that are unique to **them** to capture the regularities that they observe in the speech of those around them. Because language acquisition involves the emergence of a grammar, its study is closely tied to the type of linguistic and psychological analysis to identify and describe the grammatical system that children acquire during the first years of life. The majority of research on the acquisition of language focuses on children's early utterances, the order in which they emerge, and the kinds of errors they contain. Two complementary methods of data collection are used—naturalistic observation and experimentation.

3. In the naturalistic approach, investigators observe and record children's spontaneous utterances. One type of naturalistic investigation is the so-called diary study, in which often a parent keeps daily notes on a child's linguistic progress. A more systematic way to collect naturalistic data involves regular taping sessions, often at biweekly intervals, to gather samples (usually an hour at a time) of the child interacting with his or her caregivers. Detailed transcripts are then made for subsequent analysis later. Researchers do not talk to or see the children most of the time. Naturalistic studies tend to be longitudinal in that they examine language development over a long time. As the name suggests, longitudinal studies may take several years to conduct, but they have the advantage of permitting researchers to observe development as an ongoing process in individual children. For this reason, this type of research is also used to find out about how and why language is slow to develop in children with such disorders as down-syndrome or aphasia.

4. Naturalistic data collection provides a great deal of information about how the language acquisition process unfolds, but it also has its shortcomings. The most serious of these is people—even if they are children—may behave differently when they know they are being watched, making it difficult to gather the correct information from natural speech samples to test hypotheses or draw conclusions. This problem is further compounded by the

fact that the parents or the caregiver may unintentionally try to interfere to children's speech during the process of observation either to correct them or to help them. These two factors may cause the naturalistic method not to be very naturalistic after all. Furthermore, in naturalistic method there is always a risk of different researchers drawing different conclusions from the same witnessed behavior.

^{5.} In experimental studies, researchers typically make use of specially designed tasks to elicit linguistic activity relevant to the phenomenon that they wish to study. The child's performance is then used to formulate hypotheses about the type of grammatical system acquired at that point in time. Experimental research is typically cross-sectional. This means that it needs more than a single child to investigate and compare the linguistic knowledge of different children at a particular point in development. Experimental studies usually employ exercises that test children's comprehension, production, or imitation skills. One widely used method for testing comprehension which is truth judgment, calls for children to judge the truth of statements that are made about particular situations presented to them by the experimenter. In order to determine whether three-year old children correctly understands sentences and follow a conversation, for instance, a researcher might design a game in which the child answers a puppet's various questions.

^{6.} A second method for testing comprehension, which is acting out, involves supplying children with an appropriate set of toys and then asking them to act out the meaning of a sentence. For example a researcher can arrange some toys in a setting that perhaps creates a passive structure such as "The truck was bumped by the car". Children's responses can provide valuable clues about the type of grammatical rules being used to interpret sentences at various stages of development. In a typical production task, on the other hand, the experimenter presents the child with a situation that calls for a particular type of statement or question. Although production tasks can be useful for assessing certain types of linguistic knowledge, there are many structures that are hard to elicit, even from adults, because they are used only in special situations. For example, passive sentences such as "the house was painted by students" are quite rare and only used for situations in which the speaker thinks it is necessary to highlight the 'undergoer' of an action. For these reasons, experimental methods can provide an overly conservative view of linguistic development unless the researcher adds some other tests of other methods.

^{7.} Experiments, which are called imitation, have children just repeat model sentences can also provide important clues about grammatical development. Although imitation might appear to be easy, it has been found that children's ability to repeat a particular structure provides a good indication of how well they have mastered it. For instance, a child who has not yet acquired auxiliary verbs (i.e. am, is, are) will repeat the sentence "Mickey is laughing" as "Mickey laughing". The principal advantage of the experimental approach is that it allows researchers to collect data of a very specific sort about particular phenomena or structures. Experimentation is not without its disadvantages, however. In addition to the difficulty of designing a good experiment, there is always the possibility that children's performance will be affected by extraneous factors, such as inattention, shyness, or a failure to understand what is expected of them.

^{8.} Nonetheless, by using experimental techniques together with naturalistic observation, linguists and psychologists have learnt a lot about language acquisition process. **They** have discovered that a number of factors may contribute to the child's acquisition of language, including the properties of caregiver or parents' speech, personality and culture of

the speaker and inborn linguistic capacity. We look to future research for deeper insights into the precise role of these and other factors.

Answer the following questions according to the text:

1. According to paragraph 1, people think that learning a language is easy and not complicated because _____.

2. As learning a language, a child uses words such as “doed”, “runned” or “goed” when he speaks. Which of the followings is **not** one of the things that can be understood by these mistakes?
 - a. Children develop rules and structures of their own.
 - b. Children provide important information about how the system of language works.
 - c. Children try to observe the rules in other people’s speech.
 - d. Children copy how adults speak without understanding the rules.

3. “Them” in paragraph 2 refers to _____.

4. Which word in paragraph 3 means “something spoken, expression or saying”?
_____.

Read the statements below. For questions **5** to **9**, **in the blanks given**, write **N** for those which are correct for Naturalistic Method, write **E** for those which are correct for Experimental Method.

5. A detailed and regular record of the development of language is kept.

6. A picture of a dog smiling may be shown to a child and the child is expected to say “the dog is smiling”, which allows researchers to look for signs.

7. The researcher does not have to interact with children during the research.

8. It researches the reasons for underdevelopment of languages in children with mental problems.

9. Even finding out how the children copy from what they hear is valuable for the researcher.

10. Which word in paragraph 4 means to “to get involved, to interrupt, to change or to prevent something”? _____.

- 11.** Which of the followings is **not** among the disadvantages of Naturalistic method according to paragraphs 3 and 4?
- a. Children may speak in an artificial way.
 - b. The results may not be objective.
 - c. Research may take an extended period of time.
 - d. Parents may be asked to interfere with the research.
- 12.** According to paragraphs 6 and 7, although a child knows how to build a passive sentence, he may not make the passive sentences the experimenter wants to hear. Which of the following is **not** among the reasons of this case?
- a. The child does not understand what to do.
 - b. The child might be embarrassed to speak out.
 - c. The child does not feel the need to use the structures he actually knows.
 - d. The child wants the researcher to add some other tests as well.
- 13.** Which of the following can be understood from the text?
- a. Although there are several factors affecting language acquisition, we do not understand fully the specific contribution of each.
 - b. Language acquisition is a difficult process to analyse firstly because of the genetic factors involved.
 - c. None of the techniques is superior alone however experimental methods inform us more on linguistic development.
 - d. Unless the researchers use naturalistic observation techniques, they will not be able to understand the factors involved in language acquisition.
- 14.** "They" in paragraph 8 refers to _____.