INCEPTION – JOURNAL OF LANGUAGES AND LITERATURE
Vol 2, Issue 1, 2022
Riphah International University Faisalabad

ENVIRONMENTAL INFLUENCES ON A MALAY BILINGUAL CHILD'S SYNTACTIC AWARENESS

pISSN: 2957-9015
eISSN: 2957-9007

Nur Hannani Ramlan[1], Gayle Mak Su Xin[2], & Seera A.S.[3]

[1]School of Languages, Civilisation, & Philosophy, Universiti Utara Malaysia
[2]School of Education, Universiti Utara Malaysia
[3]School of Business Management, Universiti Utara Malaysia
gayle_mak_su@ahsgs.uum.edu.my

Abstract

By the age of 6 months old, the early production of language begins. Starting from this age, children will be able to use more than one word and they will be able to relate one word to another in creating sentences or phrases to convey meaning. For bilingual children, it is common for them to mix up words between two languages in their utterances. However, they are still able to make a distinction. Thus, this study presents an observation of the author on the syntactic awareness of a Malay child who was acquiring Malay at the same time as she was acquiring English and how different environments influenced the subject's syntactic development. In addition, the cognitivist theory by Noam Chomsky will be discussed in view of explaining the significance of environmental influences as the main variable of this study.

Keywords: *Whiteness, white privilege, bright friend, dark lady, binary, dehumanizing, exclusionary*

1. INTRODUCTION

Making a connection between words to complete a sentence is important in language acquisition. For children, one of the foundations in acquiring language is the ability to make a direct mapping of words within knowledge. As eloquently said by Wojcik (2013), according to one theory, to properly take on a new vocabulary, toddlers should understand the right links among both words and their connotations. In this sense, their knowledge of semantics should come first before

the syntactic. Principally, children will predetermine the information about a new word that they have learnt. Then, they will comprehend how to phonologically articulate the word in their language and map it across objects and other properties. Thus, being able to make a connection between words for toddlers might be regarded as successful early language acquisition.

Referring to this, many other factors can affect children's ability to have early language development such as having great environmental influences, genetics, and also exposure (as cited in Canfield, Edelson, & Saudino, 2016). It is also mentioned that children can be aware of the word mapping, syntax and sentence structure of their language through exposure and socialization that they have with their parents, caretakers and teachers. Commonly, children's syntax awareness begins at the age of 24 months old (Yairi & Ambrose, 1992). During this age, their syntax awareness starts with the basic principles of grammar such as noun + verb. As said by Tunmer and Grieve (1984), syntactic awareness is known as a process of children's capability to keep track of the links between the words in a phrase to better comprehend what they are reading, writing or uttering.

However, when it comes to a bilingual child, there are always issues and debates regarding children's syntactic awareness. The connection between words that they utter, shows that Chomsky's ideas on 'Universal Grammar' where all languages share the same language systems partially make sense. In this case, he posed that children can learn a language without any formal instructions even though Skinner's idea on children's behaviourism also plays an important role in children's language development through the environment. When it comes to bilingual children, their language development differs from monolingual children. This is due to the fact that bilingual children will have to face some additional tasks in discovering from which language each word comes first but, in terms of language development, they will be able to acquire more vocabulary along with syntactic awareness than monolingual children. Thus, both cognitivism and behaviourist theories does show a possible contribution to children's overall language development.

2. LITERATURE REVIEW

Environmental influences have been one of the vital aspects of children's language acquisition, especially for children's syntactic awareness. Concerning this, children's syntactic awareness is gained through socialization with the people around them. Their experience with words leads them to map words with referents. Many types of research have been done in the same area of study on

children's syntactic awareness of environmental influences such as by Sallehuddin (2012), Logan et. Al (2013), Canfield et. Al (2016) and many more. This is due to the fact language that the children first acquired is mainly coming from their environment. However, some argue that even though children learnt the language from their environment, the children's innate ability does play a vital aspect in language development, especially for bilingual children. In this case, a literature review on can environmental influences affect children's syntactic awareness will be further discussed and observed thoroughly in this section.

Environmental Influences and Children's Language Development

Concerning children's language development, particularly young children reading development, the study done by Logan et. Al (2013) shows that environmental influences play a huge part in children's reading development while the influences of genetics have shown an exemplary result. The study opted to identify the degree of genetics and environmental influences can contribute to children's reading development. The study findings revealed that environmental influences such as the activities conducted in the kindergarten's classroom, or factors of home environment such as the types of books used at home for pleasure reading, as well as the parents' literacy practices are among the factors that positively impacted children's reading development. However, it is showed that genetic influences from the parents can be the predictor of children's pace in reading. In this sense, the parent's genetics can contribute to how slow or fast the child's reading ability and development.

A similar study has been done by Pourcain et. Al (2014) which explores the common genetic influences that can be correlated with a child's advanced linguistic ability. When it comes to the production of words and syntactic awareness, they are able to produce a wide range of vocabulary at the age of 15 to 18 months. Hence, if there are children with genetic problems such as autism or any speech-related disorders, they will not be able to develop at the same pace as children with healthy genetics.

Next, many types of research have been done in the same area on children's syntactic awareness and environmental influences. However, there is still little research that touches on the syntactic awareness of bilingual children. Referring to this, it is found that Howel, Davis, and Au-Yeung (2008) investigated the syntactic development in fluent children, children who stutter, and children who have English as an additional language (bilingual). The study is done to identify and compare the syntactic performance across languages in children who are learning English at the same time as they are learning their first language, stutter children, as well as fluent children.

The major contribution of this study that is worth noting is that the

syntactic ability and awareness in children can be evaluated by shared techniques of production and perception. According to Levelt's (1989) model of speech production, it can be understood that children go through the process of turning their thoughts into words.

During this stage, children will be able to choose the words they wanted to use in their speech with the relevant organization of grammar. This is when their syntactic awareness will play the role of connecting words in a sentence to convey meaning in their utterances. As for perception, it is important for children's phonological awareness. The discussion conducted in the study also has shown that children who acquired an additional language such as English will be affected in their syntactic performance. From my point of view, it can be understood that learning two languages at the same time for children can cause delays and differences in certain aspects.

However, being bilingual, will not hinder the child's language abilities in anyways. Thus, the results and techniques mentioned by Howel, Davis, and Ah-Yeung (2008), have provided a new take on bilingual children's language abilities and syntactic awareness.

Theoretical Framework

This study had been examined and explained by using one theoretical model which is the Language Acquisition Device (LAD) theory by Noam Chomsky (1965). According to Chomsky's idea of Universal Grammar (UG), children are born with innate abilities in the language. In this sense, children are able to acquire language because languages across the world share the same fundamentals. Hence, in children's syntactic awareness, they are able to make a connection between words and produce a relevant sentence because of the shared ideas, regardless of the language they used (Chomsky, 1965). On the grounds that, this theory is related to the cognitive abilities of the subject's syntactic awareness. It will also help to explain how environmental influences can impact a bilingual child's syntactic awareness.

3. METHODOLOGY

The study was done to observe the syntactic awareness of a Malay child who was acquiring Malay at the same time as she was acquiring English and how different environments influenced the subject's syntactic development. Generally, this study is conducted through observation of the subject's utterances during the third stage of language acquisition. The corpus was taken during the subject was between one year and one month (1:1) and one year and 7 months (1:7). The data was collected during the subject is transitioning from a one-word stage to a two-

word stage. Firstly, the analysis on the syntactic awareness of the subject will be analysed accordingly through the subject's utterances. From the data gathered, the subject's utterances will be discussed thoroughly and will be used as a tool in justifying how environmental influences can affect the subject's syntactic awareness.

4. DATA ANALYSIS AND DISCUSSION

First and foremost, the data was gathered through observation of the subject in various environments. For example, the focused aspect of the subject's utterances was documented in a book. In this study, the subject's usage of words from two different languages in a sentence; English and Malay, were documented. Secondly, the data gathered will be separated accordingly through various settings and situations. Last but not least, the obtained data were analysed and reflected in developing a better hypothesis that can helped explained the objective of the study.

Referring to the subject's syntactic awareness, the subject's utterances were recorded during the phase of transitioning from the second stage of language acquisition (one-word stage) to the third stage of language acquisition (two-word stage) (Salim and Mehawish, 2014). The data presented in this section will reflect the syntactic awareness of a Malay bilingual child who is acquiring Malay at the same time the subject was acquiring an additional language, English. However, the findings from the observation and reflection done have found that the subject has shown the capability to form complete sentences at the age of one year and one month (1:1). Another intriguing finding that is worth noting from the observation done in this study is the subject's ability to connect words from two different languages (Malay and English) in her utterances starting from the age of one-year and five months (1:5).

Table 1: *Subject's Utterances*

Age (Year/Month)	Utterances
1:1	"Bruno scratch"
1:4	"I wish under the water, bubble"
1:5	"Sleepy, *nak tidur*"
1:5	"It so good, *sedapnya*" "It so fun, *seronoknya*"

At the age of (1:1), the subject syntactic awareness can be seen from the use of correct and basic grammatical structures of (noun + verb). The subject's

expression of "Bruno scratch" can be considered a simple sentence. However, it is mentioned by Clark and Casillas (2015) that during the second stage of language acquisition, children will usually begin to use 'one-word' to express their feelings, thoughts, or emotions. The second stage of language acquisition commonly starts at the age of 9 to 18 months. However, when it comes to the subject's sentence production, it does not reflect the second stage of language acquisition. In this sense, the subject was able to use a complete set of principles to convey meaning by using the (noun + verb) rules. At the same time, the subject has used the expression of "Bruno scratch" in the Malay language as well. For example, '*Bruno cakar'*.

These two expressions were used interchangeably by the subject. From the observation and reflection made, it seemed to indicate that during this age, the subject's capability in forming a three-word sentence and switching language could be a reflection of the effect of the home linguistics environment. This is because, during this age, the subject was surrounded by a lot of family members that speak Malay and English, but they are more dominant towards the English language. As eloquently said by Oxford and Spieker (2005), a home linguistics environment would also be one of the predictors of early language development for children.

By the age of (1:4), the subject's sentence production has become longer. Brown (1973), children's syntactic awareness can be measured by assessing the length of the child's utterance. When it comes to measuring children's syntactic awareness, their spontaneous sentence production can be analysed. In this case, the subject's sentence production from forming a two-word sentence at the age of (1:1) to forming up to 6 words per spontaneous production at the age of (1:4) can be considered impressive. From the analysis of this data, it is found that the utterance "I wish under the water, bubbles" made by the subject is coming from a song lyric. The lyrics of the song came from the Disney movie 'Moana' titled "How Far I'll Go". The original lyrics of the song are "I wish, I could be a perfect daughter...". However, after analysing the subject's utterance, it can seem that the subject has shown a positive outcome in terms of her syntactic awareness.

This is due to the fact that the subject was able to make a connection between the word 'water' and 'bubbles' even though it was not the original lyrics and was able to create a sentence by using the word 'under'. From the observation, the subject's favourite movie is Disney movies. As stated by Wirawan and Hapsari (2018), the soundtrack of the movie Disney is proven to have positively impacted children's language development. In this case, the use of a wide selection of vocabularies in the movies' soundtrack has helped the subject to build up her language development. From here, it is understood that her

capability to connect words in order to convey meaning is the result of spending a great deal of time watching Disney's movies. Hence, this suggests that the home musical environment does make an impact on a child's syntactic development and awareness.

Lastly, at the age of (1:5), the subject appears to combine two languages in the same sentences. The subject's expression of "sleepy, *nak tidur*" has shown that the subject is fully aware of what she was saying. As said by Clevedon (1987), bilingual children commonly mix both languages unconsciously. This is due to the fact that bilingual children are using the lexical capacities that they have acquired from both languages in order to comprehend the meaning. From the observation, the word sleepy does interconnect with the Malay phrase '*nak tidur*' which means 'I want to sleep' in English. The same goes with the subject's expressions on "It's so good, *sedapnya*" and "it's so fun, *seronoknya*".

The word '*seronoknya*' is a direct translation of the expression 'so fun'. Whereas, the word 'sedapnya' refers to an expression of 'the food is delicious'. Referring to the subject's sentence productions, it may have seemed that the subject has successfully conveyed the intended meaning. Referring to this, the subject's language mixing phenomenon can be explained. This phenomenon happened because starting from the age of (1:4), the subject's parents have decided to send her off to a playschool where the teachers are dominant in the Malay language.

The subject would spend a total of 10 hours in the playschool interacting with teachers and friends. Therefore, the language interference that happened to the subject may be caused by the playschool's linguistic environment. Plus, through the analysis of the subject's utterances, the subject managed to produce an adult-like sentence production even though her age reflected the second stage of language acquisition.

In this case, it is understood that the subject's syntactic awareness has developed despite the mixing of both languages. Nevertheless, the fact that the subject has the capabilities to keep track of the links between words used in her utterances to comprehend meaning is a result of the positive development of syntactic awareness. Hence, from the analysis, the subject's early linguistic development especially in syntactic awareness could be a result of the linguistic environment in the subject's playschool.

Although the findings from the observation of a Malay bilingual child have shown that the role of interactions is vital in influencing the subject's syntactic awareness, the issue with the subject's cognitive abilities should also be discussed. This is due to the fact that even though environmental influences may be the main variable in this study, the subject's abilities to map words into referents and make a connection between words across languages have shown that

cognitivist theory is also vital in the subject's language acquisition. For instance, the subject's sentence production at the age of (1:1) has demonstrated the use of basic grammar structure in the sentence production of both languages. The same goes with the subject's sentence production at the age of (1:4).

The observation of the subject's utterances has revealed the cognitive ability of the child in making links to the words from the movie. This is due to the fact that the Disney movie Moana is mainly based on water. The subject's ability to create spontaneous lyrics by using the expression "under the water, bubbles" has shown that the subject has the capability of stringing words to another, in a relevant manner. This may indicate that the cognitivist idea of Universal Grammar is significantly correlated with the subject's ability to construct a sentence and use the same language principle in different languages (Dabrowska, 2015).

5. CONCLUSION

To conclude, the difference in the environment may be one of the predictors of developing children's early linguistic abilities. Home linguistic environment, home musical environment, and playschool linguistic environment have revealed the capabilities in influencing children's syntactic awareness. Significantly, children's cognitive abilities are equally essential in the area of early language development and language acquisition. However, this study will not generalize the findings to the whole population of the bilingual child who is acquiring both languages, Malay and English at the same time. Apart from that, this study will not only be beneficial to bilingual children, but it is also equally important to multilingual or monolingual children. On the ground of this, a positive environment from parents and caretakers is crucial in helping children's language abilities as it can provide the children with a higher chance to develop early language acquisition.

REFERENCES

Brown, R. (1974). A first language: the early stages. Cambridge, Mass: Harvard University Press, 1973. *Journal of Child Language*, *1*(2), 289–307.

Canfield, C. F., Edelson, L. R., & Saudino, K. J. (2016). Genetic and environmental links between natural language use and cognitive ability in toddlers. *Child Development*, *88*(2), 573–583.

Clark, E. V., & Casillas, M. (2015). *First language acquisition* (pp. 327-344). Routledge.

Clevedon, A. (1987) Raising children bilingually: the pre-school years: Multilingual Matters. *Child Language Teaching and Therapy*, *4*(1), 114.

Dąbrowska, E. (2015). What exactly is Universal Grammar, and has anyone seen it? *Frontiers in Psychology*, *6*.

Logan, J. A. R., Hart, S. A., Cutting, L., Deater-Deckard, K., Schatschneider, C., & Petrill, S. (2013). Reading Development in Young Children: Genetic and Environmental Influences. *Child Development*, *84*(6), 2131–2144.

Oxford, M., & Spieker, S. (2006). Preschool language development among children of adolescent mothers. *Journal of applied developmental psychology*, *27*(2), 165–182.

Pourcain, B., Cents, R. A., Whitehouse, A. J., Haworth, C. M., Davis, O. S., O'Reilly, P. F., Roulstone, S., Wren, Y., Ang, Q. W., Velders, F. P., Evans, D. M., Kemp, J. P., Warrington, N. M., Miller, L., Timpson, N. J., Ring, S. M., Verhulst, F. C., Hofman, A., Rivadeneira, F., Davey Smith, G. (2014). Common variation near ROBO2 is associated with expressive vocabulary in infancy. *Nature Communications*, *5*(1).

Salehuddin, K. (2012). The acquisition of English negative constructions by a Malay bilingual child. *3L: The Southeast Asian Journal of English Language Studies*, *18*(4), 181-191.

Salim, J. A., & Mehawesh, M. (2014). Stages in language acquisition: A case study. *English Language and Literature Studies*, *4*(4), 16.

Tunmer, W. E., & Grieve, R. (1984). Syntactic Awareness in Children. *Springer Series in Language and Communication*, 92–104.

Wirawan, F. W., & Hapsari, P. D. (2018). Walt Disney's Movie Soundtracks as Media in Developing Character Education for Children. *Resital: Jurnal Seni Pertunjukan*, *19*(1), 18–27.

Wojcik, E. H. (2013). Remembering new words: integrating early memory development into word learning. *Frontiers in Psychology*, *4*.

Yairi, E., & Ambrose, N. (1992). Onset of stuttering in preschool children. *Journal of Speech, Language, and Hearing Research*, *35*(4), 782–788.