

Language diversity: Appendix Two

A practical summary of theories of language development

Nkidi Phatudi, 2019

Sociocultural theory and language development

Lev Vygotsky is a well-known advocate of the sociocultural theory of cognitive development. According to Gordon and Browne (2014: 116), Vygotsky's work is called *sociocultural* because it focusses on how values, beliefs, skills and traditions are transmitted to the next generation. Vygotsky asserted that the child is embedded in the family and culture of their community and that much of a child's development is culturally specific (Gordon & Browne, 2014: 116). Vygotsky highlighted that children's language skills develop through play (Bester et al., 2019: 25).

Language plays an important role in learning and development. As such it also plays an important role in transmitting culture to the next generation. Language acquisition takes place long before birth. An expectant mother communicates with her infant intimately. Therefore the first voice that a child hears is their mother's. For instance, she may say, "*Mommy is tired now and wants to take a nap.*" or "*We are hungry now, let us have our dinner.*" The infant gets to know the mother's voice and after birth, the baby is able to hear the mother's voice even if she is in another room.

Even before the child can talk, adults will speak to the child or ask questions as if expecting a response. For instance, we may say, "*Ilambile ingane yami?*" (Is my child hungry?) or "*Ifuna ukudla iphalishi ingane yami?*" (Does my child want to eat porridge?) We sing lullabies or traditional songs for children. As the child grows up, they become familiar with their surroundings and other members of the family. The child observes, touches, tastes, listens and explores different things in her environment before being able to say their names. For example, a child may take a spoon and try to eat. Since the child cannot pronounce the name spoon, we might help by saying, "*Isipunu*" (Spoon) or say it in a sentence, "*O uphetho isipunu?*" (Oh, you have a spoon?) Hutaaruk (2015: 55) indicates that to serve their communication desires, children may make a choice to use similar words, or even made-up words, to stand in for words they do not know. This provides adults with an opportunity to guide the child towards new knowledge.

Vygotsky developed the theory of the Zone of Proximal Development (ZPD). According to Kalpana (2014: 28), the ZPD refers to 'the range of tasks that are too difficult for children to accomplish independently' but can attain mastery if they are provided assistance and guidance by the adults or more able peers. By 9–18 months (holophrastic stage), children are able to utter single words that represent a sentence (Hutaaruk, 2015: 51). The child may point to their bottle on the table and say, "*Thatha*" (Take). A mother might say, "*O ucela Mama akunike ibhodlela.*" (You are asking me to give you the bottle.) The mother is trying to help the child to speak in a sentence. The mother does not force the child but tries to reinforce the child's verbal behavior and bridge the gap between the child's existing linguistic competence and their potential development towards *baby talk* (Hutaaruk, 2015: 51). The parent provides support for the child to build on prior knowledge, to move from doing something with help to doing something independently. This is often referred to as scaffolding.

Vygotsky's theories emphasise the role that language plays in the child's learning, as it helps the child to construct meaning which assists discovery (de Witt, 2016: 6). Vygotsky believes that conversations with older people support children's learning and development both cognitively and linguistically.

Cognitive theory

Gordon and Browne (2014: 110) contend that cognitive theory describes the structure and development of human thought processes and how these processes affect the way a person understands and perceives the world. According to Hutauruk (2015: 54), cognitive theorists believe that language is a subordinate part of cognitive development and one aspect of human cognition. The prominent player in this theory is Jean Piaget (1896–1980). Piaget is well-known for advocating the four major stages of cognitive development, namely the sensorimotor stage (0–2 years), the pre-operational stage (2–6 years), the concrete operational stage (6–12 years) and the formal operational stage (12 years–adulthood). Piaget asserted that every child of normal intelligence goes through these four stages, although the rate that they go through the stages depends on the individual and experience (Gordon & Browne, 2014: 111).

Piaget's point of departure is that every time an adult interacts with a child, the child's cognitive structure changes. This means that every time a child is in a conversation with an adult, the child's language structure changes or improves. According to the theory, language acquisition is most rapid during the ages of 2 and 3 years and teachers should take this opportunity to introduce children to a lot of new experiences and vocabulary. Teachers in early childhood spaces should create language-rich environments to help children develop broad vocabulary and opportunities to talk about what they see.

Piaget, like Vygotsky, stated that children's language skills develop through play. Young children can learn effectively through play. To encourage this learning, from birth onwards, adults should play with their children, sing traditional songs and make gestures to engage the children.

Chomsky's nativist theory

Chomsky's nativist theory asserts that language behavior is innate and that a child's language acquisition is not influenced by stimuli outside the child (Kasman et al., 2014: 1315). Chomsky proposed that children are born with an innate language acquisition device (LAD) which encodes the major principles of a language and its grammatical structures into the child's brain (de Witt, 2016: 6). Chomsky argues that the LAD explains why a child is able to learn a language even though the language spoken around them may be highly irregular – adult speech is often broken up and sometimes even ungrammatical (de Witt, 2016: 6). According to Chomsky, children are able to learn to communicate even without adult intervention (Kasman et al., 2014: 1315). Nativist theorists regard language as a maturation process through which innate language-learning capacities develop as they mature.

Multilingualism and translanguaging

In South Africa, people from diverse cultural backgrounds and speaking different languages live together. Most South African children spend the first six years of their lives in an environment where more than one language is spoken. Makalela (2014) asserts that in Black South African townships, such as Soweto and Alexander, children grow up in a mixture of languages that are dynamically linked together. The notion of a *mother tongue* has become irrelevant to a large extent in this complex multilingual context. Teachers and parents need to understand this complex social context of the society in which children grow up. Teachers should also possess a sound knowledge of how to teach language in a multilingual context.

Multilingualism refers to the ability of a speaker to express themselves in several languages with equal and native-like proficiency (Okal, 2014). Multilingualism, as an extension of cultural diversity and as an integral part of building a non-racial South Africa, encourages social cohesion.

Makalela (2014: 17) maintains that when more than one language is used to access the same content, children develop a deeper understanding of that content. For language teaching, translanguaging is a useful strategy to develop a language through cross-transfer of skills between the language skill sets that children already possess. According to García, (2011: 7) translanguaging does not recognise boundaries between languages but focuses on what the speakers do with their language. From the language skills children have, they select language features and adapt their language practices in ways that fit their communicative needs.

References

- Bester, M., Meyer, E., Evans, R. & Phatudi, N. 2019. *Literacy in the Foundation Phase*. 3rd edition. Pretoria: Van Schaik.
- De Witt, M.W. 2016. *The young child in context: a psycho-social perspective*. 2nd edition. Cape Town: Van Schaik.
- Garcia, O. 2011. From language garden to sustainable languaging: bilingual education in a global world. *Perspectives*, 34(1): 5–9.
- Gordon, A.M. & Browne, K.W. 2014. *Beginnings and beyond: foundations in early childhood education*. 10th ed. Melbourne: Centage Learning.
- Hutauruk, B.S. 2015. Children first language acquisition at age 1–3 years old in Balata. *Journal of Humanities and Social Science*, 20(8): 51–57.
- Kalpana, K. 2014. A constructivist perspective on teaching and learning: a conceptual framework. *International Research Journal of Social Science*, 3(1): 27–29.
- Kasman, N., Kaseng, S., Hanafie, S. & Daeng, K. 2014. The effectiveness of stimulus to the language acquisition of the early age child. *Journal of Language Teaching and Research*, 5(6): 1315–1321.
- Makalela, L. 2014. Teaching indigenous African languages to speakers of other African languages: the effects of translanguaging for multilingual development. In C. Van der Walt & L. Hibbert (Eds), *Multilingual teaching and learning in higher education in South Africa*. Bristol: Multilingual Matters. 88–104.
- Okal, B.O. 2014. Benefits of multilingualism in education. *Universal Journal of Educational Research*, 2(3): 223–229.