

**How children learn and develop from birth
Drawing on differing perspectives of child
development, critically discuss the
importance of a rich language
environment from birth to eight,
and its relevance to a child
becoming a ‘social being’.**

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This paper will critically discuss the importance of a language-rich environment and different child development perspectives from birth to three whilst exploring this age range. It will look at how language develops and essential factors that may influence language development to support a child to become a "social being". The research undertaken for this assignment will consider psychology, sociology and health theorists and research. It will also link development and factors that may shape a language environment, such as social, cultural, economic, and political factors. Halliday (1978) highlights the importance of language acquisition and states it is both a cultural and social practice; he states, "In the development of the child as a social being, language has the central role. Language is the main channel through which the patterns of living are transmitted to him, through which he learns to act as a member of a 'society'... and to adopt its 'culture'" Halliday (1978, p. 9). Theorists such as Bloom (1964) had observed and recorded the rapid rate of cognitive development during the early years of childhood and the effect of experience on this process.

Mora (2017) states that the first years of a child's life are the most important, especially the first three years for brain development. At this critical period, the brain can change physically; this is called plasticity as the brain is a moldable organ in constant change; these changes are unique and differ from each child, this is down to the education received, the environment and culture in which the child lives. Ruben (1997) says that there are essential elements to language: phonology, semantics, and syntax; there is also the time frame for critical and sensitive language development periods. Several studies support the idea that the critical and sensitive time of phonology is from around the sixth month of foetal life through to the twelfth month of life. This is followed by the critical and sensitive periods for syntax runs up to around four years old, and semantics develops up to the sixteenth year of life (Ruben 1997). A study that supports the idea of a critical and sensitive period of language acquisition is the case of Genie, the "feral child" who, due to neglect, never learned language skills as she was not exposed to a rich language environment when young, which consequently resulted in her never being able to acquire verbal language. Vygotsky's (cited by MacBlain) theory of language development focused on learning in a social environment and the zone of proximal development this is something that Genie the "feral child" never had the opportunity for in the critical stage of language development. Language development is closely linked with cognitive development, and critical theorists in cognitive development also highlight the importance of both. Jean Piaget's (cited by MacBlain, 2018) theory of language development states that children use both assimilation and accommodation to develop and learn language. Piaget felt that for children to develop the skill of language acquisition, they must first develop mental structures in the mind, and from this, language develops. There is criticism of Piaget's work; most of this revolves around the methods used in the research. A significant influence for his theory was the observations of his children; in addition to this, the other children observed were all from families of high socioeconomic, meaning that it is challenging to generalise his findings to a larger demographic (Hopkins 2011).

There are essential and close links to language and cognitive development but exploring language development theories on behaviour and language is also essential. Nativists such as Chomsky (1986) (cited by Kevin Crowley 2017) do not believe that language develops through imitations of behaviour and is predetermined by our biology. Chomsky believes there is some shared language commonality in everyone due to the similarities that are displayed. This means

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the learning process and development of language is an essential skill we are born with called "Language Acquisition Device" (LAD). This allows children to develop and acquire language in their own time and way, believing children automatically learn language without the need of formal instruction. Chomsky observed that all children will make similar language errors irrespective of what they are taught and that there is a set of grammatical rules that all human languages share. It is essential to highlight that Chomsky does not identify the brain areas that allow humans' instinctive language capability. Chomsky theory of language acquisition is held with high regard and still referred to today; it does have its weaknesses. The biggest weakness being that there does not appear to be enough evidence supporting his ideas on the language acquisition device as this would be seen as unethical to trial this experiment. Although there has been some research involving Genie the "feral child", there is not enough evidence to support his theory outright. Skinner (cited by Matthew Saxon 2010) argued all children who learn language are rewarded by parents or primary caregivers and believed children learn language through operant conditioning. Skinner also suggested that children learn language through imitation of other people; this interaction can also be linked to the early development of the theory of mind and early child language acquisition using joint attention. Issues with Skinner's theory are down to the levels of cognitive development in both the child and the adult who is supporting the language development, as well as the environment this takes place in, as in some cases if there is no object of reference – this could be in-home learning there could be no support on language acquisition; this is supported by Matte-Gagné and Bernier (2011) research paper that states that there are links between the cognitive development of a parent and the impact this can have on the language development of a child as well as their social and emotional development and further state that children who are in cognitive stimulating environments in early childhood are at an advantage in the learning process.

Poverty is linked with numerous factors leading to poor social interactions, with language development being limited as a prominent factor as well as brain development (Hart B et al. 1995). Hart and Risley's (1995) study on the education of parents and the use of words in the home highlighted that the total number of words spoken at home varied between families, and the usage of words was the most important factor of language growth for a child. The correlation between poverty and language growth meant less educated caregivers have been shown to use fewer words when communicating with children. They use less complex syntax and fewer references to events that are not in the present-day. The early years' development is the most crucial time of development. Children who are born into poverty or very low-income families face significant challenges (Power et al. 2013).

Language is one of the three critical areas in the early years foundation stage and aims to ensure that all children have opportunity to experience a language-rich environment, develop their confidence in skills in expression and speak and listen in a range of situations. Macblain (2018) writes that children do not play out on the streets anymore, spending more time in the home or settings of education such as nurseries and schools. In an early year setting, there is usually an emphasis on language play children learn through listening to songs, rhyming poems and nursery rhymes. As the children develop it allows play to become more structured with defined rules and expectations. Bakken, Brown and Downing's (2017) research shows that children who have the opportunity to attend early years setting have good levels of interaction with other children which

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is beneficial for language and communication development. There is a marked increase in the language development of children at a critical age of 3 and attending nursery promotes both language and cognitive skills.

In conclusion, there is a clear and vital timeframe for language acquisition, and this is a critical time of development for children in all areas. There is also a sensitive period of language development up to the age of 16, allowing children to widen their use and development of language. There is clear evidence to support nativists such as Chomsky's as well as Skinner's theory on nurture and language development; whilst both theorists provide valuable and important ideas into the acquisition of language, both have their weaknesses too, and they must be taken into consideration. The factors mentioned above, poverty and early years settings, affect the language development in their own way whilst some are detrimental in the development of language. The promotion of language development in early years settings is important as it allows children to develop language in real-life situations with peers. Children need to be exposed to language throughout their early years to develop their language fully and need to be given opportunities in real-life situations. Without these opportunities the limitations of language acquisition can have ramifications on cognitive and social development.

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