Child’s Language Acquisition: A Mentalist Approach

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Abstract
The study of how children and even adults in some cases acquire language proves to be very fascinating. Humans acquire language in a very complicated way that cannot be explained just in a simple manner. This paper therefore, examines mentalist theory and second language with reference to Igbo language. The theory of behaviourism was examined independently as it was the shortcomings that were noticed that gave rise to the subject matter (mentalist theory) under discussion. The paper further x-rays the background of mentalist theory, mentalist theory and children’s acquisition and learning of Igbo language, main precepts of the mentalist theory, counter arguments on mentalist theory and finally conclusion.

Introduction
As psycholinguists and linguists turned their attention and interest towards the study of language acquisition, quite a number of different theories of language acquisition have been put forward. As new ideas developed however, old approaches are discarded and new ones are celebrated. Usually the new ones begin as reactions against the older ones with particular focus on the weaknesses of the old ones. The reactions and counter reactions gave birth to behaviorists’ theory, mentalists’ theory, cognitivists theory, monitor theory, socio-cultural theory, communicative approach and the likes. In this paper, attention is paid to the mentalist language acquisition theory that was advanced by Noam Chomsky in 1960s. According to this theory, the child comes into the world with very specific innate knowledge which includes general predispositions and tendencies as well as knowledge of the nature of language and the world. To the proponents of this theory then, the speaker's inborn knowledge (Innateness Position) of language, not the consequences of behaviour, can be held responsible for the acquisition of language. It is against this background that the writer feels that there is the need to lucidly x-ray the shortcomings of behaviorism before delving properly into the mentalist theory/approach to second language with reference to the truthfulness of the theory in relation to the acquisition process in Igbo language.

Review of Related Literature
Behaviourist theory is the first coherent theory of language learning that was developed by Pavlov and Skinner (Hutchinson & Waters, 1986). The theory emphasizes observable and verifiable aspects of human behaviour. Therefore, it asserts the inevitability of factors such as imitation, pattern practice and reinforcement in language acquisition. Nevertheless, the theory does not represent a comprehensive theory of language learning because of its failure to recognize the occurrences of certain features of innate predispositions in language acquisition. The rationalists
contend that these three factors are necessary but not sufficient conditions for speech development in children.

Also, behaviourism deals only with performance. That is, what the child says or does at the expense of competence which has to do with what the child knows or is capable of knowing/doing. Skinner’s exposition is further vitiated by his denial of any roles to meaning and grammatical rules in language use. Many linguists and psycholinguists believe that meaning and grammar play crucial roles in language acquisition and use as they help to stabilize interpretation in the face of relativism of perception and displacement of objects. The claim by Skinner (1937) cited in Aliu (2003) that the fundamental learning processes of animals and men are the same cannot be justified. This is because human behaviour cannot be adequately accounted for by applying principles derived from laboratory work on small animals. And the training of animals to speak human language still goes on unabatedly because one of the fundamental attributes of human language is specie-specific. So, animals cannot be equated with human being. In addition, imitation is not a sufficient condition for language acquisition to the extent that children who could not speak due to neurological or physiological problems (and therefore, could not imitate or mimic) were able to understand people around them. They were also able to use/speak language (comparable to their age-mates) after they had overcome their speech impairments (Frompkin and Rodman, 1978 cited in Aliu, 2003). Imitation and echoism is no doubt a salient strategy for language learning and early phonological acquisition, but that still remains at the level of surface structure. However, at the level of deep structure (semantics) and some aspects of surface structure (complex/embedded sentences), children are not able to imitate correctly. Innatists further contend that reinforcement plays just a passive role in speech development because what is often effectively corrected by parents is either the pronunciation or content that is, the truth-value of the utterances of their children. Attempt to correct children’s grammar are usually futile. Moreover, language acquisition cannot be reduced to a reward and punishment phenomenon because children do not always utter words/sentences simply because of the reward or praise accruing to speaking. In fact, before reward or corrections are made, something ought to have been uttered.

Lastly, behaviourism is rather mechanistic and at best contributes to explaining the development of surface structure of language. Behaviorism cannot adequately account for man’s capacity to acquire language, or the development of language itself.

The mentalist theory otherwise called the innatist or rationalist theory of language learning was developed in America by Noam Chomsky first and later by Eric H. Lennenberg (a neuropsychologist). The theory came up as a reaction against the behaviorist language learning theory, and contradicted its precedent at almost every point of basic structure. Innatists generally claim that no creature other than the human being possess and uses a vocalized system of symbols of communication. The knowledge of language and the ability to use it are inborn in Homo sapiens.
A child is preprogrammed to speak a language whether he likes it or not because a Language Acquisition Device (LAD) has been “wired into his brain” from birth. Chomsky (1965) cited in Adegbite (2009) recognizes two major properties of language-creativity and rule-governance-which make it special to human beings. The enabling foundation for creativity in language must therefore be in the child as a human being. Rule governance or structure dependence defines grammaticality, which in turn, in its widest sense, language and this Chomsky called rule governance in language (Adegbite, 2009). The major principle of Mentalist language acquisition theory is that “everybody learns a language, not because they are subjected to a similar conditioning process, but because they possess an inborn capacity which permits them to acquire a language as a normal maturational process” (Wilkins, 1972: 168 cited in Demizeren, 1989). Chomsky (1968) in his book titled Aspects of the Theory of Syntax, claims that the child has innate properties of language because he/she masters his/her native language in a very short time in spite of the highly abstract nature of rules. After this, in an article entitled Linguistic Theory Chomsky called this innate knowledge Language Acquisition Device (LAD hereafter). He insisted that every human being is born into a society with a Language Acquisition Device (LAD) which embodies the nature and structure of human language. LAD is what counts for language acquisition where in environment is just there to trigger-off the LAD.

LAD, in fact, was offered by Chomsky as an explanation why children develop competence in learning a first language in a relatively short time, just by being exposed to it, owing to the fact that every normal human being is born with a LAD. In a similar vein, the additional notion propounded by Mentalist language learning theory is that the learning capacity of human being by definition is not only universal but also innate, and this innate capacity is not something to be obtained socially. In other words, language learning is not socially-oriented. Then, language learning and its environment must be viewed as a biologically acquired process rather than a result of social learning. In the end, the Chomskian doctrine came up to support the fact that universals of language were a set of rules programmed in the brains of only human infants. The LAD was later referred to as Universal Grammar (UG), which was described “as a specialized module of the brain, pre-programmed to process language” (Spada and Lightbown, 2002:116). Universal Grammar (UG) permits the child to acquire language during a particular developmental period, called critical period for language acquisition. At each learning level, the child subconsciously form hypotheses, and lists them in his/her linguistic formations and thus he/she induces rules from his/her data.

Associated with the nativist theory, although from a biological perspective is Lennenberg’s (1967) assertion that a child must grow to talk barring physiological deformities or mental complications. According to him, the critical age at which language becomes difficult is at puberty.in order to buttress the mentalist theory, instances from the Igbo are cited below.

Mentalist Theory and Children’s Acquisition: The Example of Igbo Language
The inborn mechanism for learning Igbo language in children’s mind works through a unique process. After birth, a child is exposed to language utterances like ‘bia (come), nri (food), ura’ (sleep), akwaa’ (cry) etc which start to manipulate the learning levels as the child grows up in his family. At each learning level, the child subconsciously forms up hypotheses, and tests them in his linguistic formations and thus he induces rules from his data. As he discovers that his hypotheses fall short for his utterances he rechecks them and makes the necessary modifications and then induces new rules. As he grows up more and more, his hypotheses become gradually complex, and by applying them to his performance he, by and by, becomes a competent speaker of the language he is born into. By 18 months of age he forms up two or three- word sentences like ‘ego-sweet’. ‘nri-rice’ etc that are known as telegraphic utterances that signal his competence over the language. In this way, right from his birth up to his childhood he builds up an internal adult grammar of his native language through these hypotheses. Then, the mentalist view of the language and use accepts the fact that speakers make conscious choices when they speak. Their use of language reflects their thoughts, which may be entirely original and unpredictable (Jones and Wheeler, 1983: 329). Supporting this argument, Chomsky and Wilkins (1972) cited in Aliu (2003) states that:

Since all normal human being learn their language successfully, they must possess some internal capacity for language that other animals do not have since this capacity cannot have been acquired socially, it must be innate.

This innately determined device is what Clark (1975) cited in Aliu (2003) called **Language Acquisition Device (LAD)**. For example, an Igbo child acquiring language can be assessed, using strings of utterances like:

1. **Igbo Language**
   - **Mama**: Bia rie nri
   - **Nwata**: Bia nri

   **English Language**
   - **Mother**: Come and eat
   - **Child**: Come eat

2. **Igbo Language**
   - **Mama**: Ga gwoo egwu
   - **Nwata**: Gu egu

   **English Language**
   - **Mother**: Go and play
   - **Child**: Go Play

3. **Igbo Language**
   - **Mama**: Ga dee ihe
Nwata: de ihe

**English Language**
*Mother:* Go and write
*Child:* Go write

The above example clearly revealed that the linguistic output of the child was quite different from that of the mother. The child tends to omit the conjunction “and”. Though, to the innatists both the competence and performance of the child in the language he is acquiring are necessary, but in this case, the child unconsciously form his hypothesis about the language before arriving at the linguistic output “come eat” which his creative potentials (LAD) has helped him in doing. The child was expected by his mother to say “come and eat” but he ended up communicating meaning by the help of his inbuilt potentials (LAD).

Below is a sketch of diagram that buttressed further this claim using instance from Igbo language:

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The possession of a LAD, creative ability of the child’s knowledge of the grammar of his/her language (Igbo) (HMD) and the ability to evaluate grammars because of his knowledge of UG all combine to form the child’s LAD. But it is worthy of note here that, the child’s exposure to Igbo language in the environment is a necessary and sufficient condition for language acquisition and learning. Hence, it is this exposure that helps trigger-off the LAD in the child.

**Main Precepts of the Mentalist Theory**
Chomsky, who is the originator of the mentalist theory, made a serious attack on the thesis and concepts established by Skinner's behaviorist practice. Chomsky’s principal criticism of behaviorist language learning is based on the argument that a language learning theory in the way behaviorist psychology processes it cannot account for the development of language and its learning, owing to the following reasons:

1. Language learning is of inborn nature for the most part, and therefore language is not a habit structure/formation. In addition, language learning and language development are a biological process, having nothing to do with the results of social learning. For this reason, human knowledge is embodied as LAD at birth and develops via structures, processes; and ideas, which are all mental developments. Language acquisition is innately determined. This innate property “whose, nature and mode of operation are inviolable” (Wilkins, 1972: 171), otherwise known as LAD, has got the following features:
   a) The power to differentiate speech sounds from each other,
   b) The capacity to organize linguistic events into various classes that can easily be redefined after wards,
   c) Knowledge specifying the possible linguistic system and rejecting the impossible and inadmissible ones,

2. The linguistics behavior is not composed of responses to stimuli, that is, of S ---> R relationship; and it is not a matter of habit-formation and generalization. S --->R theory is so limited, the problem of language acquisition simply falls beyond its domain” (McNeil, 1966: 412). The stimuli-response is therefore nonsense, for a child uses his cognitive capacity to discover the structure of the language spoken around him. Moreover, Behaviorist theory mostly analyzed animal behavior in laboratory, but human behavior is much more complex than animal behavior. Language behavior is so unique to humans that it can never be explained by means of animal behavior. Not the external environment and its resulting responses but innate environment is important.

3. According to Chomsky, LAD is peculiar only to human beings who use language, where as other animals do not. Since all human beings learn their language successfully they have to possess some internal capacity for language learning that other animals do not own; then, this capacity cannot have been acquired socially, therefore, it must be innate. Thus, the place of social factors in acquiring and learning a language is limited. It is the inborn capacity which is responsible for the language acquisition process.

4. Children quite often parrot the words and structures of their parents, but in many cases children’s language indicate systematic departures from the language used by their adults: then, such systematic deviations refute to deductions of a theory which relegates the learning of a language to imitative behavior. The fact here is that the children do not always imitate what they hear. For example, in terms of overgeneralization, irregular past tense verbs are infrequent in parents’ speech, and children do not often imitate such verbs but produce systematic forms like “comed”, “goed”, “doed”, “spaked, and “becomed”. And this very fact indicates that children in a majority of cases go on their own ways in speaking.
Parental frequency, approval or disapproval is very limited in terms of grammaticality because parents mostly insist on truth values of the utterances. Then, parental approval cannot be considered as reinforcement for grammaticality.

5. Analogizing and generalizations made by children are, in fact, production and application of rules, because ordinary linguistic behavior characteristically involves innovation. Formation of new sentences and new patterns in accordance with rules of great abstractness and intricacy... therefore, there are no known principles of association or reinforcement, and no known sense of generalization that can begin to account for this characteristic “creative” aspect of normal behavior” (Chomsky, 1966:48). To put it in other words, such behavioristically oriented, customary notions like imitation-practice, learn-by-doing, habit-formation, as clarified by Transformational-Generative Grammar, do not work positively to expose the linguistic creativity in language learning.

Succinctly put therefore, the mentalist theory emphasizes rules instead of habits; productivity instead of generalization; language is innate and universal human capacities instead of special methods of vocal responses (Esper Erwin, 1968: 227). The language teacher is not needed; errors are permitted because they serve as reflections of learners’ language learning or acquisition process and the role of social environment is undermined.

**Counter Arguments on Mentalist Theory**

To some extent, the mentalist theory seems complementary to behaviorist theory, whose major principles are further clarified and then developed by mentalist theorists. The following reasoning represents the fact that some of the precepts of mentalist theory should be refined.

1. Language acquisition is not totally of inborn nature nor is it just a matter of biological make-up. There is also an undeniable effect in language learning coming from the social environment since infants grow up biologically in a social environment from which they cannot be divorced. It has been argued that language acquisition and learning cannot be separated from the social environment. The presence of people such as father and mother around the child learner establishes a natural social environment. Therefore, language is not totally of inborn nature nor is it just a matter of biological make-up. Also, language learning involves learning-by-doing activity to an extent. When the child realizes that his/her hypothesis falls short, he/she makes necessary corrections or modifications (Demizeren, 1989). No one can learn to speak if there is no one around: then in this respect, innate language learning will be nothing but a fiasco.

2. At each learning level, the children forming up an hypothesis and trying it in his linguistic formations, recognizes that his hypothesis falls short, then he makes necessary modifications, all of these indicate that he still learns-by-doing a method like trial and error; thus, acquisition is also a learning-by-doing activity to an extent. Therefore, language learning is basically a mentally-oriented verbal behavior.
3. According to Whorfian hypothesis, language exerts an undeniably formative, lenitive effect on perception and cognition of language, especially in learning one’s mother tongue. In addition, the individual’s world view and his cognitive system are naturally controlled and shaped by the verbal systems of all kinds given restrictively to him by the society into which he is born into in the process of acquisition of native language. Then, it is very difficult to buy the idea that ‘the social factors have virtually no role at all’ in learning languages (Wilkins, 1972: 171-172).

4. The use and influence of imitations and reinforcements cannot totally be denied or disregarded by saying that they destroy or relegate the possible creativity in language learning. But before making a creative performance, that performance has to be established as an acquired skill whose formation can only be managed by imitations, repetitions, and reinforcements of certain doses, after a reasonable amount of which the “threshold level” (Demirezen, 1988: 138-139) of learning will naturally be established in the language learning process. However, the role of imitations and repetitions cannot be wholly denied in such areas like learning vocabulary items and structural patterns. Then, to favor a considerable dose of imitations, repetitions, and reinforcement will be reasonable, provided that they should be stopped at the junction where they harm the creative use of language.

5. Analogizing and generalizations are not entirely the application of rules and transformations, but are productions and reinforcements and can only be sophisticated by repetitions. It is true to say that in analogizing or making generalizations children commit mistakes, i.e., they utter the past tense of such irregular verbs like go, do, and make as ‘goed’, ‘doed’ and ‘maked’, which by themselves are applications. As it is apparent, not each application of rules create correct grammatical forms. It is reasonable to think that application of rules, for the most part, generates correct verbal items not the incorrect ones, though it does both.

6. It is not true to say that behaviorism is “at least quite incapable of explaining our ability to learn and use our mother tongue” (Chomsky, 1959: 26-58). On the contrary, behaviorism is a clear cut explanation of Sapir-Whorf hypothesis, which insists that one’s native tongue limits and restricts his view of the world. Moreover, there have always been negative interferences and transfers from the mother tongue in foreign language teaching process, both in competence and performance levels. The motto of behaviorism is that language is a verbal behavior, learning-by-doing activity in learning a language. Children will naturally commit mistakes while not only learning their mother tongue but also a foreign language. Thus, this claim of Chomsky is totally baseless.

Conclusion
It is an obvious fact that mentalist theory of language learning and teaching is a clear-cut challenge to many claims of behavioristic language use. A specific contribution of mentalist theory to language learning theory is that it has bestowed a strong emphasis on human language learning behavior. In other words, according to Chomsky, human behavior is considerably more
complicated. Hence, it is the submission of this paper that it is not a reliable attitude to describe and explain the human verbal behavior through the learning behavior of animals. Thus, the mentalist language learning produces meaningful and conscious learning in both children and adults.

References


