NO PREP

How Children Learn Language

Includes: Student reading, case study, differentiated questions, teacher key

Name: Period: Date:

How Children Learn Language

The Hardest Thing Anyone Ever Learns

Language acquisition is the most impressive intellectual accomplishment most people will ever manage, and nearly everyone completes it before starting school. Consider what a four-year-old has done. They have identified where one word ends and the next begins in a stream of continuous sound, extracted thousands of vocabulary items and their meanings, and inferred the grammatical rules of their language without anyone stating those rules aloud. Adults studying a second language with textbooks, instruction, and conscious effort rarely reach comparable fluency. Children do it while mostly playing. Researchers have argued for decades about how this is possible. One influential position holds that humans are born with specialized

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Before the First Word

Language development begins well before a child says anything recognizable, and the prelinguistic stage lasts about a year. Newborns already show a preference for their native language's rhythm, which they were exposed to in the womb, and they prefer human speech to other sounds from the beginning. Crying is the earliest communication, and while it is not intentional at first, caregivers quickly learn to

distinguish different cries. Cooing appears around two months, consisting of drawn-out vowel sounds. Babbling begins around six months and is the major landmark of this period, involving repeated consonant-vowel combinations such as bababa or dadada. Babbling is not random noise but is vocal practice, and it follows its own progression, beginning with sounds from many languages and narrowing over months toward the sounds of the language the baby is actually hearing. Deaf infants exposed to sign language babble with their hands, which is strong evidence that babbling is about language rather than about mouths. Gestures arrive alongside, and pointing around nine to twelve months is one of the most significant prelinguistic milestones there is, because pointing means the baby understands that attention can be shared and directed. Receptive language, meaning what a child understands, runs consistently ahead of expressive language, meaning what a child can say, and that gap persists for years. Forgetting this gap causes real problems, since adults regularly discuss a toddler as though the child cannot understand the conversation happening directly above their head, and quite often the child understands most of it.

First Words to Full Sentences

The first recognizable word typically arrives around twelve months, give or take several months, and early vocabulary grows slowly at first, reaching roughly fifty words by around eighteen months. Then something changes. Many children experience what is often called the vocabulary spurt or naming explosion, in which word learning accelerates sharply, and by age two a typical child has a few hundred words while by age six most have several thousand. Early words are heavily weighted toward things the child cares about, meaning caregivers, food, animals, and body parts, along with social words like hi and no. Around eighteen to twenty-four months, children begin combining words into two-word utterances, and this telegraphic speech keeps the content words and drops the small connecting ones, producing want cookie or mommy sock. Even these short strings follow consistent word order, which shows that grammar is already forming. From there, sentence length and complexity grow steadily, adding plurals, past tense, questions, and negation in a fairly predictable order. By age four or five, children handle complex sentences and can tell a story with a beginning, middle, and end. Pronunciation lags behind grammar and vocabulary, and some sounds, particularly r, l, s, and th, commonly remain imperfect

until age six or seven without indicating any problem at all. Adults sometimes correct these sounds aggressively, which rarely speeds anything up and can make a child self-conscious about talking, which is the opposite of what builds language.

The Mistakes That Prove the Rules

Some of the strongest evidence that children learn rules rather than memorizing phrases comes from their errors. A three-year-old who says he goed to the store or I have two foots has produced something they almost certainly never heard an adult say. That is the point. They have extracted the general rule, meaning add ed for past tense and add s for plural, and applied it to a word that happens to be irregular. Researchers call this overregularization, and it frequently produces a striking pattern where a child correctly says went at two, then switches to goed at three, then returns to went at four. The apparent backslide is actually progress, because the child moved from memorizing individual words to operating a rule, and the final stage is learning the exceptions to that rule. Other characteristic errors reveal how meaning gets sorted out. Overextension is using a word too broadly, such as calling every four-legged animal a dog, while underextension is using it too narrowly, such as applying dog only to the family pet. Both reflect a child actively testing the boundaries of a category. The useful takeaway for adults is that correcting grammar directly does very little, while recasting does more, meaning a child who says goed hears the adult reply that they went, and the correct form arrives without the exchange turning into a correction. Recasting also protects something fragile, since a child who is corrected repeatedly may simply say less, and a child who says less gets less practice at precisely the moment practice matters most.

What Actually Helps

Because language develops through interaction rather than exposure, the practices that support it are ordinary and specific. Talking to children frequently and directly is the foundation, and research consistently finds that the quantity and quality of speech addressed to a young child predicts later vocabulary and academic outcomes. Directed is the operative word, since speech aimed at the child does the work while background television does not. Reading aloud daily is unusually effective, because books contain vocabulary and sentence structures that rarely appear in everyday conversation, and shared reading naturally creates the back-and-forth that builds language. Responding to what a child says, expanding on it, and asking open questions

all extend an exchange rather than closing it, and the child who says truck and hears yes, that is a big red garbage truck has just received far more than a confirmation. Child-directed speech, the slower higher-pitched exaggerated register adults use with babies, turns out to be genuinely useful rather than silly, since it holds infant attention and highlights the boundaries between sounds. Bilingualism deserves a specific note because the myths are persistent. Learning two languages does not cause language delay or confusion, and while bilingual children may have slightly smaller vocabularies in each individual language early on, their total vocabulary across both is comparable and any early differences typically even out. The persistent advice to drop the home language in favor of the school language is not supported by the evidence, and it costs a child the ability to talk with their own family.

Key Information: Language Development

Detail	Information
Cooing	Drawn-out vowel sounds, beginning around 2 months
Babbling	Repeated consonant-vowel strings, beginning around 6 months
Pointing	About 9-12 months; shows the child grasps shared attention
First Word	Around 12 months, with a wide normal range
Telegraphic Speech	Two-word phrases at 18-24 months; content words only
Receptive vs. Expressive	Understanding always runs ahead of speaking
Overregularization	Errors like goed or foots; proof a rule was learned
Bilingualism	Does not cause delay or confusion; total vocabulary is comparable

Case Study: The Boy Who Started Saying Goed

Amara's son Theo said went correctly for almost a year. He is three now, and last month he started saying goed instead. He also says foots and mouses, and yesterday he told her that he catched the ball. Amara is worried enough that she brings it up at his checkup, describing it as her son getting worse at talking. The pediatrician asks her to repeat the examples, then tells her these are some of the most reassuring words a three-year-old can produce. Theo did not forget went. He figured out that English marks past tense by adding a sound to the end of a verb, and he is now applying that rule everywhere, including to words that break it. The pediatrician tells her not to drill him and suggests she simply say it back correctly in her own reply, so that when Theo says he catched it, she answers that he caught it. Amara asks how long it takes. Roughly a year, and then he will say caught again and never think about it.

1. Explain why the pediatrician treats goed as progress rather than as a language problem.

2. The pediatrician suggested recasting instead of drilling. Explain why that approach is recommended.

Multiple Choice

1. A three-year-old says foots instead of feet. What does the reading call this error?

a) Telegraphic speech

b) Overextension

c) Underextension

d) Overregularization

2. Why does the reading treat hand babbling by deaf infants as important evidence?

a) It shows sign language learning occurs much later than speech

b) It shows babbling is about language rather than about mouths

c) It shows babbling is random noise with no real function

d) It shows receptive language lags behind expressive language

3. Which statement about raising a bilingual child does the reading support?

a) It reliably delays the first word by approximately one year

b) It causes lasting confusion between the two grammars

c) It does not cause delay, and total vocabulary is comparable

d) It requires dropping one language before starting school

Matching

Write the letter of the correct definition on the line next to each term.

Term	Definition
1. ___ Babbling	A) Two-word phrases that keep content words and drop connecting ones
2. ___ Telegraphic speech	B) Repeated consonant-vowel practice sounds beginning around six months
3. ___ Overregularization	C) Using a word too broadly, such as calling every animal a dog
4. ___ Overextension	D) Replying with the correct form instead of directly correcting the child
5. ___ Recasting	E) Applying a grammar rule to a word that is actually an exception

Fill-in-the-Blank

1. Repeated sounds such as bababa are called _____.

2. What a child understands is called _____ language.

3. Saying goed instead of went is called _____.

Short Answer

Answer each question in 2-4 complete sentences.

1. Explain why a child's grammar errors are evidence of learning rather than of failure.

_____

_____

_____

2. Explain why background television does not build language the way conversation does.

3. Explain why reading aloud builds language beyond what ordinary conversation provides.