



GOMBE SAVANNAH

**JOURNAL OF LANGUAGE, LITERATURE AND
COMMUNICATION STUDIES (GOSAJOLLCOS)**



**DEPARTMENT OF LANGUAGES
AND LINGUISTICS
GOMBE STATE UNIVERSITY**

**Volume 6 Number 1
JUNE, 2025**



Savannah Journal of Language, Literature and Communication Studies (SAJOLLCOS)
Vol. 6 No. 1: June, 2025 — ISSN: 2787-0286 & 2811-2261 (Online & Print)

**SAVANNAH JOURNAL OF LANGUAGE, LITERATURE AND COMMUNICATION
STUDIES (SAJOLLCOS)**

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VOLUME 6, NO. 1, JUNE 2025

ISSN: ONLINE: 2811-2261, PRINT: 2787-0286

**A Publication of Department of Languages and Linguistics
Gombe State University, Gombe State**

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(SAJOLLCOS) Gombe State University, Gombe State. Volume 6, No. 1 June, 2025.



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ISSN: 2787-0286 Print & 2811-2261 Online

Printed in Nigeria @Six-Sweet Printers and Publishers

GSU, Gombe, Gombe State.

Phone No: +2348039511789

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Gombe Savannah Journal of Language, Literature and Communication Studies (GOSAJOLLCOS) is a peer-reviewed journal of the Department of English, Gombe State University. The journal is committed to the development of communication arts through researches in Language, Linguistics, Literature, Theatre Arts, Cultural Studies, Creative Arts, Media and Communication Studies. It has both print and online versions. The Editorial board hereby calls for thoroughly researched papers and articles on the subject areas already mentioned. Submissions of papers are accepted all year round but publication is expected to be done in May/June annually. All manuscripts should be accompanied with the sum of ten thousand (**₦10,000**) naira only. On acceptance of any manuscript, contributors will pay the sum of twenty five thousand (25,000) naira only as publication fee.



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An Overview of Language Acquisition Processes: A Review Approach

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Abstract

Language is a behavior that is found and applied in communication among human beings. It involves structures, rules and representation, which is acquired through complex processes. A comparison of the processes of language acquisition revealed a common pattern between and among all languages irrespective of whether it is the mother tongue or a second language. The stages of language accomplishments include silent/receptive, early production, speech emergence, intermediate fluency and continued language development/advanced fluency. The paper also examines the language development theories and identified the psycholinguistic, the learning-based and functionalist theories, which represent two contending views, where they either emphasise on innate or environmental influences on language acquisition respectively. Thus, it is logical to conclude that language development is the result of complex processes involving several aspects of learning, cognitive processes and various genetically determined mechanisms.

Keywords: Language Acquisition, First Language, Second Language, Linguistic Development, Acquisition Theories.

1.0 Introduction

Language has been variously defined as the means for expressing thought. It was also defined as the organised system of speech used by human beings as a means of communication among themselves (Aliyu, 2001). Thus, language is central in interpersonal relations and it is also a tool by which individuals exchange messages in the course of accomplishing their day-to-day activities in meeting their individual and collective needs. Language acquisition is a fundamental aspect of human development, serving as a critical gateway to communication, cognitive

growth, and social integration. From the earliest stages of infancy to the mastery of complex linguistic structures in later childhood, the process through which individuals acquire language has long intrigued scholars across fields such as linguistics, psychology, and education. This research, titled "An Overview of Language Acquisition Processes: A Review Approach," seeks to explore the key theories, stages, and factors that influence how language is acquired both as a first and second language.

Over the decades, researchers have proposed various models to explain



how language emerges and develops — from behaviorist perspectives that emphasize imitation and reinforcement, to nativist theories that highlight innate biological mechanisms, and to interactionist and cognitive viewpoints that stress the importance of environment and mental development. Each framework contributes uniquely to our understanding of how individuals, particularly children, learn to comprehend and produce language.

This study adopts a review-based approach, synthesizing key findings from influential theorists such as B.F. Skinner, Noam Chomsky, Jean Piaget, Lev Vygotsky, and Stephen Krashen. It also examines contemporary insights into bilingualism, second language acquisition (SLA), and the role of socio-cultural and neurocognitive factors. By providing a comprehensive overview, this research aims to clarify how language acquisition unfolds and to highlight implications for educational practice, curriculum design, and further linguistic inquiry.

2.0 Language Acquisition

It is the process by which humans acquire the capacity to perceive or comprehend language, as well as to produce and use words and sentences to communicate. Language involves structures, rules and representation. It is suggested that children are sensitive to patterns in language which enables the acquisition process. An example of this gradual pattern learning is

morphology acquisition. Morphemes are the smallest grammatical markers or units in language that alter words (Aliyu, 2017). First language acquisition refers to the way children learn their native language. While second language is the learning of another language or languages besides the native language. Thus, the learners of second language are either bi- or multi-lingual, that is, where the individual acquires one or more additional languages respectively. According to scholars there are different perspectives on language acquisition some of these are:

One among linguists proposed that language acquisition is an innate process. He argued that humans are born with a *Language Acquisition Device (LAD)*, a mental structure that enables them to learn language naturally. Which means “Language acquisition is a process governed by a biologically based, innate ability to learn language.” (Chomsky, 1965)

On the other hand, B.F. Skinner viewed language acquisition as a learned behavior, acquired through interaction with the environment via imitation, reinforcement and conditioning. That is “Language is learned through operant conditioning, where children imitate sounds and words, and are reinforced for correct usage.” (Skinner, 1957).

Also, Piaget emphasised the role of cognitive development in language acquisition. He believed that language develops as a result of a child’s growing intellectual abilities. “Language is a result of cognitive development and emerges through a



child's interaction with their environment." (Piaget, 1959).

3.0 Comparison of Language Acquisition in First and Second Languages

Language acquisition is generally categorised into two types: first language (L1) and second language (L2) acquisition. First language acquisition begins from birth and occurs naturally within a rich linguistic environment, primarily during what is known as the "critical period" of development (Lenneberg, 1967). This process is largely subconscious, as children absorb language through constant exposure and interaction with caregivers and their environment (Chomsky, 1965). In contrast, second language acquisition typically takes place after the first language has been established. It often involves a more conscious and structured learning approach, especially when acquired in classroom settings (Krashen, 1982). Cognitively, L1 learners usually achieve native like grammar and pronunciation with ease. Their brains are highly plastic and responsive to linguistic input during early development. However, adult L2 learners may face challenges such as fossilisation, where certain incorrect forms become fixed and difficulty in achieving native-like fluency (Selinker, 1972). Motivation is also a key differentiating factor: while L1 acquisition is driven by the basic need to communicate, L2 acquisition is influenced by instrumental (career-oriented) or

integrative (social/cultural) motivations (Gardner, 1985).

Error correction plays different roles in both processes. Children acquiring their first language receive mostly indirect feedback through modeling, while second language learners often benefit from explicit corrections and formal instruction (Lightbown & Spada, 2013). Neurologically, L1 is processed predominantly in the left hemisphere, particularly Broca's and Wernicke's areas. L2 processing may involve additional brain regions, depending on the age of acquisition and the learner's proficiency (Dehaene et al., 1997).

In summary, while both types of language acquisition share the ultimate goal of communication, they differ significantly in terms of developmental timing, cognitive processing, learning environment and neurological engagement.

In an effort to compare the processes of language acquisition in the first and second languages, the paper examined the stages of development in the two farcets of acquisition and later look for similarities and differences between them. The respective language accomplishments are presented below:

3.1 Stages of First Language Acquisition

In the course of learning the mother-tongue, the following accomplishments are attained through the period of infancy, childhood, adolescence and adulthood (Baron, 1999; Elliot, Kratochwill & Cook, 2002).



S/N	AGE	Language Accomplishment
1.	Birth	Crying
2.	2-4 months	Cooing
3.	4-6 months	Babbling
4.	12 months	Single word
5.	18 months	Two-words
6.	2 years	Longer phrases
7.	2-3 years	Short sentences and question
8.	3 years	A vocabulary of 1000 words
9.	4 years	Mastery of basic elements of language
10.	6 years	Thousands of words & start to read
11.	7 years	Can write sentences
12.	9 years	Writes and comprehends well
13.	10 years	Good sense of grammar & dictionary skills

Aitchison (1987)

By the end of seven years, almost all children have learned a great deal of their language. They appear to be quite sophisticated in their language

even though considerable development is still to come. During the middle childhood period, children improve their use of language and expand their structural knowledge. By the end of the period, Elliot et al (2002) (2000) opined that, the children are similar to adults in language usage.

3.2 The Five Stages of Second Language Acquisition

The development of both first language (L1) and second language (L2) follows identifiable patterns, though the stages may differ slightly in timing and expression. The process of acquiring the mother tongue is challenging and learning the second language is even much more difficult, because learning the skills demands more effort, commitment and practice. The five stages of second language acquisition were propounded by a breakdown of the five major stages common to both L1 and L2 acquisition, with comparisons according to Krashen & Terrell (1983) are :

3.2.1 Silent/Receptive:

This stage may last for several months. During this time, new language learners typically spent time learning vocabulary and practicing new words. While they may engage in self-talk, they do not normally speak the language with any fluency or real understanding.



3.2.2 Early Production:

This stage may last about six months, during which language learners typically acquire an understanding of up to 1,000 words. They may also learn to speak some words and begin forming short phrases, even though they may not be grammatically correct.

3.2.3 Speech Emergence:

By this stage, learners acquire a vocabulary of 3000 words and learn to communicate by during, which learners gain greater comprehension and begin reading and writing in the second language.

3.2.4 Intermediate Fluency:

At this stage, which may last for a year or more after speech emergence, learners have a vocabulary of as many as 6000 words. They usually acquire the ability to communicate in writing and speech using more complex sentences. This critical stage is also when learners begin actually thinking in their second language, which helps them gain more proficiency in using it.

3.2.5 Continued Language Development Advanced Fluency:

It takes most learners at least two years to reach this stage and then extends up to ten years to achieve full mastery of second language in all its complexities. Second language learners need ongoing opportunities to engage in discussions and express themselves in their new language, in order to maintain fluency in it. The key to learning a new language and developing proficiency in speaking and writing that language is

consistency and practice. The learner must converse with others in a new language on a regular basis in order to grow in fluency and confidence.

4.0 Comparison of First and Second Language

A comparison of accomplishments in the first and second Languages shows a common pattern of development through the five major stages:

- **First Stage:** The silent or receptive stage corresponds with from birth to 2 years, when the period is devoted to learning vocabulary and practicing new words. **L1:** In infants, this is the *pre-linguistic* stage. Babies coo, cry and make other sounds before using actual words. They understand more than they can express.
- **L2:** Learners may remain mostly silent but are actively listening and absorbing vocabulary and structure (Krashen's & Terrell (1983) "silent period").

Second Stage: The period of early production is the equivalent of the age of 3 years, when an average of 1000 words are acquired.

- **L1:** Children begin to produce single words (e.g., "mama", "milk") and use simple two-word combinations ("want juice"). Vocabularies are limited.
- **L2:** Learners start using short phrases, often with grammatical errors, relying



on memorised chunks and gestures.

Third Stage: Speech emerges by the third stage of learning the second language, which occurs by the age of 6 years among native speakers, when about 3000 words are learned. The period is characterised by the ability to form complex sentences, comprehension, reading and writing.

- **L1:** Vocabulary expands rapidly; children form longer sentences and begin to grasp grammar intuitively, though errors are common.

L2: Learners start producing longer phrases and sentences. They attempt to apply rules but still make frequent errors (e.g., verb tense, plural forms).

Fourth Stage: Intermediate fluency is the equivalent of what is gained between ages 7 and 8 years. About 6000 words are learned with good communication skills in the form of reading and writing.

- **L1:** By ages 4–6, children speak fluently with better control of grammar, though they are still refining complex structures.
- **L2:** Learners can engage in longer conversations, express opinions and understand abstract concepts. Errors become less frequent but may persist in complex grammar.

Fifth Stage: A second language learner can sufficiently acquire the language within two years and attain

mastery by the age of ten years, while the first language learner can gain this competence by ages 9 and 10 years.

- **L1:** Children achieve near-adult competence, mastering most grammatical structures, vocabularies and nuances of their native language.

L2: Learners demonstrate strong proficiency and can communicate effectively in academic and social contexts. Achieving native-like fluency is possible, especially if learning began early (Krashen & Terrell, 1983). It is impressive to note that the stages of accomplishing the mother tongue and second language are almost identical. More so, both mastery, competence and confidence in the learning and application of the languages largely depends on the amount of interest and practice. There is need for further research to investigate whether the difficulties encountered by the native and second language learners are common.

5.0 Theories of Language Development

Several theories were propounded by psychologists to explain the nature of language development among human. Some of these theories are presented below.

5.1 Psycholinguistic Theory: This theory emphasises the significance of inborn processes and biological mechanism on language development. The psycholinguistics contend that language acquisition must have strong biological basis because young children acquire it



rapidly, so easily and during a period of development, when their cognitive abilities are not well developed (Braine, 1963; Chomsky, 1959, 1965 all cited in Baron, 1999).

Language acquisition, according to Chomsky (1959), requires a speech-analysing mechanism known as Language Acquisition Device (LAD). When a child hears a speech, this hypothetical brain mechanism begins to develop a transformational grammar that translates the surface structure of the language into the deep structure the child can comprehend. The development of LAD takes many years; this is why the child's initial language skills are limited, but later develop rapidly.

5.2 Cognitive Development Models

This was proposed by the cognitive development theorists represented by Jean Piaget in reaction to Chomsky's LAD. The new model contends that the brain contains series of separate modules, some of which control cognition and others that are specialised for different aspects of language development (e.g. grammatical structure, social communication and conceptual meaning). The language modules are thought to be largely separate from the child's cognitive system and somewhat independent of one another (Cook, 1988). This theory emphasises the comprehension aspect of language, that is, language acquisition is attained primarily through hearing than speaking the language.

The cognitive development model was divided into three basic approaches, namely: some of the

cognitive theorists assume that very young children have a good deal of knowledge about the world and that they use this knowledge to help them learn the language; the second group holds that children analyse speech into meaning-based or semantic concepts that involve relations among objects, actions and events; and the third category are the information processing theorists, that develop elaborate computer programmes, which attempt to identify precisely the sorts of grammatical rules required to explain human language.

5.3 Environmental/Learning Approaches

This theoretical approach emphasises the roles of environment and social interaction as the most influential factors on language development. This approach can be further divided into the learning-based and functional theories. The two models are briefly discussed below.

The learning-based Theory: The learning theorists like Skinner, explained that language is acquired largely through reward and punishment of verbal responses. Later research evidence has shown that parent-child interaction provides an opportunity for parents to train children in the rules of language.

5.4 The functionalist theorists:

It emphasises the importance of social context in which language develops. The functionalists hold that the children's primary



motivation for acquiring language is to communicate ideas and to be understood. The emphasis is on the functional uses of language (pragmatics). The model suggests that the child extracts the meaning rather than structure from speech.

It was proposed by Bruner that the typical social environment of a child provides many structured opportunities for language learning to take place. These opportunities comprise the Language Support System (LSS), whose function is to assist children in their efforts to acquire meaning and eventually grammatical rules from speech input.

6.0 Conclusion

In sum, to borrow from Baron (1999), in view of the contrasting theories of language development, it is safest to conclude that language development is as a result of complex processes involving several aspects of learning, cognitive processes and various genetically determined mechanisms. It beats one's imagination to realise that the processes involved in learning the mother tongue and the second languages are more or less the same. The processes of first and second language acquisition share common developmental stages, yet they differ in timing, context and cognitive engagement. Both types of acquisition typically progress through five major stages: pre-production, early production, speech emergence, intermediate fluency and advanced fluency. In first language acquisition, these stages unfold naturally and effortlessly during

early childhood, supported by a rich linguistic environment and biological readiness. In contrast, second language acquisition often requires more conscious effort and is influenced by factors such as age, motivation and learning environment. While children acquiring their first language develop native-like competence, second language learners may face limitations depending on when and how they begin learning. Understanding these patterns offers valuable insights for educators, linguists and learners and also highlights the need for tailored strategies in both natural and instructional language learning settings.

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