

Analysis of Theories of Language and Communication at the Preschool Level

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Abstract

The main objective of this paper is to compare the different theories of Skinner, Bruner, Chomsky, Piaget, Vygotsky, and Amsterdam and Bruner, examining how they relate to the acquisition of language and communication development, in conjunction with the influence of teaching practice at the preschool level. The area of language and communication is one of the most important fields of training at the preschool level since that is where the need to communicate originates, and it is essential for infants. Childhood is one of the most important stages of human development, as it is a stage where changes are constantly produced and where the evolution of infants is continuous. This paper critically analyzes these theories, highlighting their strengths and limitations in explaining language acquisition and communication in young children. Skinner's behaviorist approach emphasizes environmental reinforcement, while Chomsky's innatist theory underscores innate linguistic capabilities. Piaget's constructivist perspective links language development to cognitive growth, whereas Vygotsky's sociocultural theory focuses on social interaction as a key driver. Amsterdam and Bruner's interactionist theory bridges these views, emphasizing the dynamic interplay between innate predispositions and environmental stimuli. By integrating these perspectives, educators can adopt a holistic approach to language instruction, tailoring methods to meet the diverse needs of preschoolers. Practical implications for classroom activities, such as interactive storytelling, collaborative play, and reinforcement techniques, are also discussed. Ultimately, this comparative analysis aims to enrich teaching practices and support the linguistic and communicative development of young learners.

Keywords: theories of language and communication, preschool level, infant, language acquisition, cognitive development

Introduction

The concept of childhood is shaped by the fact that the word “infant” comes from the Latin “infans”, that is, without language (speechless, inarticulate). Language is a means of communication through a system of symbols, and human beings use language to relate to their peers and express desires and needs in a precise way. Language is a common need for communication at the preschool level. At this level, it is possible to promote skills through specific activities, focusing on the training field of language and communication, and focusing on oral language. This promotes confidence in infants when they express themselves, dialogue with others, and converse with the people around them.

Infants arrive at preschool with different attitudes and customs, and these differences even extend to their ways of speaking, since from the first years they develop their language according to the context in which they find themselves. Skinner (1989) states that the process of learning a language consists essentially of determining the environmental conditions. In line with Skinner (1994), language can be considered to consist of units that can be combined to give rise to new patterns. He proposes that verbal behavior is characterized by being a behavior that is reinforced by other people, in the activity of listening. Chomsky (1993) thinks that research on the syntactic structure of the language shows that all related languages have structural properties in common. Piaget (1997) is a constructivist mentalist. He proposes a genetic and formal theory of knowledge according to which the infant must master the conceptual structure of the physical and social world to acquire language. Language is a product of intelligence. The development of language is the result of cognitive development. As claimed by Vygotsky (2020), language acquisition is framed within the concept of internalization, which he considers to be a process of transformation of inter-psychological social processes into individual or intra-psychological processes. Amsterdam and Bruner (2000) argue that innate mechanisms that predispose the infant to social interaction will be necessary for the development of language. Since infants are born with different abilities, some develop language acquisition at an earlier age. The theories of Skinner (1989), Chomsky (1994), Piaget (1997), Vygotsky (2020), and Amsterdam and Bruner (2000) can explain how language develops in children according to each person’s perspective. This can enrich the child’s experience, especially when it is shared and linked with educational practice.

Theories review

It is very common for children to enter kindergarten with disabilities, which is why the work carried out by educators is vital, helping and guiding children through specific activities and exercises.

It is also important for children to improve their listening skills, expand their vocabulary, and enrich their oral language by communicating in different situations. Children develop their listening skills because they need to listen when the educator tells the children the instructions for the work to be done. This also happens in their interaction with their peers, as they learn to wait their turn and listen to what their peers say. They

expand their vocabulary when the educator uses words that the children have not yet heard; then they know the meaning of the word and can begin to use it in various situations that arise both at school and outside school. All these purposes are interrelated, so this aspect of oral language always comes into play in the different activities that are carried out in kindergarten.

As is well known, infants arrive at preschool with different attitudes and customs, and these differences even extend to their ways of speaking, since from the first years they develop their language according to the context in which they find themselves.

Below, we describe some theories based on various authors, related to the development of language, providing a critique from the perspective of the experience of teaching at the preschool level.

Skinner (1989) states that the process of learning a language consists essentially of determining the environmental conditions. That is, from a very personal perspective, infants act by imitation and according to the context in which they find themselves. The influence of the environment in which they develop is important, and it is based on their experience in the school and family context. Children frequently act by imitation in the language acquisition process. They also show an interest in speech to satisfy their needs. This can be realized by conducting interviews with parents and finding out more about the infant's immediate environment to assess the results concerning each of the theories presented here.

According to Skinner (1994), language can be considered to consist of units that can be combined to give rise to new patterns. He proposes that verbal behavior is characterized by being a behavior that is reinforced by other people, in the activity of listening. The behaviors of the speaker and the listener together make up what could be called a complete episode. Skinner opposes mentalism. Language as behavior is an object of study in its own right, without appealing to anything else. It replaces the idea of language as an entity or as an instrument. Verbal behavior should be studied like any other behavior. Its particularity is to be reinforced by its effects on other people. As a result, it is free of the spatial, temporal, and mechanical relationships that prevail between operant behavior and non-social consequences. Skinner opposes the mechanistic causality of the stimulus-response model. Verbal behavior is voluntary; it is selected for its environmental consequences, and it is investigated through functional analysis. The meaning of words is investigated in terms of the variables that determine their occurrence in a particular instance. Meaning is understood by identifying the variables that control the utterance. The particularity of the verbal behavior of the operants is that the consequences of the speaker's behavior are mediated by other people. The controlling variables are social. Skinner proposes the concept of rule-governed behavior. Rules are stimuli that specify contingencies. Rules specify the environmental consequences of behaviors. The effect of a rule on an individual depends on that individual's learning history regarding the operant behavior of following the rules. Most human behavior is the product of both circumstances and rules.

Chomsky (1993) thinks that research on the syntactic structure of the language shows that all related languages have structural properties in common. On the other hand, Chomsky (1994) mentions that the ability to speak is genetically determined. This is rather in conflict with the previous theory, as it was argued that infants act more by imitation in the first years of life. However, the theory is supported by some observed cases, for example, when an infant has some language problem from birth, such as

congenital aphasia, or some delay in the appearance of speech. This can be explained and theoretically discussed in medical terms. When the infant is in the mother's womb, and at the moment of birth, it is of the utmost importance that the mother can communicate with her baby, taking into account that the emotional ties will be strengthened. The infant will learn to assimilate the sounds of his native language. Also, in the first year of life, listening to conversations forms the mind and makes the infant more intelligent and alert, stimulating his reflexes and increasing mental speed. The child will develop the capacity for rapid learning and the ability to assimilate and remember what has been learned.

Piaget (1997) is a constructivist mentalist. He proposes a genetic and formal theory of knowledge according to which the infant must master the conceptual structure of the physical and social world to acquire language. Language is a product of intelligence. The development of language is the result of cognitive development. Piaget argues that thought and language develop separately since intelligence begins to develop from birth before the infant speaks. Consequently, the infant learns to speak as its cognitive development reaches the level necessary for language. It is thought that makes it possible to acquire language, which implies that when a human being is born, he or she does not have an innate language, but rather he or she acquires it little by little as part of cognitive development. Once a language is acquired, this in turn will also help cognitive development. The progressive construction of different schemes of reality is a sign that the infant's intelligence is developing. Schemes are a fundamental element for human beings to adapt to the environment and to be able to survive; from the moment infants are born, they build and accumulate schemes by exploring their environment. Whenever they interact with the environment, they try to adapt existing schemes to face new experiences. Learning begins with the first sensory-motor experiences, formed with cognitive development and language. Learning continues through the construction of mental structures, based on the integration of cognitive processes, where the child builds knowledge through continuous interaction with the environment. Therefore, for the infant to reach her maximum mental development, she must go through different and progressive stages of cognitive development from birth. The infant cannot skip any of the stages and cannot be forced to reach them more quickly. Psychological structures develop from innate reflexes, are organized during childhood in patterns of behavior, are internalized during the second year of life as thought models, and are developed during childhood and adolescence in complex intellectual structures that characterize adult life. Piaget (1997) comments that language development is a by-product of the development of other cognitive abilities; thought and reflection are needed before language. Children can express their needs for objects such as food or people from a very early age, and long before they can speak. Therefore, a person needs to think before they can use speech to communicate.

According to Vygotsky (2020), language acquisition is framed within the concept of internalization, which he considers to be a process of transformation of inter-psychological social processes into individual or intra-psychological processes. Inter-psychological functions occur at the social level, in interaction in small groups. Human development occurs through processes of exchange and transition of knowledge in a cultural communicative medium. The transmission of knowledge of culture is carried out through language. Therefore, language is the main vehicle for these processes and is what decisively influences the development of the mind. Mental functions are interpreted as

internalized social norms and the result of the transfer of consciousness. Therefore, language and thought are two different concepts with different origins. Throughout development, a functional interconnection occurs in which thought becomes verbalized and speech becomes rational. In this way, action is regulated and planned. Thought is not subordinate to language, although it is influenced by language. A child's language is initially social and is external in form and function. Gradually, language becomes internalized and goes through an egocentric period with an external form but with an internal function. Finally, language becomes a verbal thought that has an internal form. Internalization transforms the process itself by changing its structure and functions. Social relationships or relationships between people underlie the origins of all higher psychological functions. The infant's initial gesture to reach an object is interpreted by the adult as an interpsychological process; it is a communicative social interaction. When the adult gives answers, they are internalized and fight to be externalized by repeating them and making them routine.

Likewise, Amsterdam and Bruner (2000) argue that innate mechanisms that predispose the infant to social interaction will be necessary for the development of language. Since infants are born with different abilities, some develop language acquisition at an earlier age.

Bruner (1996) points out that, between six and eleven months of age, the infant progressively passes from the demand mode to the exchange and reciprocity mode in mother-infant interactions. At this age, the infant makes multiple spontaneous vocalizations, both vowels and consonants, and even syllables and diphthongs. These word-like vocalizations will shortly develop into the production of his or her first words. People between zero and fourteen years of age are more likely to learn distinct concepts, while from fifteen years of age onwards, they can identify the properties that determine a category. Games can help a great deal in stimulating the interest of infants in the study of issues such as language and social organization. Infants must be aware of their thinking strategy in their attempt to keep information in memory.

The comparison of these theories makes it clear how one can describe the development of the child in different ways, depending on the specific case of each infant being studied, their abilities, the context in which they find themselves, and the stimulation given to them by the adults around them.

In teaching practice at the preschool level, it is usual to pay attention to how the language acquisition process is occurring, since it touches upon the extensive diversity that exists in each classroom. At the beginning of each school year, interviews are conducted with the parents, and the influence that they have on the language development of their children can be evaluated. Interviews are also conducted with children, and they provide the opportunity to learn more about the needs of each one, and even to detect some speech difficulty or language disorder. All this is undertaken with the support of a specialist since the majority of educators are not trained or qualified to carry out psycho-pedagogical evaluations.

Comparison of theories of language and communication at the preschool level

Developing language and communication skills in preschool infants is a complex and multifaceted process. Various theories have been proposed to explain how infants

acquire language and communication skills, including those by Skinner (1989), Chomsky (1994), Piaget (1997), Vygotsky (2020), and Amsterdam and Bruner (2000). Here, we will examine these theories and their implications for teaching practice at the preschool level.

Skinner's (1989) operant conditioning theory posits that language acquisition is a result of environmental factors, such as reinforcement and imitation. According to Skinner (1989), infants learn language by imitating the speech of those around them and by receiving reinforcement for correct utterances. This theory suggests that teachers should use positive reinforcement techniques, such as praise and rewards, to encourage infants to use language correctly.

Chomsky's (1994) innatist theory proposes that language acquisition is facilitated by an innate capacity for language. As claimed by Chomsky (1994), infants are born with a universal grammar that provides the foundation for language development. This theory suggests that teachers should provide infants with opportunities to engage in meaningful communication, such as conversations and storytelling, to help them develop their language skills.

Piaget's (1997) constructivist theory posits that language development is a result of cognitive development. In line with Piaget (1997), infants construct their knowledge and understanding of language through active engagement with their environment. This theory suggests that teachers should provide infants with opportunities to explore and experiment with language, such as through play and hands-on activities.

Vygotsky's (2020) sociocultural theory proposes that language development is a result of social interaction and cultural influences. According to Vygotsky (2020), infants learn language by engaging in meaningful communication with more knowledgeable others, such as teachers and parents. This theory suggests that teachers should provide infants with opportunities to engage in collaborative learning activities, such as group discussions and problem-solving, to help them develop their language skills.

Amsterdam and Bruner's (2000) interactionist theory posits that language development is a result of the interaction between the child and their environment. According to Amsterdam and Bruner (2000), infants learn language by engaging in meaningful interactions with their caregivers and by receiving feedback on their language attempts. This theory suggests that teachers should provide infants with opportunities to engage in interactive learning activities, such as reading and storytelling, to help them develop their language skills.

Regarding the approach, Piaget (1997), Vygotsky (2020), and Bruner (1996) are cognitivists, while Chomsky (1993) is an innatist. Regarding the conception of language, according to Piaget (1997), it is dependent on cognitive development; the symbolic function is at the origins of language in the infant and later develops into language. According to Vygotsky (2020), the primary function of language is communication and social contact, and the most primitive forms of children's language are also social. For Bruner (1996), language is an element of cognitive development, where language is cognitive, the infant knows the world through language, and finally, action and images are translated into language. Chomsky (1993) proposes the existence of a black box in innate language that is acquired through experience; infants learn their native language easily and quickly and emit and understand unlimited messages that they have never heard before.

Conclusion

In conclusion, each one of these theories provides a unique perspective on language and communication development at the preschool level. By understanding these theories, teachers can develop effective teaching practices that support the infant's language and communication development.

Each theory described above has been developed based on teaching practice. It is important not to adopt only one theory, but to integrate and compare experiences with teaching work as it develops, so that the theories are enriched.

In preschool, it is very common to rely on different theories, especially when they refer to language development, which is the primary field where educators focus their attention at the beginning of the school year, since it is the first opportunity for children to develop more fluent language outside the context of their home.

The theories of Skinner (1989), Chomsky (1994), Piaget (1997), Vygotsky (2020), and Amsterdam and Bruner (2000) can explain how language develops in children according to each person's perspective. This can enrich the child's experience, especially when it is shared and linked with educational practice.

It is of utmost importance to analyze the theories presented here, since it is important for educators to assess the different situations of their students when they develop language. In this way, educators will be able to provide quality care for their students and detect any problems in development based on the most appropriate theory. Educators' knowledge of these theories can contribute to integrating them into practice, addressing individual differences, and supporting parental influence.

Ultimately, the integration of these diverse theoretical perspectives offers a holistic approach to understanding and fostering language acquisition in preschoolers. By combining insights from behaviorist, innatist, constructivist, and sociocultural frameworks, educators can create a dynamic and responsive learning environment. Such an environment not only addresses the individual needs of each child but also leverages the collective strengths of these theories to promote effective communication skills. Future research and practice should continue to explore interdisciplinary approaches, ensuring that teaching methods evolve in tandem with our deepening understanding of early childhood development.

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