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A Comparative Theoretical Analysis of Language Acquisition Models in Children Under Five

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Abstract

This comparative theoretical analysis investigates major language acquisition models to understand how children under five acquire language. Early language development is crucial for cognitive and social growth, yet existing literature lacks a focused comparative analysis of these models for this specific age group. This study aims to describe dominant theoretical models, analyze their core assumptions, mechanisms, and relevance to early childhood language development, and evaluate their strengths and limitations. Employing qualitative library research and comparative analysis, data was collected from seminal works by Skinner (behaviorist), Chomsky (nativist), Piaget (cognitive), Vygotsky (social interactionist), and Tomasello (usage-based), alongside peer-reviewed journals and scholarly books from 1960 to 2025. Findings indicate that no single model fully explains all facets of language acquisition in young children. Behaviorism highlights environmental reinforcement, nativism emphasizes innate linguistic structures, cognitive theory links language to general intellectual development, social interactionism stresses the role of social context and scaffolding, and usage-based models focus on pattern-finding and communicative intentions. The comparative approach reveals complementary strengths, suggesting that integrated, multidimensional frameworks are most effective for understanding and supporting early language development.

Keywords: comparative theoritical analysis, Language Acquisition Models, Language Development, Complementary Strengths, Multidimensional Frameworks

INTRODUCTION

Language acquisition in the first five years of life is a remarkably complex and rapid developmental process, transforming infants from pre-linguistic communicators into proficient speakers capable of expressing intricate thoughts and understanding complex discourse. This period is critical for cognitive, social, and emotional development, laying the foundation for future learning and interaction (Siegal, 1999). The remarkable speed and apparent effortlessness with which children master their native language, despite varying input quality, presents a fundamental developmental puzzle that has spurred diverse theoretical explanations. The differing approaches to resolving this puzzle often reflect underlying philosophical and scientific divides regarding the origins of human knowledge and behavior.

Over the past century, various theoretical paradigms have emerged to explain how children acquire language. These models are broadly categorized by their emphasis on innate biological predispositions (nativism), environmental influences (behaviorism), or the interplay of cognitive and social factors (cognitive, social interactionist, and usage-based theories) (Zhao, 2022). Each paradigm offers distinct perspectives on the primary mechanisms and driving forces behind language development in early childhood.

This report undertakes a comparative theoretical analysis of five prominent language acquisition models—Behaviorist, Nativist, Cognitive, Social Interactionist, and Usage-Based theories—with a specific focus on their applicability and insights into

language development in children under five years of age. By examining their core assumptions, mechanisms, strengths, limitations, and supporting empirical evidence, this analysis aims to elucidate the unique contributions and ongoing debates within the field, ultimately synthesizing a more holistic understanding of this fundamental human capacity.

METHOD

This study employed a qualitative library research design, utilizing a comparative analysis method to systematically examine and contrast the major theoretical models of language acquisition (Creswell & Creswell, 2017; Selvi, 2019; Takona, 2024). This approach allowed for an in-depth exploration of each theory's foundational principles, mechanisms, and empirical underpinnings, facilitating a comprehensive comparison of their explanatory power regarding language development in children under five.

Data was collected from a range of scholarly sources, including seminal books, peer-reviewed journals, and influential works on language acquisition published from the 1960s up to recent studies in 2025. Key foundational texts included B.F. Skinner's Verbal Behavior (1957), Noam Chomsky's Syntactic Structures (1957), Jean Piaget's The Language and Thought of the Child (2001), Lev Vygotsky's Thought and Language (1962), Jerome Bruner's Child's Talk: Learning to Use Language (1983), and Michael Tomasello's Constructing a Language: A Usage-Based Theory of Language Acquisition (2003). These primary sources were supplemented by secondary literature, including reviews, critiques, and empirical studies that discuss or test the propositions of these models.

The collected data was systematically categorized based on several key theoretical components relevant to language acquisition: the role of environmental input, the importance of innate mechanisms, the significance of social interaction, and the influence of cognitive processes. A comparative matrix was then used to identify overlaps, distinctions, strengths, and limitations across the different models. This analytical approach facilitated a nuanced understanding of how each theory addresses the complexities of language development in early childhood(Agusta, 2003; Huberman, 2014; Miles et al., 2014; Sarosa, 2021).

RESULT AND DISCUSSION

A. Comparative Analysis Table

Criteria	Behaviorist	Nativist	Cognitive	Social Interactionist	Usage-Based
Role of Input	High	Low	Moderate	High	High
Innateness	No	Strong	Moderate	Partial	No
Cognitive Emphasis	Low	Low	High	Moderate	High
Social Environment	Minimal	Minimal	Contextual	Strong	Strong
Empirical Support	Limited	Mixed	Moderate	Strong	Emerging

B. Discussion

1. Behaviorist Theory: B.F. Skinner

a. Core Assumptions and Mechanisms

The behaviorist theory, primarily championed by B.F. Skinner in his seminal work Verbal Behavior (1957), posits that language acquisition is a product of environmental conditioning rather than innate predispositions. It assumes a continuity in learning processes across all animal life, suggesting that principles observed in animal experiments can be extended to human behavior without significant modification (VanPatten & Williams, 2007).

The central mechanism is operant conditioning, where children learn language through imitation of adults and caregivers (Zhao, 2022). Correct utterances are strengthened through positive reinforcement, such as praise or receiving desired objects. Conversely, undesirable or incorrect utterances are subject to negative reinforcement (not being rewarded) or punishment, leading to their eventual "forgetting" (Chomsky, 2024). Skinner introduced various "verbal operants" to categorize verbal behavior based on its functional relationships with the environment, including mands (requests), tacts (labels), echoics (imitations), and intraverbals (responses to verbal stimuli). Language acquisition is viewed as an incremental, automatic process where associative relationships between stimuli and responses form habits through repetition (Chomsky, 2024).

b. Strengths and Limitations

The behaviorist model offers a straightforward explanation for the acquisition of basic vocabulary and phonological development in children under five, where direct imitation and reinforcement are observable (Zhao, 2022). For instance, a child saying "mama" and receiving a positive response from their mother reinforces the utterance (VanPatten & Williams, 2007). Empirical studies, particularly in applied behavior analysis, have demonstrated the effectiveness of reinforcement techniques in teaching specific verbal behaviors, especially in children with developmental delays like autism. Research on the influence of parental care and interaction patterns on children's language acquisition also aligns with the behaviorist emphasis on environmental input (DeSouza et al., 2017; SKINNER Evi Novalin Bako & Handayani Napitupulu, 2024).

A significant limitation lies in its inability to adequately explain the rapid and creative nature of language acquisition. Children frequently produce novel sentences they have never heard before, such as "drinked" instead of "drank," which cannot be accounted for by mere imitation or reinforcement. This phenomenon, known as overgeneralization, suggests an active rule-learning process rather than simple habit formation (VanPatten & Williams, 2007).

c. Empirical Evidence and Criticisms

While Skinner's initial work Verbal Behavior was largely theoretical, drawing on animal experiments, later research has provided some empirical support for the principles of verbal behavior in human language acquisition (Chomsky, 2024). DeSouza et al. (2017) reported a significant increase in empirical studies supporting Skinner's account, particularly within interventions for children with autism. Studies on parental interaction patterns show that consistent stimulus-response interactions can influence a child's language mastery and vocabulary development.

The most influential critique came from Noam Chomsky's (1959) review of Verbal Behavior, which effectively "demolished" Skinner's theories of language mastery and learning (Cowie, 2008). Chomsky argued that language use is "stimulus independent and historically unbound," fundamentally different from the conditioned behaviors of animals. He contended that children are not simply "conditioned" and that a careful arrangement of reinforcement contingencies is not a necessary condition for language learning. Critics also argue that the richness and complexity of language cannot be explained by the "impoverished" input children receive, which often lacks

explicit negative feedback on grammatical errors.

While behavioral principles can be effectively applied to teach specific verbal behaviors in structured environments, particularly in interventions for children with developmental delays, their explanatory power for the spontaneous, creative, and rapid acquisition of complex grammatical structures in typically developing children appears limited (VanPatten & Williams, 2007). This distinction highlights that the meticulous reinforcement schedules effective in therapeutic settings may not fully account for the less structured, natural linguistic input children receive during typical development, suggesting a fundamental difference between language learning through explicit conditioning and the more organic process of language acquisition.

2. Nativist Theory: Noam Chomsky

a. Core Assumptions and Mechanisms

Noam Chomsky's nativist theory fundamentally challenges behaviorist accounts, proposing that humans are born with an innate, specialized capacity for language acquisition. This capacity is conceptualized as a "language organ" or "faculty" within the brain, often referred to as the Language Acquisition Device (LAD) (Cowie, 2008).

The LAD is believed to contain Universal Grammar (UG), an innate knowledge of abstract linguistic rules, constraints, and principles common to all human languages (Skinner, 1986). This innate knowledge constitutes the "initial state" of the language faculty, which, when exposed to "primary linguistic data" (pld)—the language input a child hears—guides the child to acquire the specific grammar of their native language.

A cornerstone of Chomsky's argument is the Poverty of the Stimulus (PoS). He argued that the linguistic input children receive is too "impoverished" to account for the rapid and complex grammatical knowledge they acquire. The pld is finite, often contains ungrammatical utterances (e.g., slips of the tongue), and crucially lacks "negative evidence" (explicit correction of errors) (Flevaris, 2011). Despite this, children universally acquire complex grammatical rules, such as structure-dependent rules (e.g., forming questions by fronting the auxiliary verb based on grammatical structure, not linear order), which Chomsky argued must be innately known.

b. Strengths and Limitations

Nativist theory effectively explains the rapid pace of language acquisition in children under five, the universality of grammatical structures across diverse languages, and children's ability to produce novel, grammatically correct sentences they have never heard (Flevaris, 2011). It accounts for the observation that children often make systematic errors (e.g., "drinked" instead of "drank") that reflect an active application of rules rather than mere imitation. The theory also provides a compelling explanation for how children filter out ungrammatical input and converge on the correct grammar despite noisy data.

Critics question the specificity of the innate knowledge, arguing that many "linguistic universals" might stem from general cognitive abilities or communicative needs rather than a language-specific module. The PoS argument itself has faced scrutiny, with some research suggesting that the pld may contain more subtle forms of negative evidence or that children utilize statistical learning mechanisms to infer grammatical rules from distributional patterns (Cowie, 2008; Skinner, 1957). The concept of a strict "critical period" for language acquisition, while supported by some evidence, is often reinterpreted as a "sensitive period" where acquisition is easier but not impossible after a certain age.

c. Empirical Evidence and Criticisms

Supporters point to phenomena like linguistic universals (features common to all languages), the apparent "critical period" for fluent acquisition (Lenneberg, 1969), and the spontaneous emergence of complex grammar in creole languages from simpler pidgins (Bickerton, 1984; Jenkins, 1984; Meier, 1984) as evidence for an innate language faculty. Studies on developmental language disorders, such as Williams Syndrome and Specific Language

Impairment (SLI), were initially thought to show a "double dissociation" between general intelligence and language, supporting a modular language device.

The empirical evidence for nativism has been extensively debated. The existence of true linguistic universals is not universally accepted, and alternative explanations for commonalities include cognitive constraints or communicative demands. Research on language localization in the brain suggests that language processing is widely distributed and that traditionally "language-specific" areas are also involved in non-linguistic tasks, challenging the idea of a distinct "language organ". Furthermore, more recent research on Williams Syndrome and SLI suggests that the deficits are broader than purely grammatical, often involving general motor or cognitive impairments, and the FOXP2 gene's role is wider than just language. The "Unlearning Problem," which posits that children need innate constraints due to a lack of negative feedback, is challenged by evidence that children are sensitive to subtle feedback and statistical regularities in their environment. Modern understanding increasingly views language acquisition as involving multiple systems, some specialized for language but also retaining older non-linguistic functions (Chomsky, 2024; Cowie, 2008; Skinner, 1986).

The intellectual tension between Chomsky's nativist framework and Skinner's behaviorist model represents a foundational divergence within developmental psychology concerning the origins of human language. Chomsky's (1959) incisive critique of Verbal Behavior (Skinner, 1957) marked a pivotal moment, catalyzing a shift in scientific discourse from solely observable behaviors to the exploration of unobservable mental structures and processes, thereby initiating what is often termed the "cognitive revolution". This profound disagreement underscores a central philosophical debate regarding the primacy of innate predispositions versus environmental influences in shaping complex human capacities. The ongoing criticisms of both extreme positions highlight the limitations of reductionist explanations for complex human phenomena, paving the way for more integrated, interactionist theories that attempt to synthesize elements of both innate predispositions and environmental influence, recognizing that neither factor alone is sufficient.

3. Cognitive Theory: Jean Piaget

a. Core Assumptions and Mechanisms

Jean Piaget's cognitive theory posits that language acquisition is not a distinct faculty but rather a reflection and outcome of a child's broader cognitive development (Siegal, 1999). Piaget believed that children actively construct their understanding of the world through interaction with their environment, forming mental structures called schemas. Language emerges as these schemas develop and become more sophisticated (Piaget, 2013).

Key mechanisms in this development include assimilation (applying existing schemas to new experiences) and accommodation (modifying schemas to fit new information), which together drive intellectual development. Piaget outlined four sequential stages of cognitive development, with language acquisition primarily occurring during the sensorimotor stage (birth to 2 years) and the preoperational stage (2 to 7 years) (Piaget, 2013).

During the sensorimotor stage, infants learn through sensory and motor interactions, developing concepts like object permanence (understanding that objects exist even when unseen) (McLeod, 2022). Towards the end of this stage, the emergence of the "general symbolic function" allows children to mentally represent the world, which is crucial for the onset of language. The preoperational period (ages 2-7) is characterized by semiotic function, or representational thought through signs and symbols. This stage includes five characteristic behaviors: deferred imitation, symbolic play (make-believe, using objects to represent others), drawing, mental imagery, and verbal evocation of events (using language to reflect past events). Language becomes a

tool for organizing and expressing increasingly complex thoughts.

b. Strengths and Limitations

Piaget's theory highlights the child's active role as a "little scientist" in constructing knowledge, moving beyond passive reception of information. It provides a compelling framework for understanding how language development is intertwined with, and dependent on, the child's general cognitive maturation. The correlation between vocabulary growth and cognitive milestones, and the positive impact of language interventions on cognitive abilities, lend support to this view (McLeod, 2022; Siegal, 1999).

Critics argue that Piaget may have underestimated infants' cognitive capacities and overestimated those of adolescents.20 His theory has also been criticized for neglecting the significant role of cultural and social interaction factors in cognitive and language development. Furthermore, Piaget's methodological approach, often involving observations of his own children, raised concerns about ethical considerations and potential researcher bias (Babakr et al., 2019).

c. Empirical Evidence and Criticisms

Empirical support for Piaget's theory in language acquisition often comes from observations linking the emergence of cognitive milestones to linguistic abilities. For example, the development of object permanence in the sensorimotor stage is seen as a prerequisite for children to understand that words can represent absent objects (McLeod, 2022). Similarly, symbolic play in the preoperational stage, where children use one object to stand for another, is closely tied to the symbolic nature of language. Studies show that children's vocabulary growth correlates with their cognitive development (Siegal, 1999).

Despite its influence, Piaget's theory faces several criticisms regarding its empirical validity and scope. Researchers have shown that infants demonstrate abilities (e.g., object permanence) at earlier ages than Piaget suggested when tested with less demanding methods (Baillargeon, 1987; Baillargeon's, 2012). The most significant criticism for language acquisition is its limited account of social and cultural influences, which later theories, particularly Vygotsky's, heavily emphasize (Babakr et al., 2019). Piaget viewed egocentric speech as a sign of cognitive immaturity, which contrasts sharply with Vygotsky's perspective of it as a transitional stage towards inner thought (Marketing, 2021).

This perspective establishes a hierarchical relationship where the maturation of underlying cognitive structures is posited as a prerequisite for the emergence of complex language. For instance, a child's ability to grasp the concept that objects persist even when out of sight, known as object permanence, is considered foundational to their capacity to use words to represent absent entities. Similarly, the engagement in symbolic play, where one object can stand for another, serves as a cognitive precursor to understanding the symbolic nature inherent in linguistic units (Piaget, 2013). This framework suggests a cognitive 'readiness' model, where certain mental capacities must be in place before full linguistic expression can unfold. If language development is rooted in broader cognitive development, then educational interventions for children under five should not solely focus on language drills but also on fostering these foundational cognitive skills through play, exploration, and problem-solving, aligning with the emphasis on individual learning and the central role of play (McLeod, 2022).

4. Social Interactionist Theory: Lev Vygotsky and Jerome Bruner

a. Core Assumptions and Mechanisms

The Social Interactionist theory, heavily influenced by Lev Vygotsky and further developed by Jerome Bruner, posits that language acquisition is fundamentally a social process, learned through interaction with others. Unlike Piaget, Vygotsky emphasized that learning is inherently collaborative and cannot be separated from its social context (Marketing, 2021).

Lev Vygotsky's Sociocultural Theory highlights the role of a More Knowledgable Other (MKO)—typically a parent, caregiver, or teacher—who guides a child's learning.

Learning occurs most effectively within the Zone of Proximal Development (ZPD), defined as the gap between what a child can achieve independently and what they can accomplish with the assistance of an MKO or more capable peers (Vygotsky, 2012). Instructional scaffolding, a concept closely associated with Bruner but rooted in Vygotsky's ideas, describes the temporary support provided by the MKO, which is gradually reduced as the child's competence increases. This support involves techniques like modeling, hints, questions, and feedback (Qiang, 2024).

Vygotsky viewed language as an essential tool for communication, understanding culture, and critically, for cognitive development itself. He proposed three stages of language development: social speech (external communication, from age 2), private speech (self-directed speech, from age 3), and silent inner speech (internalized thought, from age 7). Vygotsky argued that thought and language, initially separate, merge around age 7, with private speech serving as a crucial transition to internalized verbal thought (Marketing, 2021).

Jerome Bruner, influenced by Vygotsky, proposed the Language Acquisition Support System (LASS) as an environmental complement to Chomsky's LAD. LASS emphasizes the structured routines and social interactions that caregivers provide, such as "motherese" (simplified, exaggerated speech), joint attention, and dialogic reading, which facilitate language learning (Bruner, 1985).

b. Strengths and Limitations

This theory powerfully accounts for the social and communicative functions of language, emphasizing that children learn language to communicate and simultaneously learn the linguistic code within meaningful interactions (Maynard & Peräkylä, 2003). It highlights the importance of the quality and quantity of linguistic input and interaction (Weisleder & Fernald, 2013). The concepts of ZPD and scaffolding provide practical frameworks for educational interventions and parental guidance in fostering language development (McLeod, 2022).

Criticisms include the vagueness of some concepts, a lack of specific hypotheses for experimental testing (particularly for Vygotsky's early work), and a limited focus on biological or genetic factors in language development. While emphasizing social interaction, the theory can be seen as less explicit about the precise cognitive mechanisms by which children process and internalize linguistic rules from the social input. The ZPD concept, while influential, is sometimes criticized for its lack of specificity in defining the exact boundaries of what a child can achieve with assistance (Marketing, 2021).

c. Empirical Evidence and Criticisms

Numerous studies support the social interactionist perspective. Research indicates that children acquire language more effectively through live, interactive engagement with caregivers than through passive exposure to media (Maynard & Peräkylä, 2003). Studies on parent-child interaction show that the amount and quality of child-directed speech significantly influence real-time language processing efficiency and expressive vocabulary growth in infants and toddlers (Borovsky & Peters, 2019; Fernald et al., 2013). The effectiveness of scaffolding techniques in educational settings, where adults adapt their support to a child's evolving abilities, provides strong evidence for the ZPD's utility in language learning. Furthermore, interventions utilizing parent-mediated social communication therapy, such as music-assisted programs, have shown improvements in social interaction and language development in preschool autistic children (Green et al., 2010).

While robust, some criticisms persist. The theory's reliance on observational studies rather than controlled experiments is sometimes noted. There is ongoing debate about the precise mechanisms through which social interaction translates into the acquisition of complex grammatical structures, which nativist theories claim require innate predispositions (Flevaris, 2011). The theory might not fully account for

individual differences in language acquisition rates, beyond variations in social input (Borovsky & Peters, 2019; Weisleder & Fernald, 2013).

This theoretical framework effectively bridges the traditional divide between innate predispositions and environmental influences. It proposes that children's inherent capacities, such as Vygotsky's elementary mental functions, are transformed into higher-order cognitive abilities, including language, through active social engagement. This view emphasizes a dynamic, reciprocal relationship where the social environment does not merely provide input but actively supports, mediates, and shapes a child's developing linguistic potential. The concept of the Zone of Proximal Development (ZPD) exemplifies this interactive process, illustrating how a child's potential for learning is realized and expanded through guided interaction with more knowledgeable individuals. The Language Acquisition Support System (LASS) further articulates this, framing the environment not just as a source of language data but as a crucial system that facilitates and scaffolds the child's innate linguistic predispositions (McLeod, 2022). This integrated perspective has direct and powerful implications for educational and parenting practices, underscoring that creating rich, responsive communicative environments and providing tailored support are paramount for children under five.

5. Usage-Based Theory: Michael Tomasello

a. Core Assumptions and Mechanisms

Michael Tomasello's usage-based theory (Tomasello, 2005) presents a contemporary alternative to nativist accounts, arguing that language acquisition does not require a specialized, innate "language instinct" or Universal Grammar. Instead, it proposes that language structure emerges from language use, and children build their linguistic abilities by relying on general cognitive skills.

The theory emphasizes the primary role of pragmatics (the study of language in context) in human communication, both phylogenetically (evolutionary history) and ontogenetically (individual development).16 Children are seen as equipped with two sets of skills: intention-reading and pattern-finding (Tomasello, 2009). Intention-reading allows children to identify the communicative intentions of adult speakers, while pattern-finding enables them to abstract linguistic schemas or constructions from recurring sequences of symbols in the language they hear. Tomasello (2005) outlines four specific sets of processes: Intention-Reading and Cultural Learning; Schematization and Analogy; Entrenchment and Pre-emption; and Functionally Based Distributional Analysis.

This approach suggests that human infants communicate in sophisticated ways through prelinguistic gestures, such as pointing, even before acquiring productive language. These early communicative acts embody social cognition and communicative motivation, paving the way for the acquisition of linguistic conventions. The most basic unit of linguistic experience is considered to be the utterance, not the word, as children attempt to comprehend the overall communicative intention behind an utterance and assign functions to its constituents. Children's earliest multi-unit utterances often take the form of holophrases, pivot schemas, and item-based constructions, which are highly concrete and gradually become more abstract (Tomasello, 2009).

b. Strengths and Limitations

The usage-based theory offers several strengths in explaining language acquisition in children under five. It provides a robust framework for understanding how children learn language incrementally, starting with concrete, item-based constructions and gradually abstracting more general patterns (Tomasello, 2009). By emphasizing general cognitive skills like intention-reading and pattern-finding, it accounts for the creative aspect of language production without recourse to an innate, language-specific grammar module (Tomasello, 2005). The theory provides a psychologically sound vision for the study of language acquisition by grounding it in observable

communicative behaviors and general learning mechanisms.

However, limitations exist. Critics argue that while general cognitive mechanisms are undoubtedly involved, the theory may underestimate the role of specific genetic predispositions that might make humans uniquely prepared for language (Cowie, 2008). The acquisition of highly abstract grammatical rules, particularly those that appear to be underdetermined by the linguistic input (as argued by the Poverty of the Stimulus argument), remains a point of contention. Furthermore, the theory places less emphasis on linguistic universals compared to nativist views, which some consider a weakness in explaining the commonalities across human languages.

c. Empirical Evidence and Criticisms

Empirical evidence for the usage-based theory stems from research on infants' early social-cognitive abilities. Studies on infants' prelinguistic gestural communication, such as pointing for imperative and declarative motives, and their ability to construct shared understandings within joint attentional frames, support the foundational role of intention-reading and communicative function. Research on children's pattern-finding abilities, including categorization, analogy, and distributional analysis, provides evidence for how they abstract linguistic schemas from the input they hear (Tomasello, 2009).

Nativist theorists often criticize usage-based accounts by reasserting the Poverty of the Stimulus argument, suggesting that the linguistic input children receive is insufficient to acquire the full complexity of grammar without innate guidance (Cowie, 2008). They argue that while general learning mechanisms are important, they cannot fully explain the rapid and seemingly effortless acquisition of abstract grammatical rules. Some formal linguistic theories continue to posit additional acquisition processes beyond those proposed by Tomasello to account for universal grammar, although Tomasello contends these extra processes are unnecessary for explaining the phenomenon (Tomasello, 2005).

The usage-based theory offers a compelling alternative to nativist accounts by demonstrating how complex linguistic structures can emerge from general cognitive and social learning mechanisms, rather than requiring a specialized, innate grammar module. This perspective represents a significant evolution in linguistic theory, moving towards more integrative, non-modular explanations for language acquisition. By emphasizing the child's ability to discern patterns and intentions in communicative contexts, the theory provides a robust framework for understanding how children construct grammar from the language they experience, thereby challenging the necessity of a pre-programmed Universal Grammar.

CONCLUSION

This comparative analysis of major language acquisition models—Behaviorist, Nativist, Cognitive, Social Interactionist, and Usage-Based—underscores that each offers unique insights into how children under five acquire language, yet no single model provides a complete explanation. Behaviorism highlights the role of environmental reinforcement and imitation in acquiring basic vocabulary and phonology, with empirical support in structured learning environments.9 However, it falls short in explaining the rapid and creative generation of novel utterances and complex grammatical rules.9 Nativism posits an innate Language Acquisition Device (LAD) and Universal Grammar (UG), accounting for the speed and universality of language acquisition despite impoverished input. While influential, the empirical evidence for a highly specific, modular language organ and the "Poverty of the Stimulus" argument face ongoing debate.

The findings of this comparative analysis support the adoption of more eclectic and integrated approaches in early childhood education and language stimulation practices. Recognizing that

language acquisition is influenced by a combination of innate predispositions, cognitive development, and environmental interactions, educators and caregivers should move beyond single-theory applications. Instead, practices should emphasize the importance of interaction-rich environments for children under five, fostering both structured learning opportunities and spontaneous communicative exchanges. This includes providing diverse linguistic input, engaging children in meaningful social interactions, and supporting their cognitive exploration through play and problem-solving.

For practical application, findings should be applied in curriculum design for early childhood education (PAUD) and in developing parenting strategies. This involves creating curricula that integrate elements from social interactionist and usage-based theories, promoting active, communicative learning experiences. Parenting strategies should emphasize responsive communication, joint attention, scaffolding, and providing rich linguistic input tailored to the child's developmental stage, thereby fostering optimal language development in children under five.

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