

Foreign Language 101: Children Learning Language: How Adults Can Help

[Will-3.9 year-old]: Knock-knock.

[Adult]: Who's there?

[Will-3.9 year-old]: Car and truck.

[Adult]: Car and truck who.

[Will-3.9 year-old]: Car and truck were towed.

[Narrator]: Will isn't ready for standup. But he's on the way. To tell his knock-knock joke, he has in under four years put together a vocabulary of well over 1000 words. He follows a complex 7th grammatical rule. How does Will or any child learn language? Children learn language many ways; from adults, other children, books, and television. We start learning language right after birth and continue learning our entire lives. The learning curve is usually steepest from birth to the ages five or six.

[Stage In Language Development]

[Narrator]: Naomi Baron is the author of Growing Up with Language: How Children Learn to Talk. Here she identifies six stages in language development.

[Naomi Baron]: Early sounds include cries and giggles and squeals. Around age three months children start cooing. About three months later around six months old, children start to babble. Meaning these combinations of syllables like papa, caca or gaga.

[Baby]: (Squealing).

[Narrator]: As Kaylee babbles, she explores using her tongue, teeth and lips to produce sounds that sound like language. Some children stop babbling when they begin using identifiable words. Others mix babbling with meaningful speech for several months.

[Naomi Baron]: Most children use their first identifiable words around the time of their first birthday. Some of these first words may sound like phrases like 'thank you' or 'all gone'. But in the child's mind they're really single words.

[Baby]: (Making baby noises).

[Adult]: Hello.

[Baby]: Hello.

[Naomi Baron]: Around age 18 to 30 months most children start combining words together. Sometimes they form phrases like ‘big ball’ or other times it sounds more like the beginnings of a sentence such as ‘want ball’ or ‘drink milk’.

[Narrator]: Between 18 and 24 months most children reach a 50 word vocabulary. Remember, normal children reach these stages at different ages.

[Toddler]: Oh yay.

[Naomi Baron]: Over the next three to four years, children’s control of vocabulary, the sound system and the grammar all develop.

[Will]: Dad

[Will’s Dad]: Yes?

[Will]: I have a new fish.

[Will’s Dad]: You have a new fish?

[Will]: Yeah but he died.

[Dad]: He did.

[Will]: Yeah because there’s too..because Sarah gived him too much food.

[Narrator]: Will still hasn’t learned that the past tense of ‘give’ is ‘gave’ that the verb is irregular.

[Naomi Baron]: At stage six children start sorting out some of the details of sound and meaning and grammar. For example they finally figure out when to use ‘w, l, or r’ for words like ‘rabbit’ or ‘late’.

[Sarah’s Teacher]: Who are you friends with in school?

[Sarah-5.2 year-old]: Nick, Tyler (pronounced: Tie-were) and Michelle (pronounced Mish-eh-w) and Rachel (pronounced Way-chel) and Jenna.

[Jeff-4.7 year-old]: But dis is not a real puzzle; I’m gonna go get a nudder puzzle.

[Naomi Baron]: Lots of children have articulation problems that resolve themselves naturally in the first or second grade. Here Sarah said “Way-chel” instead of Rachel. And Jeff said “dis” and “a nudder” instead of “this” or “another”. These confusions between ‘w’, ‘l’ and ‘r’ and between ‘d’ and ‘t-h’ are very very common in children in this stage.

[Narrator]: Listen to Diana. It may sound as if she’s stuttering but she isn’t.

[Diana-4 year old]: T-t-t-t-t-to Africa.

[Diana’s Teacher]: Africa!

[Naomi Baron]: If Diana only speaks like this occasionally, she doesn’t have a problem. Adults often hesitate in their sentences using fillers like ‘uh’ and ‘um’, however stuttering is a real problem for some people. Children often go through a temporary period of stuttering; maybe when they’re under stress, however if the problem persists it’s very important to get therapy.

[Narrator]: Half of children who seem to have problems at age two do not have problems at age three. Children develop a lot during early childhood. Don’t rush to conclusions about delayed development.

[Children Develop Differently]

[Narrator]: How and when children first speak varies. Why? Gender may influence when children start speaking. Boys tend to vocalize less as infants. Girls are several weeks ahead of boys in uttering their first words, reaching a 50 word vocabulary and putting two words together.

[Naomi Baron]: Infant boys have a lower survival rate than girls. They also tend to weigh less than girls at birth and take a little longer to go through physical, social and the linguistic stages of development.

[Narrator]: Sarah is very social. Personality also impacts language.

[Sarah-5.2 year-old]: No this is up here.

[Naomi Baron]: Shy children don’t tend to talk as much as more outgoing children. In turn, adults talk more to children who talk a lot. And we also know that the more adults talk to children, the faster the language development.

[Narrator]: Evan first put words together at two years, nine months. Other children in his family also talked late. Early or late talking is often genetic, it runs in families.

[Naomi Baron]: Just as many diseases are genetically based. Language problems often have a genetic basis as well. For example if a child has problems in early pronunciation, it's very likely that a brother, a cousin or an uncle might also have had pronunciation problems as well.

[Narrator]: The way a parent relates to a child affects language development. To gain fluency, children need to hear and respond to language.

[Naomi Baron]: Unfortunately a number of parents or other caregivers haven't learned how to talk with children. Recently I was sitting in an airport lobby and I observed a father in his late 20's, with an infant daughter; about three months old. He was doing all the right care-giver things, he was feeding her a bottle, holding her head properly, burping her, and giggling a clown doll in front of her. But for an entire half-hour, he didn't say a word to her. It's critical that anyone spending time with young children learn to talk with him so they in turn can develop language.

[What Caregivers Can Do]

[Mother]: What makes the bread rise?

[Child]: Yeast.

[Mother]: Right. Do you know how much one quarter of a teaspoon is?

[Child]: No.

[Mother]: Look bud, let's see here.

[Narrator]: Exposing children to a rich language model early in life, is very important. Scientists are beginning to discover that language learning, first or second-language learning happens most in the first six or seven years of life. That's when the brain pathways are laid down for our ability to produce and understand language. Here are some ways adults can help children become fluent language-learners.

[Father]: Mommy and Daddy love you more than the whole wide world Charlie.

[Mother]: Yeah. Oh I think Charlie's ready for his dinner, yeah?

[Naomi Baron]: Child-directed speech, some people call it 'baby talk', is a special kind of language that many adults use in talking with infants and young children. It's called baby talk because this is how adults talk sometimes to babies. Not because it's the way babies themselves speak. Here are some examples of the things adults do in talking baby talk.

[Mother]: Yeah you're not paying attention to me. Mommy's gonna take your Legos away okay?

[Narrator]: Jake's mom calls herself 'Mommy' instead of 'I', she substitutes a proper noun for a pro-noun.

[Mother]: That many? How big...

[Baby]: (Squealing).

[Mother]: They were that big?

[Baby]: (Squealing).

[Mother]: Oh!

[Narrator]: Parents ask a lot of questions, even when children are too young to answer. This Mom also uses a high-pitch.

[Father]: Would you like some juice? Would you like some juice?

[Narrator]: Many parents repeat themselves. They also speak slowly and more correctly than when talking with adults.

[Mother]: My, what a big boy you are!

[Narrator]: They pronounce words in special ways. Mom stretched out the word 'my'.

[Father]: No eat.

[Narrator]: Sometimes they intentionally use incorrect grammar.

[Teacher]: What is this?

[Toddler]: It's a big choo-choo.

[Teacher]: It's a big choo-choo?

[Narrator]: Substituting 'choo-choo' for train is another example of baby-talk.

[Naomi Baron]: There're two different kinds of baby talk that adults tend to use in addressing children. In the first we use sounds and words and grammar that we don't usually use with adults. We often raise our pitch very high. We use sentences that are ungrammatical; like saying 'no eat'. And we call things by names that we wouldn't ordinarily; like calling a train a choo-choo.

[Adult]: Do you want this? Do you want this? Do you want it?

[Naomi Baron]: The other form of baby talk includes sounds and words and sentences that we would use in our conversation with adults. We repeat ourselves, we slow down our speech and we ask a lot of questions. This style of baby talk makes us sound more like teachers. We don't know if either of these kinds of baby talk actually helps children learn language faster. But we do know they help adults feel connected; as if they're doing something useful in trying to establish communication with their children, who don't yet have much language.

[Narrator]: Indirectly correcting children's speech may help them learn language. Watch how the caregiver corrects Natalie's use of the word 'pick'.

[Caregiver]: Does he sometimes come and pick you up?

[Natalie-4 year-old]: No, only my mommy pick me up.

[Caregiver]: Only your Mommy picks you up.

[Naomi Baron]: Incorporated correction into a response; if a child says 'I go-ed home yesterday', you don't want to correct it by saying 'it's not go-ed, it's went'. Instead you want to say something like 'oh, you went home yesterday?'

[Narrator]: How could the caregiver better respond to Tyler.

[Caregiver]: When is your birthday?

[Tyler-3.4 year-old]: In August 5th.

[Caregiver]: What do you think you'll do on your birthday.

[Tyler-3.4 year-old]: Eat cake and play with my balloons.

[Caregiver]: Do you live with your mom?

[Tyler-3.4 year old]: No I live in Paletine Road.

[Narrator]: Here's how Naomi Baron would correct Tyler.

[Naomi Baron]: When is your birthday?

[Tyler-3.4 year-old]: In August 5th.

[Naomi Baron]: Oh it's on August 5th. What do you think you'll do for your birthday?

[Tyler-3.4 year-old]: Eat cake and play with my balloons.

[Naomi Baron]: Oh, you're going to eat cake and play with balloons. That's exciting. Do you live with your mom?

[Tyler-3.4 year-old]: No I live in Paletine Road.

[Naomi Baron]: Oh, you live with your mom on Paletine Road.

[Narrator]: When parents play language tour guide, during everyday activities, their children's language development may thrive.

[Mother]: Should we take it home with us? Feel; it's heavy. This is a pineapple. Can you say pineapple?

[Molly-2.5 year-old]: Pineapple.

[Mother]: Ooh, feel it! Is it kind of prickly?

[Molly-2.5 year-old]: Yeah.

[Narrator]: Dressing a child is a wonderful opportunity for conversation.

[Mother]: That's your left foot. You remember that book, 'left foot left foot, right foot right; feet in the morning and feet at...

[Molly-2.5 year-old]: Night!

[Mother]: Night! Good for you!

[Narrator]: Expand on what children say. Take their comments seriously.

[Mother]: What kind of creature is this?

[Todd]: It's gonna be an alien (pronounced A-wee-en)

[Mother]: An alien?

[Todd]: A space alien

[Mother]: Space alien? Goodness!

[Narrator]: Read books and play games that use language imaginatively.

[Mother]: I never heard of such a thing. What color is Lola's lollypop?

[Molly-2.5 year-old]: Green.

[Mother]: Green lollipop, well; Little Lola Lop, left like lazy lion licks a lollipop.

[Narrator]: Mom questions Molly while reading Dr. Seuss. Ask open-ended questions while reading to a child.

[Dad]: Remember what the caterpillars are?

[Todd]: No.

[Dad]: What are caterpillars?

[Todd]: Butterflies.

[Dad]: Yeah, but they're not butterflies yet, are they?

[Todd]: No.

[Dad]: What do they do after they eat a lot of milkweed do you think?

[Todd]: They go in the cocoon.

[Naomi Baron]: Ask a lot of ‘w-h’ questions. Questions asking who, or where, or when, or why and also ask a lot of ‘how’ questions. They require a lot more language response from children, than simple yes/no questions.

[Narrator]: How can you use language creatively when reading to children in large groups such as daycare centers? Here are two suggestions: First, divide children into smaller groups; no more than four or five children at a time. Second; when you read to them, don’t simply read the text like a monologue, but turn it into a conversation; stop, asking questions and get children to participate in a conversation.

[Caregiver]: Out of your what?

[Boy]: Out of the spout.

[Caregiver]: Spout.

[Narrator]: Refer to printed words when talking with children.

[Mother]: Pops, Kid’s Crunch. Toasted Oats, or Crispix and you know what; sometimes you like to mix ‘em, do you want to...

[Narrator]: By pointing out the names of cereals, Mom prepares Todd and Molly for reading.

[Mother]: Every one of them?

[Narrator]: Help children recognize rhyming words.

[Mother]: Do you know what this is?

[Molly-2.5 year-old]: What?

[Mother]: Those are light bulbs. And your night light needs a new light. Hey Molly listen, night light; does that rhyme?

[Narrator]: Play word games. Nikko enjoys the rhyming game.

[Caregiver]: How about the word run.

[Nikko-6 year-old]: Pun.

[Caregiver]: Ooh. Can you think of another one?

[Nikko]: Jun.

[Caregiver]: Sun.

[Narrator]: Children love to play with rhymes. And we know that rhyming actually helps their language development.

[Caregiver]: Very good, you are good at this. How about, bright?

[Nikko-6 year-old]: Delight.

[Caregiver]: Light. Night.

[Nikko-6 year-old]: Sight.

[Caregiver]: Kite.

[Nikko-6 year-old]: Jight.

[Caregiver]: Ooh, not exactly but close! Think of another one.

[Nikko-6 year-old]: Might?

[Caregiver]: Might! Very good!

[Naomi Baron]: We have evidence that children who know a lot of nursery rhymes, or play with rhymes a lot are better in the early stages of reading than children who are not rhymers.

[Narrator]: Todd enjoys the opposite game.

[Mother]: I say black; you say...

[Todd]: White.

[Mother]: I say up; you say...

[Todd]: Down.

[Mother]: I say in; you say...

[Todd]: Out.

[Mother]: I say hot; you say...

[Todd]: Cold.

[Mother]: I say sad; you say...

[Todd]: I say happy!

[Naomi Baron]: Language games are an important part in children's development. They come to feel control over their language abilities. Children learn, not only how to play language games, they learn how to change the rules.

[Caregiver]: So if I said light; what would rhyme with light?

[Sarah-5.2 year-old]: Night.

[Caregiver]: Very good!

[Narrator]: Watch Sarah turn the rhyming game into a 'complete the sentence' game.

[Sarah-5.2 year-old]: Night.

[Caregiver]: What would we have; write?

[Sarah-5.2 year-old]: Write with the pencil!

[Naomi Baron]: At the end of this conversation, Sarah change the rules of the game; focusing on meaning instead of rhymes. Sometimes children don't understand what the rule of the game is. And they just try to use language that makes sense.

[Caregiver]: What did you tell me rhymed thump?

[Adrian-6 year-old]: Bump.

[Caregiver]: How about stump?

[Adrian-6 year-old]: (Nods his head)

[Caregiver]: What happens if you get a big thing here on your hand, what is it called?

[Adrian-6 year-old]: Owy?

[Caregiver]: You're right! How about a lump?

[Naomi Baron]: Why does Adrian say 'owy' instead of 'lump'? Because he doesn't know they're still playing a game. Instead he gives a response that's logical.

[English as a Second Language]

[Narrator]: Natalie is bilingual.

[Natalie-4 year-old]: I'm going to California on Monday.

[Narrator]: Spanish is the primary language in her family. She speaks English at the childcare center.

[Caregiver]: What are you going to do in California?

[Natalie-4 year-old]: Get my doggy in California

[Narrator]: How do children from non-English speaking homes learn to speak English?

[Naomi Baron]: Some educators believe the best way is for children to hear only English in school. Others believe it's better to make a transition; to begin teaching some of the content areas in the child's native language and gradually move into English. What matters most is that children have ample opportunity to hear and use English. Even children who go to English-only schools may not end up speaking English very much. They may go back to their native language in the cafeteria, on the playground, and the minute they go home. It's important to create opportunities for children to hear and use the English language.

[Television & Computers]

[Narrator]: American children currently watch television, an estimated 22 to 26 hours a week. Television is clearly an important part of most children's lives.

[Naomi Baron]: Some television programming is educational and enjoyable for children. But it's a mistake to use the television as a baby-sitter. It can deprive the child an opportunity to run around and play; and more importantly to interact with other people.

[Narrator]: Molly's mom takes the time to watch Sesame Street with her. Sesame Street encourages kids trying out language. When mom talks and sings with Molly, the program is a more valuable source for learning.

[Mother and Molly-2.5 year-old]: (Singing) Oh, cookie cookie cookie starts with 'C'.

[Naomi Baron]: These days, a lot of children spend many hours in front of a computer. But just as the television can get misused as a baby-sitter so can the computer. There are though, a lot of things parents can do.

[Father]: 'C', that's a cup; first letter of the word 'cup'.

[Narrator]: Will's dad provides him with computer programs that can help him learn to read at an early age. Playing them build Will's confidence about what he knows. He also enjoys them a lot.

[Will-3.9 year-old]: (Watching computer screen and making noises along with the program).

[Narrator]: When a child can click a mouse or speak a number and get a response, that encourages communication. Will enjoys Reader-Rabbit's playful language. Dad's attention helps Will to sound out the words he sees. Computer programs can build language skills and introduce knowledge. Will learns there aren't just spiders, there are...

[Narrator of Computer Program]: Golden silk spider. Crab spider. Baby wolf spider. Did you know that some people keep tarantulas as pets?

[Improving Interactions]

[Narrator]: Communication can break down when adults talk with children.

[Mother]: What are you going to wear on your feet?

[Molly-2.5 year-old]: Pretty shoes.

[Mother]: Pretty shoes; can you put on your pretty shoes for me?

[Molly-2.5 year-old]: No, the high-heel shoes.

[Mother]: What do you call those?

[Molly-2.5 year-old]: High-heel ones.

[Mother]: I can't understand you, what do you call those?

[Molly-2.5 year-old]: (Not audible).

[Narrator]: Understanding children in daycare situations is a real challenge. Background noise makes understanding little voices more difficult. Children can become frustrated when adults don't understand them. It's important that both children and adults persist at understanding each other.

[Shade-2.1 year-old]: My mom was sick yesterday.

[Caregiver]: Your mom was sick for a long time huh? But she's all better now? Did she go to the doctor and he made her better?

[Shade-2.1 year-old]: Sometimes my dad gives us tea sometimes. Sometimes my dad gives us tea.

[Caregiver]: Sometimes your dad what?

[Shade-2.1 year-old]: My dad gives my mom tea.

[Caregiver]: Oh fixes her tea!

That conversation succeeded because Shade kept repeating herself and her teacher continued to talk to her even though understanding was difficult. In many childcare centers the provider has limited time to talk and listen to kids. It's important providers direct language to each child. As Jamita models her clay, the teacher talks directly to her and Jamita can respond.

[Teacher]: Is it big or small?

[Jamita-4.3 year-old]: Big.

[Teacher]: It's big. Is it round or square?

[Jamita-4.3 year-old]: Square.

[Teacher]: Oh it's square.

[Jamita]: Look.

[Teacher]: Oh I see you made it flat.

[Naomi Baron]: Many of us say 'my day is so full, how can I find all this time to keep talking with my child?' There are ways and we can find them. When we make dinner, when we're driving a car, when we're grocery shopping. No matter what we're doing we can find time to talk with our children. It makes a difference in their language development.

[Credits]:

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