

RESEARCH ARTICLE

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Language Development in Early Childhood: Stages, Influencing Factors, and the Role of the Family Environment

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Abstract:

This article examines the main stages of language development in early childhood and highlights the internal and external factors that shape this developmental trajectory. Drawing on psycholinguistic and developmental research, the study describes the progression from the prelinguistic stage to single-word, word-sentence, and sentence stages, as well as later syntactic and lexical growth in the preschool years. Particular attention is given to individual differences related to general health, intelligence, gender, birth order, family relationships, parents' educational level, bilingual exposure, and the socio-cultural environment, including Qur'anic preschool education, kindergarten attendance, media, and story-reading practices. The paper argues that a rich, emotionally secure, and linguistically stimulating environment can enhance language acquisition in both typically developing children and those with developmental risks, and underscores the central role of the family in supporting children's linguistic and cognitive development.

Keywords: Language development; early childhood; psycholinguistics; family environment; Qur'anic school; bilingualism; intelligence; birth order; media; storytelling.

Introduction

Language constitutes the quintessential medium of human communication, manifesting as a conventional system of acoustic symbols-phonemes organized into morphemes and syntactic structures-that encode and transmit multifaceted meanings across individuals (Chomsky, 1965). Exclusive to Homo sapiens, it integrates verbal components (words, dialects, intonations) with non-verbal cues (gestures, facial expressions, body posture), forming a holistic communicative framework indispensable for social interaction. In pediatric orthophonia, understanding this multimodal nature is paramount, as disruptions in any domain impair holistic development.

Child language development unfolds through phylogenetically conserved stages: preverbal cooing and canonical babbling emerge by 2-6 months, progressing to holophrastic one-word productions (12 months), telegraphic speech (18-24 months), and syntactic complexity by age 4-5 (Berko Gleason & Ratner, 2017). This trajectory reflects interplay between innate universals (universal grammar) and environmental input (critical period hypothesis, Lenneberg, 1967), with phonological awareness, lexical expansion (vocabulary burst ~50-300 words), and pragmatic competence evolving interdependently.

Beyond mere symbol manipulation, language forges cognitive architecture-scaffolding abstract thought, memory consolidation, and executive functions-while cementing social bonds through turn-taking dialogues and shared narratives (Tomasello, 2008). It unifies relationships, synchronizes collective intentions, and cultivates empathy, rendering societies cohesive; empirical neuroimaging corroborates this, revealing overlapping neural substrates for linguistic processing and social cognition (Friederici, 2011).

Developmental anomalies-phonological disorders, specific language impairment (SLI), autism spectrum-related pragmatic deficits-disrupt this trajectory, yielding cascading effects on academic achievement, peer integration, and self-esteem (Bishop, 1997). Orthophonists intervene via evidence-based protocols (e.g., Rapid Syllable Transitions, ReST), targeting phonological-motor integration where unaddressed delays persist into adolescence in 30-50% untreated cases, underscoring early identification imperatives.

Paradoxically, linguistic prowess harbors pitfalls: semantic ambiguities, pragmatic misfires, or phonological distortions precipitate interpersonal conflicts, alienating individuals despite shared intent. In clinical orthophonia, rectifying these errors restores communicative efficacy, affirming language's pivotal role in relational harmony-a thesis central to advancing pediatric speech-language pathology interventions for holistic child development.

Stages of language development in children

1. Prelinguistic stage (0–12 months)

During the prelinguistic stage, infants communicate mainly through crying, cooing, and babbling before they produce recognizable words of their native language. Vocalizations gradually become more organized and intentional as infants gain motor control over their articulators and receive auditory feedback from caregivers in the surrounding environment (Kuhl, 2004, p. 832). Early canonical and reduplicated babbling, which typically emerges in the second half of the first year, reflects the phonological patterns of the ambient language and forms a crucial foundation for later word recognition and speech perception efficiency (Fenson et al., 2000, p. 56).

2. One-word (holophrastic) stage (around 12–18 months)

In the one-word or holophrastic stage, children begin to produce single words that function pragmatically as whole utterances in context. A single lexical item such as “milk” may serve to request, label, or comment, depending on the communicative situation and the child’s intentions (Clark, 2009, p. 107). These first words are often context-bound and may show overextension or underextension, but they indicate that the child has started to map stable sound patterns onto meanings in the environment and to build an initial mental lexicon (Hoff, 2014, p. 139).

3. Two-word stage (around 18–24 months)

During the two-word stage, children combine two content words into simple structures such as “mommy go,” “more juice,” or “doggie run,” expressing basic semantic relations like agent–action, action–object, and possession. Function words and inflectional morphemes are typically omitted, yet the order of words already mirrors the canonical syntactic patterns of the target language (Brown,

1973, p. 167). This stage marks a qualitative shift from isolated lexical items to rule-governed combinations and is strongly associated with a rapid increase in vocabulary size and improvements in processing spoken language in real time (Bates et al., 1994, p. 74).

4. Telegraphic speech and early grammar (around 24–36 months)

In the telegraphic stage, children start producing multiword utterances that resemble short telegrams, where content words predominate and grammatical morphemes such as articles, auxiliaries, and inflections are often omitted. Despite their brevity, these utterances reveal a growing command of word order, argument structure, and basic morphological contrasts, including plural marking and tense distinctions (Brown, 1973, p. 210). Over time, children's sentences become longer and more complex; they begin to use grammatical morphemes more consistently and to form simple questions and negatives, indicating the emergence of an early grammatical system (Hoff, 2014, p. 175).

5. Later syntactic and lexical development (preschool years and early school age)

From the preschool years into early school age, children experience rapid growth in both vocabulary and grammar. They acquire more abstract words, relational terms, and derived or compounded forms, while also mastering complex syntactic constructions such as coordination, subordination, and relative clauses, which support narrative skills and academic language use (Clark, 2009, p. 215). During this period, individual differences in language trajectories become more apparent, influenced by cognitive factors, the richness of linguistic input, and the quality of interaction with adults and peers (Rowe & Weisleder, 2020, p. 63).

Second: The linguistic stage:

This stage begins when the child enters the second year of life, where the child starts to replace babbling and rhymed syllables with words that have clear meanings, and may include the acquisition of the following language skills:

Word stage: The child acquires his or her first words between 8 and 18 months by combining two sounds, one consonant and one vowel. These early words are usually associated with the child's basic needs, such as the need for food and drink, and for calling the mother, father, siblings, and other people close to the child, for example: "mama," "baba," "ammo," "milk," "juice," etc. Studies have shown that the amount of unclear or unintelligible speech begins to decline gradually from the beginning of the ninth month of age. The words produced by the child at this stage are closely related to his or her basic needs, and the child tends to overgeneralize by using a single word to refer to several objects, such as using the word "woof" (or "au") for all animals. (Imad Al-Zaghloul & Ali Al-Hindawi, 2012, p. 372)

Word-sentence stage: In this stage (from 18 to 24 months), children use a single word to refer to a number of objects, events, or phenomena in their surroundings. Among the main features of this stage is the close connection between the word and actions or movements, due to the strong relationship between them; thus, the child tends to use a word together with an action or movement that has just occurred in front of him or her. The words produced by the child at this stage are often used to express personal and others' possessions, in addition to expressing personal needs, and the

child's language at this point is called "telegraphic speech" because it is brief and concise while still conveying a broad meaning. (Imad Al-Zaghloul & Ali Al-Hindawi, 2012, p. 372)

For example, when the child says "mama eat," this may indicate a need for food or a reference to the presence of food, and the child's utterance can only be fully understood through the context in which it occurs. Similarly, when the child says "daddy car," the utterance can carry more than one meaning depending on the situation

Sentence stage:

By the end of the second year, the child begins to develop short and simple sentences, in which two or three key words are linked together to form a meaningful utterance, but without observing grammatical rules, prepositions, conjunctions, or adverbials of time and place; this has been compared to "telegraphic" language, as in: "the plane flew," "the dog went," "daddy went." The development of sentences is very slow at the beginning of this stage, but then it rapidly accelerates, and these utterances can be seen as a mixture of telegraphic sentences and sentence-like forms. The child's speech is often unclear because he or she avoids pronouncing certain sounds, such as /r/, /ð/, /θ/, /n/, and /k/, and also produces grammatical errors such as delaying the negative particle, for example: "go out no no" instead of "do not go out." In this stage, the child is not yet able to distinguish reliably between masculine and feminine forms, and this difficulty may extend beyond the age of four; moreover, the child cannot yet consistently produce plural forms, as when saying "come with us" to mean "all of you come with us." It is also observed that the child at this stage repeats certain words, sometimes related to a request and sometimes in the middle of a conversation; in the first case, repetition suggests insistence on obtaining something, whereas in the second it may indicate the child's difficulty in clarifying the intended idea. All of these features reveal clear signs of linguistic development, while cognitive development in this period is characterized by simple cognitive growth that marks the beginning of what can be called a cognitive chain, which forms the basis for concept formation and mental schemas to be discussed in later lessons. Adults at this stage tend to present information in categories, groups, or sequences to facilitate the child's understanding in different situations (Mohamed Ahmed Shalabi, 2001, p. 198).

For example, the concept of "wedding" may be introduced as: "We will go to a wedding; we will see a bride and groom, sweets, loud music, and so on." At this stage, the child also begins to show early forms of pretend play, such as pretending to give you something to eat from an empty hand, or riding a stick as if it were a horse. In addition, overgeneralization appears clearly: the child may label all time-keeping devices, whether wall clocks or wristwatches, simply as "clock," and all types of footwear, regardless of their form or specific name, as "shoes."

Factors influencing language development:

The stages through which the child passes in learning language are obligatory for children across the world, and the ages at which children begin to articulate sounds or produce their first words do not differ greatly from one culture to another in general. However, children of the same chronological age do not reach the same degree of language development, and this variation is due to several factors.

General health of the child:

The child's health is one of the key factors that support normal language development, whether in terms of physical health—such as the integrity of the senses, nervous system, and speech apparatus—or mental health, including fear, anxiety, and low self-confidence. All of these are internal, psychologically based factors that may hinder the sound development of language in the child.

Gender:

Most studies in this field indicate that language development in girls is faster than in boys, especially in the early years of life. It has been observed that girls generally begin babbling before boys, and that they show a greater ability to vary sounds during babbling before the age of two; this superiority continues throughout infancy in all aspects of language, including onset of speech, size of vocabulary, sentence length and complexity, and number of lexical items—all of which are important indicators of language growth (Qasim, 2000, p. 120). One explanation is that the left hemisphere of the brain, which is mainly responsible for language, matures more quickly in girls than in boys. Broca's area plays a crucial role in forming and constructing words and sentences, as it is the center responsible for organizing speech patterns, and this function is related to its proximity to the cortical areas controlling the muscles of the face, jaw, tongue, and larynx. It is also responsible for verb forms and the selection of function words (Alsartawi & Abu Jouda, 2000, p. 55). Some research also attributes gender differences in language development to social factors: the girl is often physically closer to the mother, whereas the boy is more frequently away from her. The mother tends to take her daughter with her to places such as the kitchen and bathroom and to most locations she visits, while she is less likely to do so with her son, which increases the girl's exposure to language input.

Family and its socio-economic conditions:

Language does not develop in a vacuum; the child approaches language acquisition with a strong biological drive to develop language, and the emergence of language is closely tied to cognitive development. The child does not acquire language without exposure to linguistic models, and there is evidence that mere passive listening is not sufficient for acquisition. The child's communicative interactions with caregivers drive and facilitate the acquisition of vocabulary and overall language development. Many researchers argue that for speech to grow and develop, the child must receive warm, physically and emotionally engaging interaction from caregivers, through which children are stimulated and motivated to babble, and babbling gradually transforms into meaningful speech. For this reason, the underlying causes of children's language learning are fundamentally social, and are intimately connected to their contact with parents or other caregivers.

Parents' cultural and educational level:

This factor is of critical importance in the child's language development, as there is a strong relationship between the child's linguistic growth and the parents' educational and cultural level. A higher level of parental education and culture enables them to seek sound methods of child-rearing, especially in meeting children's needs without resorting to physical punishment, and in giving them

opportunities to talk, express their opinions, and participate in simple decisions, such as choosing a preferred clothing color. In many communities, an educated or culturally aware mother actively searches for solutions to her problems and her children's questions through social media, as well as by attending learning seminars and conferences to gain expertise in raising children during the critical developmental stages they pass through and that require guidance and informed study

Birth order of the child:

According to some studies, the oldest child and the only child tend to be richer in their language development because they receive extensive parental attention and have more direct contact with adults. The youngest child in the family is also often linguistically rich with a good vocabulary, due to the family's particular focus on him or her. Numerous studies have examined the child's birth order and its relation to intelligence, and have found a relationship between birth order and IQ level; for example, the average score of the first-born child was about five points higher on the Raven test than that of the ninth child in birth order (Mohamed Ahmed Shalabi, 2001, p. 104).

Intelligence:

There is a strong relationship between the child's mental ability and language, as children with intellectual disabilities display clear disorders in the linguistic domain, and mental capacity therefore sets an upper limit on the degree of language mastery. More intelligent children use language earlier and more skillfully; they show a higher linguistic level than others in terms of vocabulary size, correctness of sentence structure, and sentence length. In other words, the higher the intelligence, the greater the child's ability to acquire various language skills. Ultimately, however, regardless of the child's mental capacities, a rich and healthy environment is needed to foster these potentials. A well-known illustration is the case of "Victor," the so-called wild child found living in the forest, who barked, ate, and walked like dogs; when the researcher Itard attempted to teach him language over a period of five years, he did not succeed (Qahtan Ahmed Al-Zahir, 2015, p. 414).

Family relationships:

The way parents deal with their child is crucial in increasing or decreasing the child's linguistic repertoire. When family relationships are characterized by warmth and harmony, the child can express ideas freely whenever he or she wishes, and both cognitive and linguistic abilities develop in a healthy manner. In contrast, when relationships are based on dominance and control, the child tends to avoid situations and refrains from expressing opinions out of fear of reprimand.

Qur'anic school:

This factor is among the most important influences on the child's language development. The method of repetition used in Qur'anic schools reinforces vocabulary, supports correct articulation of sounds, stabilizes their points of articulation, improves pronunciation, and trains the tongue accordingly. Several studies have reported that a high proportion of students who succeed in the baccalaureate examination have previously attended Qur'anic schools. Although the curricula of contemporary Qur'anic schools vary, they still maintain high quality in teaching children vocabulary and controlling articulation of sounds because they rely on rote learning and memorization, and they take into account peak periods for acquisition. For instance, a child in a Qur'anic preschool may

study for only two hours a day, whereas preparatory education in regular institutions can exceed five hours daily, morning and afternoon, yet there is often no significant difference in educational level; indeed, the advantage may favor pupils who attended Qur'anic schools.

Language duality (bilingualism):

The importance of language and of providing the child with a second language is well known, but the language the child learns can particularly affect development in early childhood. When a child speaks two languages because the home language differs from that of friends and school, or when the child is required to learn a foreign language while still acquiring the mother tongue, this can disrupt and delay language skills in both languages. Children learn two labels for one object or concept, which may hinder the emergence of speech. The presence of more than one language in the child's environment can thus have a noticeable impact, especially for children who are predisposed to language disorders.

Relationship between parents:

The relationship between mother and father is very important for the child's language development. Persistent conflicts and arguments between them in front of the child can lead to negative behavioral patterns such as aggression and withdrawal, which in turn may interfere with normal language use and communication.

Attendance at daycare or kindergarten:

Many studies have confirmed that a child's integration into kindergarten during the middle childhood years supports the acquisition of numerous vocabulary items through group play and role play. Such interactive contexts offer rich opportunities for conversation, negotiation, and narrative, all of which contribute to expanding the child's lexicon and communicative competence.

Mass media:

Despite legitimate concerns about mass media, it can play an important role in enriching the child's language, especially through well-designed, educational programs targeted at children. The primary risk associated with media is not the content itself, but the amount of time the child spends in front of screens. Excessive exposure may limit real interactive communication, whereas moderate, guided exposure to high-quality programs can enhance vocabulary and listening skills.

Stories and tales:

Numerous studies have emphasized the importance of reading stories to children, especially at bedtime. Stories foster language development, increase vocabulary, and provide opportunities for dialogue with the storyteller, thus enriching the child's linguistic repertoire. Psychologists and speech-language therapists place particular emphasis on this factor, whether the child is typically developing or experiencing difficulties such as learning disorders, because reading or listening to stories helps consolidate words, enrich vocabulary, and connect sentences and events. Stories also play a significant role in strengthening the bond between the child and parents, improving attention and concentration, and encouraging the child to ask questions.

Communication with the child:

A child who is engaged in frequent verbal interaction tends to have a rich vocabulary, unlike, for example, an only child with busy parents who rarely converse with him or her. A child accustomed to talking with parents, uncles, aunts, or members of a large extended family is usually sociable and able to express inner thoughts easily because of continuous linguistic stimulation. By contrast, a child who is not used to verbal communication often relies heavily on gestures, pointing to desired objects with a finger, and has a limited vocabulary.

Psychological state:

A child who receives sufficient affection, warmth, and attention, and who feels secure while speaking, is more likely to develop language in a healthy way. In contrast, a child who is fearful and lacking in self-confidence may experience delayed or restricted linguistic development.

Exposure to stimuli:

The more a child is exposed to a wide range of environmental stimuli, the richer the child's vocabulary tends to be. Therefore, children should be allowed to explore various stimuli directly, rather than being exposed to them only through pictures. Real-life exploration supports the formation of concepts and provides concrete experiences that can be labeled and described verbally.

Conclusion:

From this article, we can deduce the importance of the linguistic stages the child passes through during development, as well as the significance of internal and external factors in enhancing and improving language growth. Understanding these stages enables us, even if only to a limited degree, to monitor and guide the course of language development in both typically developing children and those with disabilities or disorders. It also highlights the crucial role of the family and the part it plays in ensuring healthy language development for its children through stimulation and attention to all linguistic and cognitive aspects.

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