

Language Acquisition

By Nancy Arapoff Cramer

(An answer to question D in Yao Shen's article, "What Are Your Answers ESL Teachers?") (See TESL Reporter, Vol. 3, No. 3, Spring, 1970). Nancy Arapoff Cramer, Assistant Professor, Department of English as a Second Language, University of Hawaii is the author of *Writing Through Understanding*.

One of the questions (D) in Yao Shen's article reads as follows: "If, as some of the recent psycholinguists claim, a child does not learn language by imitation, how does he learn it according to them?" Five more specific questions on this subject follow.

I would like to refer the readers (and question-askers) to a very fine article by Leon Jakobovits, entitled "Implications of Recent Psycholinguistic Developments for the Teaching of a Second Language," which can be found in the June 1968 issue of *Language Learning*, or in Mark Lester's recent anthology *Readings in Applied Transformational Grammar*. I recommend this article because it answers, clearly and precisely, all of these questions, and also makes some suggestions, based on the most recent findings about language acquisition, as to how best to go about teaching language.

Jakobovits sees the ability to acquire language as being both hereditary and maturational: the child is born with a built-in knowledge of "linguistic universals" which makes the task of learning a given set of incredibly complex and abstract rules one he can accomplish with seeming ease and very little help at a very young age. Naturally, he cannot do this if he is not exposed to language during the crucial language-learning years (between 2 and 5). He must hear adults speak, and attempt to speak to them in order to be able to formulate in his mind the rules of his language. But he does *not* imitate adult speech. His speech merely becomes more "adult-like" as he continues to learn ever-more specific rules for that language.

It is important to remember that the child understands adult speech (as shown by his ability to carry out orders, etc.) before he can speak it, and that adults understand the child's "non-English" utterances (such as "allgone shoe"). This indicates that there is a lot more to language than surface structure. That both child and adult can "see," far below the surface of a particular language, the *same* general cognitive structure, indicates that there does indeed exist a set of linguistic universals which is a part of our genetic heritage.

In any case, space here does not permit a thorough discussion of a very complex subject. My intent has been to arouse your interest to the point of looking up Jakobovits' article, for he really "tells it like it is," clearly and simply. Most importantly, he doesn't leave the language teacher in despair, but rather makes some very helpful suggestions about second language teaching.

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