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Role of Imitation in Language Assessment Tests

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ABSTRACT

A study investigated whether imitation plays a significant role in the acquisition of grammar. Three 6- to 8-year-old hearing-impaired children were administered the Grammatical Analysis of Elicited Language--Simple Sentence Level Test (GAEL), which is designed to evaluate hearing-impaired children's use of grammatical aspects of spoken and/or signed English. Subjects' verbal responses to the "imitated" component (in which subjects were asked to say just what the tester said) of the GAEL were transcribed and analyzed. Results indicated that imitated speech is neither longer nor grammatically more advanced than non-imitated, spontaneous speech. Findings suggest that the children produced "unique" language structures to assimilate the adult form in their language without abandoning their own system of language. (Two tables of data are included.) (RS)

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Abha Gupta

Role of Imitation in Language Assessment Tests

With the current emphasis on assessment in education, it becomes important to examine the current practices in testing and their underlying assumptions. One such practice in assessment of oral language development continues to be the use of "imitation tasks". The use and function of imitation in child language has been a continuing concern of psycholinguistic research. Although the role imitation plays in accounting for normal language acquisition is not well understood, elicited imitation has been justified as a clinically powerful tool for assessment and intervention with the language impaired child (Berry and Taylor, 1976; Sherman 1971).

Tager-Flusberg and Calkins (1990) re-opened the question of whether imitation plays a significant role in the acquisition of grammar. The main findings of their study are that, with few exceptions, spontaneous speech utterances were longer, and contained more advanced grammatical constructions than did the imitation utterances. They argue that imitation does not facilitate grammatical development. These findings were supported by the results of our study in which data from three hearing impaired children were obtained on a language proficiency test.

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Background Research:

A majority of assessment measures continue to use imitation as a primary basis for estimating the linguistic competence of language impaired children. Practical reasons for the widespread use of such measures are that imitative measures require less time, are relatively easy to administer and sample with greater variety and proficiency, than spontaneous sampling methods. Clay, et al (1979:9) report that "By having a child repeat sentences which represent a range of different syntactic structures in English, a teacher can learn as much in a relatively short time about his control of those structures as would be learned from listening to the child's spontaneous speech over a much longer period."

Method:

Subjects

The three hearing impaired children for this study were Jeany, Joel and Ronnie (names have been changed). Their respective ages were eight, seven and six years old. The children were monolingual speakers of English and were randomly selected. The children primarily used oral language in the test.

Procedure

The children were administered the Grammatical Analysis of Elicited Language--Simple Sentence Level Test (GAEL). The test is designed to evaluate hearing impaired children's use of grammatical aspects of spoken and/or signed English in a standardized test setting. The

Gael test consists of a series of activities with a set of toys and games designed to elicit specific sentences which constitute a sampling of syntactic structures.

Each child was individually tested and videotaped. The examiner verbally modeled the sentences to each child while simultaneously manipulating objects that enacted events appropriate to the test sentences. The test consisted of a total of 21 activities eliciting 94 sentences. The two components of the test were "Prompted" and "Imitated". For the Prompted component, the examiner modeled similar sentences prior to eliciting the target sentence from the child whereas for the Imitated component the child had to repeat after the examiner modeled the correct sentence. In this study we focused on the Imitated responses of the children who were instructed by the tester as, "I want you to say just what I say." The child's verbal response to each sentence was transcribed.

Analysis

Each child's response was scored with reference to the immediately preceding utterance. The data were analyzed within Snow's (1981) methodological framework. Each imitated response was categorized as Exact Imitation (EI), Reduced Imitation (RI), and Expanded Imitation (Exp I). These categories were operationally defined as below (Snow 1981):

Exact Imitation: Reproduction of all the words and morphemes of the adult utterance in their modeled order, with no changes or additions. Only deviations produced by the child's current phonological system were allowed. For example:

T: That boy turned around.

J: *That boy turned around.*

Reduced Imitation: Reproductions of at least one content word from the adult utterance, including no words for morphemes not present in the modeled utterance. Deviations from the modeled order were included as Reduced Imitations as well. For example:

T: Mommy walked.

J: *Mommy walk.*

Expanded Imitations: Utterance including at least one stressed content word from the adult utterance and at least one word or morpheme not in the modeled utterance. For example:

T: Mommy dropped the chair.

J: *The mommy drop a yellow chair.*

Results

The analysis showed that Joel and Ronnie- two of the three children elicited more exact imitations than deviated imitations. Jeany

deviated 51% of the times and thus the difference between her exact imitations and deviated imitations was not much. All three children showed more reduced imitations than expanded imitations.

[Table 1 (included at the end)]

The implication of such three-fold analysis of imitative responses is that if children demonstrate expanded imitations more than exact and reduced imitations, then their expanded imitations are assumed to provide support for the view that imitations reflect a child's *potential* for producing language beyond what the child is currently producing in spontaneous speech. The underlying assumption in this logic is that any linguistic production which is an 'expanded imitation' is considered linguistically more complicated than its original unexpanded form. The validity of this assumption is questionable given the transformational generative grammar model. Goodman (1984) argues that See Spot Run is a linguistically more complicated structure than its semantically equivalent form -- You see that Spot is running. The latter is the underlying structure of the former. The reader or the listener has to infer the additional information given the reduced form of the sentence. An imperative structure, like "Shut Up!" is grammatically more complex than its declarative form, "You Shut Up!" or the interrogative form "Will you please shut up" in the transformational generative grammar paradigm. The underlying structure of the imperative contains the second person pronominal in the subject position which is deleted by an imperative transformational rule of subject deletion. Although, if

one considers only the surface forms, then one might be tempted to believe that the imperative surface form is simpler than its corresponding declarative or interrogative form because the former has fewer lexical items. Thus, surface structures could be misleading without considering the underlying forms.

Sometimes, pushing children to produce an imitated sentence could lead to surface forms that are neither a part of the 'adult grammar' nor that of the 'child's grammar'. In these instances children tend to assimilate adult models into their existing system of language without abandoning their own system, resulting in surface forms that are 'unique', that would not have occurred in children's spontaneous language otherwise. We observed this phenomenon in the responses of Jeany, Joel and Ronnie. For instance, in the following discourse that occurred between Jeany (J) and the Tester (T), Jeany maintained her current systematic form of the sentence, assimilating the 'adult form' to result in a 'unique' surface form:

J(P): prompted response of Jeany

J(I): imitated response of Jeany

J(P): I see a apple

T: I see some apples. (tester's attempt to elicit target response)

J(I): I see a apple.

T: What do you see: (moving on to next picture)

J(P): I see a rose.

T: I see some flowers.

J(I): I see a some flower.

J(P): I see a balloon. (in response to next picture)

T: I see some balloons.

J(I): I see a some balloon.

Jeany's prompted responses are corrected by the tester each time. Jeany was expected to produce an imitation of the correct form that the tester modeled. However, Jeany's imitations show that she maintained the surface form of her sentences and incorporated the additional grammatical feature from the Tester's utterance. As in:

I see a some balloon.

In this sentence, Jeany retained all the linguistic features of her prompted response, which was "I see a balloon" and added the quantifier [some] from the tester's response in the syntactically appropriate slot in the sentence. Her syntactic usage of [some] seems to be governed by her already acquired grammatical system of forming adjectival phrases, as she had exhibited in response to earlier activities of the test, phrases like: 'a yellow chair'; 'a little bed'; 'the big bed' etc. Thus, in the above imitation, she followed the same grammatical order of an article, adjective and a noun:

[a some flower]

art adj/quant noun

This unique occurrence of quantifier demonstrates that Jeany has acquired a grammatical rule to produce adjectival phrases correctly, but is still struggling with usage of quantifiers. She is not yet ready for the linguistic rule that "determiners are mutually exclusive with each other, i.e., there cannot be more than one determiner occurring before the noun head" (Quirk et al 1980:137).

*a the girl

*a some flower

(*=not allowed in English grammar)

The determiners are in a 'choice relation', i.e., they occur one instead of another. In this respect they are unlike 'all', 'many' which are in the 'chain relation' as in:

all the many pretty flowers

McNeill (1966:69) describes the way children assimilate adult models into their current grammars, but he clearly distinguishes between assimilating imitations and changing a child's grammar. He cites one child, in the phase of producing double negatives while developing the negative transformation, who had the following exchange with his mother:

Child: Nobody don't like me

Mother: No, say "nobody likes me."

Child: Nobody don't like me.

(eight repetitions of this dialogue)

Mother: No, now listen carefully; say "nobody likes me."

Child: Oh! Nobody don't likes me.

Not only do such practices of correcting not help, they may actually hinder a child's learning. Cazden (1972:111) says: "The implication for education is that teachers may be interfering with the child's learning process by insisting on responses that superficially look or sound "correct". John de Cuevas (1990:62) quotes a similar example:

Child: My teacher holded the baby rabbits and we petted them.

Mother: Did you say your teacher held the baby rabbits?

Child: Yes.

Mother: What did you say she did?

Child: She holded the baby rabbits and we petted them.

Mother: Did you say she held them tightly?

Child: No, she holded them loosely.

Children often stick to their notions of language, disregarding those who try to correct them, persisting in their peculiar usages until they are ready to adopt new ones.

The operational definitions and the criteria for classifying "Expanded/ Reduced" imitations as mentioned earlier are fallacious as they consider only the surface form of the utterance. The belief that imitations facilitate grammatical development is a result of such operational criteria. In another test activity, Jeany gave the

following response, which was considered an expanded imitation following the operational criteria described previously:

T: What happened?

J(P): Mommy push the pink chair

T: The girl pushed the red chair to the table.

J(EI): The girl push the table pink chair table move the table in the table.

Here, although imitative response (EI) is an expansion of the modelled utterance, it is more of a reflection of Jeany's strong efforts to get the words of the modeled utterance in her response and a desperate attempt to recollect and reproduce the tester's sentence than an indicator of linguistic growth. She imitates the first half of the sentence correctly and then falters off to repeat the final word of the modeled sentence 'table' and then retains her noun phrase of the prompted response 'pink chair'. After which she attempts to formulate a structure in the close proximity of what she remembers of the modeled utterance. It becomes more of a cognitive task requiring one's memorization abilities than one's linguistic abilities. These imitative responses of children make one reconsider the distinction that Spolsky (1966) made between "language" and "language-like behavior" in terms of producing language and displaying language.

The results of this study suggest that imitated speech is neither longer (underlying structure of the utterance) nor grammatically

more advanced than non-imitated, spontaneous speech. Our study showed that when asked to imitate, children produced 'unique' language structures to assimilate the adult form in their language without abandoning their own system of language. We found very little evidence in our data for the progressive nature of imitation.

TABLE 1

Children's use of exact, reduced and expanded imitations

Child	Total Imitations	Exact	Total Deviated	Percentage of Imitations	
				Reduced(RI)	Expanded(EI)
Jeany	141	69 (.49%)	72	42 (.30%)	30 (.21%)
Joel	125	75 (.60%)	50	27 (.22%)	23 (.18%)
Ronnie	163	103 (.63%)	60	36 (.22%)	24 (.15%)

TABLE 2

Number of Children Deviated on Each Test Item

Number of children	Test Items
10	28, 29, 47, 48, 49, 50, 58, 61, 75, 78, 81
9	4, 6, 10, 15, 17, 19, 21, 24, 27, 32, 33, 37, 39, 40, 41, 54, 55, 57, 59, 60, 62, 74, 76, 85, 87, 89
8	7, 9, 11, 16, 18, 26, 31, 38, 42, 51, 64, 65, 71, 72, 73, 77, 79, 80, 83, 84, 88, 91
7	2, 5, 8, 12, 13, 14, 20, 30, 34, 35, 43, 53, 56, 63, 82, 86, 90, 92, 93
6	1, 22, 23, 25, 52, 66, 68
5	3, 36, 44, 46
4	67, 70,
3	45
2	69
1	94

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