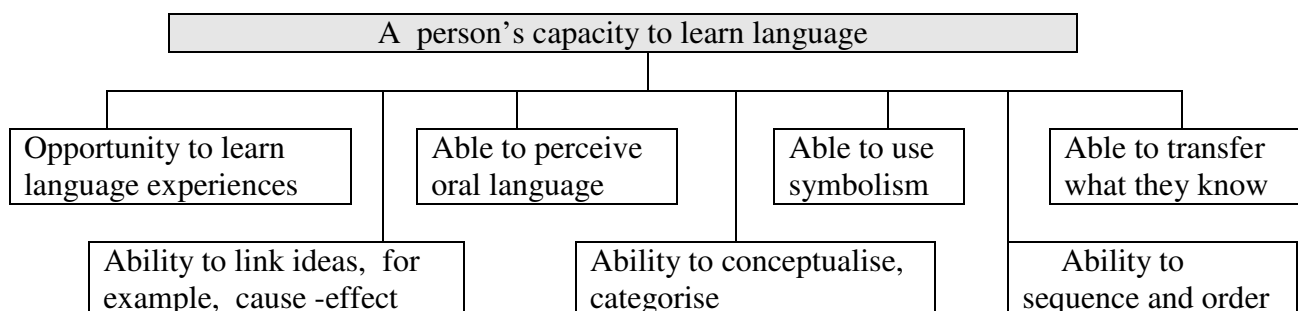


Session 1: A framework for describing language
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Section 5: Students' language learning capacity

Aim of this section: to explore a person's ability to learn. A person's ability to use language at any time is influenced by their capacity to learn it. What does a person need to know to learn language? There are a number of aspects of this. Some of these are shown in the following diagram.



If we are to help young children to learn language, we first need to understand what knowledge they need to do this. In other words, what knowledge prepares children to learn how to use language? The conversation between the five year olds provides a starting point. It tells us some things about their capacity to learn language.

In our ICPALER model, this is the **AL** aspect. All of the other aspects depend on how well the person can learn.

	E	R
the ideas being communicated		
the conventions, rules they are using		
the purpose for communicating		
how you learnt to do these things and how confident you feel about doing them		

5.1 What learning abilities did the children in the conversation have?

Each of the children in the conversation had been able to learn language. The ways in which they did this suggests that they were able to think in various ways. These ways of thinking can help us see how they learn. Have participants review the conversation and identify what the children's language behaviours suggest about how they can think.

To what extent do the students show evidence of being	Evidence for this way of thinking
able to talk about items that were not present?	
able to use words such as 'kitten' or cat to refer to more than one specific item?	
able to link ideas into sentence meanings?	
able to arrange ideas in order?	
able to transfer what they knew to other experiences?	
willing and prepared to engage in oral communication?	

Each of these questions about thinking is linked with a particular aspect of a person’s ability to learn, as follows:

Questions about thinking / ability to learn:	ways of learning:
able to talk about items that were not present?	can form symbols, or symbolize
able to use words such as ‘kitten’ or cat to refer to more than one specific item?	can form concepts or categorize
able to link ideas into sentence meanings?	can link ideas
able to arrange ideas in order?	can sequence and order
able to transfer what they knew to other experiences?	can transfer what they know
willing and prepared to engage in oral communication?	a belief that they can use language and a willingness or preparedness to engage in oral communication.

The young children were able to use various ways of learning in order to develop their ability to communicate using language. These ways of learning are necessary for language learning. They develop over the first few years of life.

<p>learning capacities</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • forming symbols, or symbolize • forming concepts or categorize • linking ideas • sequencing and ordering • transferring what they know • believing that they can use language and a willingness or preparedness to engage in oral communication.
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<p>ability to learn language</p>

The more young children use these ways of learning, the more efficiently they can use them to learn language. Without these ways of learning, children are less able to learn to communicate effectively.

Children who have difficulty learning language may have difficulty thinking in some of these ways. In this section we examine these ways of learning and how they can be used to learn language.

5.2.1 Ability to symbolize

The children could think about items and events that weren’t present. They could, for example, talk about dogs that were not with them at the time. In other words they used symbols for both items and events. They could symbolize actions, such as ‘go to the vet’. Had the children been unable to symbolize, they would not have been able to talk about the ideas when they weren’t present.

The children used sound patterns to symbolize the ideas. The spoken word ‘doggie’ doesn’t sound like the animal it represents. They were also able to symbolize actions such as ‘bited and ‘falled’.

Children's ability to symbolize develops gradually. Children aged 2-3 would have difficulty symbolizing a complex idea such as 'democracy'. They first learn to use symbols for salient or important items in their lives, such as the faces of their parents. Gradually they learn to symbolize actions and other items.

They then learn to use more complex symbols, for example, to learn to recognize the 'golden arches' and pictorial symbols. They learn to use spoken words to symbolize first individual items and then groups of items. When they see a visual symbol or hear a spoken symbol, they can recall what it means.

Later they learn to deal with the alphanumeric symbols used in writing and reading. These include letter clusters and numerals. They learn to link these written symbols with how they are said and what they mean.

5.2.2 Ability to form concepts or categorize

The children use spoken words such as 'doggie' to refer to more than particular item. Their language suggests they understood that 'doggie' refers to a category of items, rather than a single, particular item.

They seemed to understand that the word 'doggie' applied to a type of animal that has particular features; it barks, bites, is a pet, etc. The children are using it as a 'mental category' or an 'idea'. Children understand 'doggie' as being different from 'cat'. They learn the characteristics that distinguish doggies from other items such as chairs.

As children develop, their mental category or ideas can ultimately become concept, although it should be noted that educators differ in how they actually define what a concept is. Most people use the word 'concept' to apply to ideas that can be used in logical ways. Young children learn to do this gradually. Before they can think in logical ways using concepts, they put items into the same category based on how they look, sound or feel. In other words, they use perceptual features.

Using solely the criterion of how things look, sound or feel can be a misleading way of putting things into categories. The concepts associated with words such as 'five' or 'aunt' are not based on how things look. Not all things that are an example of five or aunt look the same. Categories based on how things look or sound precede logical categorizing. They are often called 'percepts'.

Concepts are a key aspect of language learning. One concept that is critical for language learning is the 'concept of a word'. Children learn to store in memory both how the word "doggie" is said and also what it symbolizes, that is, its meaning and how it is used in language. They learn, for example, that some words are the names of objects, some name actions and some name attributes or properties such as 'smallness' or 'redness'.

Learning the concept of a word allows the child to use meanings in novel ways. It allows children to form word banks, in which each spoken word is linked with its meaning, independently of other words.

They store in their memories what they have heard and link this with what was going on at the time. This is an aspect of a person's capacity to learn language. This becomes part of their memory for language.

5.2.3 Ability to link ideas

A key aspect of thinking is being to link or combine ideas. The children in the conversation linked single ideas into sentences ideas. Not only did they comprehend individual words but they also understood sentences that linked two or more ideas. The observation that they comprehend and said comprehensible sentences that were linked with the topic suggests that they understood the links between ideas.

One relationship they seemed to understand in a limited way was cause and effect. Tom understood the connection between having a ball and biting it. Kath understood the link between falling into a pool over and being dried. Will understood the link between falling into a pool and drowning.

As children develop, they learn to link ideas in more complex ways. First they link things by putting them together through actions. Later they learn how to link symbols. They learn to think about the link as a whole. When they hear the event '*the cat drank the milk*', they can imagine the event as a whole, as well as each aspect. Later still, they can understand two links at once, for example, '*Before the cat drank the milk it played with the toy*'. Much later they learn to understand general links (for example, to understand "*All puppies are dogs*") and conditional links (for example, to understand "*If the car runs out of petrol, it will stop.*")

5.2.4 Ability to sequence and order

The children in the conversation arranged word meanings in order. These became comprehensible sentences that expressed their intentions. They also used the word order in what they heard to work out the intended meanings of sentence. Most of the children's statements suggest that they could use word order effectively.

Being able to arrange ideas in order and to comprehend by using the order in the spoken information are key abilities in learning language. Children who have not developed this ability may have greater difficulty learning to comprehend and say sentence meanings and to use various grammatical conventions.

Children learn gradually how to do this. The early seriation research within the Piagetian framework indicates that children first learn to sequence two items (for example, *big – little, large-small, light-heavy*), then three items and then more. In parallel with this they learn to use the words that refer to the items in each order, for example, *little- bigger-biggest*.

Children also learn to recognise order and sequence in situations. They first learn to recognise two items in order, then three and finally more. They can look at a pattern and tell themselves what it shows.

5.2.5 Ability to transfer what they know

Not only do individuals store their earlier experiences of language and how it is used but as well they transfer these to other situations and apply them in new contexts. They can analyse their experiences, take them apart and put them together in novel ways.

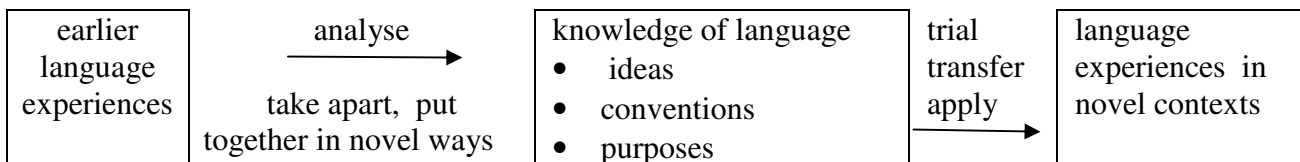
Kath transferred what she had heard about Tom's doggie by making links with her dog. Will linked Tom's dog with his dog having puppies. The children were making links between their experiences.

This capacity to transfer what they know is an important capacity for young children. It is important that teachers understand how young children do it in their language. It would be inappropriate, for example, for Miss Brown to tell Will to 'stay on the subject' (which would be

about Tom’s dog). The experiential links these young children are showing in their language illustrate the developmental stage of their capacity to link and to transfer.

5.3 Applying the ways of learning to language experiences

The ways of learning are not sufficient to learn language. As well, the language learner needs to experience language being used in a range of contexts. The learner can store these in memory and build a bank of earlier language experiences. They can then apply the ways of learning to these. From this they can build a knowledge of language that they can then transfer and trial in novel contexts. This process is shown in the following diagram.



The quality and the range of language experiences a child learns will influence the language knowledge the child can construct. Consider two three year olds, Alan and Bianca, seeing a ferret and saying “*Look, Mummy, doggie*”. Alan’s mother says “*No it’s a ferret*”. Bianca’s mother says “*It’s a ferret. It looks like a dog. But see how it has pointy ears. Its body is different. See how it is long and thin. It’s a ferret. It doesn’t bark. What’s it called again?*” Bianca received feedback that tuned her in to looking at the features of the object she was naming. Given sufficient of these types of experiences, Bianca’s bank of language experiences will be will of a higher quality than those of Alan.

A second way in which children’s language experiences differ is in how people communicate with them. Some infants will hear their parents and siblings use language that is slightly ahead of where their language is. Their parents and older siblings speak in ways that are slightly developmentally advanced of what the infant knows. The language used is shaped by what the infant knows. This is called ‘motherese’.

A third way in which these earlier experiences differ is in the quality of the positive feedback infants receive when they make responses that approximated to the language used or that showed they are aware of the language. The positive feedback helps the children learn to value language as a way of communicating, to trial and experiment with language and to build a self confidence in using it.

A fourth way in which these earlier experiences differ is in the encouragement and modelling infants receive to imitate in oral language contexts. Gradually they learn to imitate language selectively. The modelling can also assist them to imitate the motor aspects of language production.

A fifth way in which these earlier experiences differ is in the pairing of language and related motor activities. Some infants have a range of experiences in which they pair what they say with actions they do. They bang a drum while saying “*Bang. Bang*” and repeat “*Jump, jump*” while jumping. This early linking provides the foundation for transition between motor and verbal activity in later years.

Infants store in their memories what they have heard and link this with what was going on at the time, including the actions they were doing. These experiences contribute to their capacity to learn language.

5.4 A belief that they can use language successfully. How willing to use language?

All of the speakers in the previous conversation were willing or prepared to communicate and even to take control of the conversation. They seemed confident about their ability to communicate. They seemed to believe that they could make sense or be successful when they talked.

Children's belief that they can use language and can be successful doing it is necessary for effective language use. Confidence in one's ability to communicate orally has a significant influence on how one uses it. Children's self efficacy as language learners is important for language learning. A positive self efficacy is associated with a willingness or preparedness to engage in oral communication. Children who, on the other hand, believe that they are less likely to use language successfully are less willing and prepared to engage in oral communication. Children's beliefs about their likelihood of success as language users are stored in their earlier experiences.

5.5 Being able to perceive oral language

In order to have the language experiences, children need to be able to detect the sounds that make it, to sort them out from other noises that occur at the same time, to retain them briefly and to integrate them.

Discuss the following auditory perceptual abilities with participants:

- (1) the ability to hear adequately the range of sounds that make up speech (that is, acuity). If a child can detect only some of the sounds that make up words, the child will form incorrect versions of them and will have greater difficulty recognizing regularities in speech patterns. Children who have intermittent middle ear hearing loss, for example, may hear sound sequences differently on different occasions. This can disturb significantly their experiences of oral language.
- (2) the ability to attend to a particular spoken message when there are competing sounds, for example, to attend to what the teachers is saying when children are rustling papers in the background, or footsteps in passage (that is, auditory figure-ground differentiation).
- (3) the ability to direct and maintain attention to a particular spoken message and to listen to it selectively when other people are also speaking (auditory selective attention).
- (4) the ability to make or form a complete interpretation of a message either when you only hear part of it or when you hear the message in parts (auditory gestalt or closure). In a classroom, part of a spoken message may be interrupted by other noise, so the child hears part of it.
- (5) the ability to retain and say immediately the information that was heard (short term auditory memory).

Have the participants suggest indicators of each of these in a classroom context.

In Session 2 we will examine using the **ICPALER** framework to develop teaching procedures to assist students who have oral language difficulties.