

Teenage language

As teenagers you may think you receive a very bad press! The media seem happy to represent teenagers as an inarticulate group who express themselves largely through Facebook and who are chained to their cell phones using 'text speak'. This section offers a more balanced approach to the ways in which teenagers use language.

Teenagers are often early adopters of popular culture; style, fashion, music, new technology and language. Older people often criticise the language they hear teenagers using but words they may have used themselves such as *OK*, *blast* and *groovy* once raised eyebrows in the 1950s and 1960s for the same reason! Teenagers are innovators of language and this is an important feature of their conversational styles.

Teenagers are fluent conversationalists. Having learned the conventions from their earliest years, they are now able to bend and break these established patterns, especially in conversation with their peers. Teenagers talk a lot! Their world is bursting with activity which needs to be communicated and, in the digital age, instantaneous transfer of this information is critical to them. Skype, Facebook, FaceTime, phone, twitter, BBM, Snapchat, Whatsapp and Instagram are just some of the methods of social networking which increasingly redefine the boundaries between written and spoken language. These forms of communication generate language which may be unclear or even incomprehensible to those outside the teenage circle.

A criticism of teenagers and their language use is that they may actually reduce their lexical base from a vocabulary of several thousand words acquired in childhood. Teenage language has often been associated with lowered standards, as defined by older generations who often fail to understand teenage use of **patois**. Additionally, there is now the medium of the internet on which teenagers may share different language styles which were not available to their parents and grandparents.

Teenage language acquisition is clearly not about *learning* language, but it is about learning to adapt and use language in situations where they are beginning to play adult roles in society and for which clear communication is essential. Teenagers, more than adults, may live in contrasting language worlds. Online digital communication and behaviour is immediate; it is generated by the user themselves, for example videos posted on YouTube. Teenagers can create their own virtual lives with games and activities that they themselves choose and control. These online activities invariably have their own vocabulary which is understood by the participants. Online teenage gaming advertisements encourage teenagers to *create your own avatar or build your own medieval kingdom while you chat and hang out with friends*. Investigation into such games shows that there is a lot of jargon and colloquial phrasing, sometimes leading to bad or abusive language.

By contrast, the style of traditional education, which takes up more and more of the teenage years, may demand more standard English usage. Successful students have to demonstrate that they are able to write and express themselves appropriately. The majority of teenagers successfully code switch between different language styles, but it is those who cannot switch, and are therefore perceived as inarticulate, who become the object of negative media attention.

For more about language and social groups, turn to page 174 in **Unit 5**.

patois the dialect of a particular group, especially one with low status in relation to the standard language

For more about code switching, turn to page 187 in **Unit 5**.

- 1 Think about your own personal communications. What digital forms of communication do you use? With whom do you communicate and how frequently?
- 2 To what extent do you code switch when you move from digital conversations with your peer group to communication with the broader community, such as older family members, teachers and employers? Analyse the type of vocabulary and syntactical changes you make, and the reasons why.
- 3 One online blogger has said that:
Daily, teens confront the challenges and opportunities of code switching in digital spaces, at home and at school. Code switching is not easy to do and can bring coping fatigue, confusion, missteps and distractions.

afsusa via flickr

Discuss this statement with classmates and consider whether it is a fair assertion of the difficulties teenagers face today.

Analyse a range of magazines aimed at both male and female teenagers, and TV programmes and films where teenagers are featured, both from your local area and from other countries. What forms of language are prominent? Is the language used in the magazines similar to your own style of speaking? To what extent do teenagers code switch from standard forms of English to teenage colloquial language?

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Here are four transcripts of conversations demonstrating teenagers using both appropriate and inappropriate forms of language in order to speak in public.

Transcript 1

Teenagers in a classroom are discussing the ethics of animal testing as part of an exam assessment.

- TOM We're goin' to start to discuss animal testing
- PETE um (.) I reckon that animal testing is wrong (.) because (.) it only harms a few animals but it um (.) saves a large percentage of humans
- LEILA I'd like to argue against that because it doesn't always save humans lives (.) because some products that are tested on animals are in the name of vanity because (.) they're like beauty products which are unnecessary really so (.) would you really kill an anim-/ an animal for a beauty product 'cos I wouldn't (.)
- TOM um (.) we also think it's important to do animal testing because (1) there's been instances in the past where large numbers of humans were about to die from an illness or a disease (.) and some animals have been harmed in animal testing but it's resulted in hundreds and thousands of people being saved from that particular disease

- SHANNON but who says (.) um that they can test a product on an animal an' it's fine on them and then (.) then (.) they test it on a human and it kills them or (.) //
- LEILA // yeah because they've got different DNA so (1) if it's ok with an animal (.) it might not always be all right on a human//
- TOM well life's about survival of the fittest (.) and it's in the best interest to test it on an animal not knowing if it's the right thing to do

www.youtube.com

Transcript 2

The following conversation involves a teenage girl and her maths teacher in a classroom in Essex, near London.

- STUDENT What is pi (.) where did it come from (.) sir who made up pi
- MATHS TEACHER I told you last lesson where it came from
- STUDENT I don't really pay attention [*snaps pen*]
- MATHS TEACHER you were going to do some practice questions on area of a sector
- STUDENT Fun fun fun [*hums and laughs*]
- MATHS TEACHER it's not funny ... you're here to work, you're here to learn maths yeah
- STUDENT [... *unclear*]
- MATHS TEACHER I don't care
- STUDENT ooh err
- MATHS TEACHER it's taken you nearly five minutes to open a book (.) come on
- STUDENT [*makes face at teacher*]
- STUDENT [*voiceover*] When I'm messing around I don't really know I'm messing around till I get into an argument with a teacher or somethin' like that but I do actually wanna get good grades and that and listen
- MATHS TEACHER how many questions of those four have you tried
- STUDENT the date
- MATHS TEACHER none. my (1) problem with some people in the class is that they don't seem to remember stuff (.) so you need to remember the area of the circle formula and the circumference of the circle formula

Transcript 3

An extract from Malala Yousafzai's speech at the United Nations. Malala was shot in the head by the Taliban in Pakistan for championing girls' rights to education.

Dear Friends, on the 9th of October 2012, the Taliban shot me on the left side of my forehead. They shot my friends too. They thought that the bullets would silence us. But they failed. And then, out of that silence, came thousands of voices. The terrorists thought that they would change our aims and stop our ambitions but nothing changed in my life except this: weakness, fear and hopelessness died. Strength, power and courage was born. I am the same Malala. My ambitions are the same. My hopes are the same. My dreams are the same.

Dear sisters and brothers, I am not against anyone. Neither am I here to speak in terms of personal revenge against the Taliban or any other terrorist group. I am here to speak up for the right of education of every child. I want education for the sons and the daughters of all the extremists especially the Taliban.

I do not even hate the Talib who shot me. Even if there is a gun in my hand and he stands in front of me. I would not shoot him. This is the compassion that I have learnt from Muhammad – the prophet of mercy, Jesus Christ and Lord Buddha. This is the legacy of change that I have inherited from Martin Luther King, Nelson Mandela and Muhammad Ali Jinnah. This is the philosophy of non-violence that I have learnt from Gandhi Jee, Bacha Khan and Mother Teresa. And this is the forgiveness that I have learnt from my mother and father. This is what my soul is telling me, be peaceful and love everyone.

Dear sisters and brothers, we realise the importance of light when we see darkness. We realise the importance of our voice when we are silenced. In the same way, when we were in Swat, the north of Pakistan, we realised the importance of pens and books when we saw the guns.

Transcript 4

An interview with an American teenage competition finalist.

INTERVIEWER Recent polls have shown a fifth of Americans can't locate the United States on a world map. Why do you think this is?

TEENAGER I personally believe the U.S. Americans are unable to do so because, uh, some, uh (.) people out there in our nation don't have maps, and, uh, I believe that our education like such as South Africa and, uh, the Iraq everywhere like, such as and ... I believe that they should, our education over here in the U.S. should help the U.S., err, uh, should help South Africa and should help the Iraq and the Asian countries, so we will be able to build up our future.

ACTIVITY 7-3

- 1. Read the transcripts and evaluate, with evidence, the extent to which the teenagers are able to use an appropriate register of language for the situation.
- 2. Source your own examples of teenage speech from your local area and, using the same criterion, assess whether teenagers have the ability to code switch.

How is teenage slang developing?

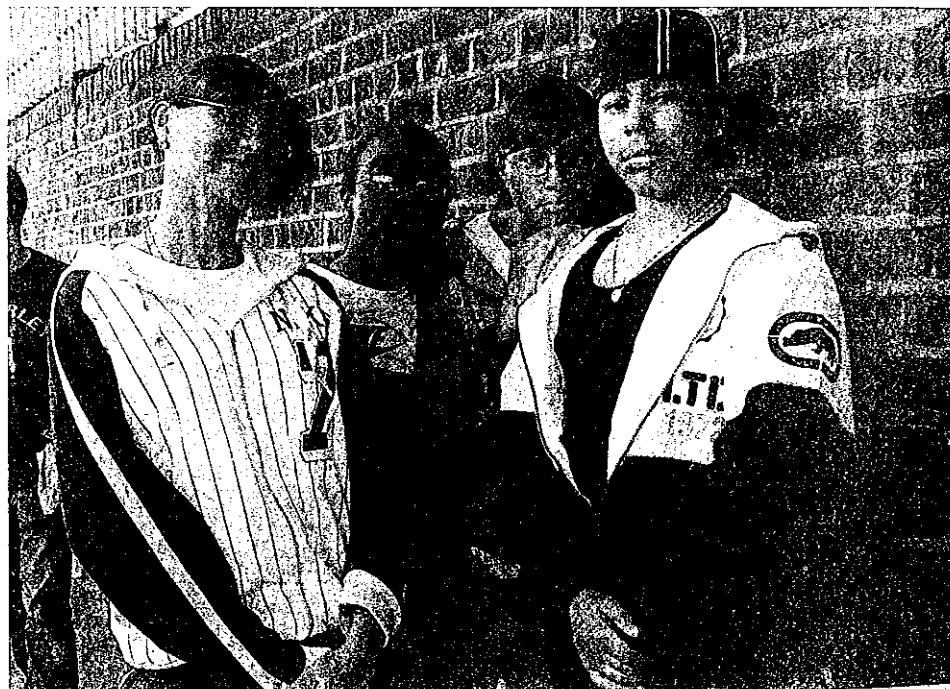
In Unit 5 you learned about slang and how this form of language is undergoing constant and rapid change with new forms emerging and words appearing and falling out of use. Particular forms of slang are used by teenagers and teenage slang can be a very lively form of expression!

Read this news article about recent developments in new forms of slang used amongst multi-ethnic teenagers in London.



LINK

For more about slang, turn to page 195 in **Unit 5**.



From the mouths of teens

A 'perfect storm' of conditions has seen teen slang from inner-city London spread across the country. But where does this new language originate from? And, if you can't stop kids from speaking it, is there any way to decipher what the words mean?

At the back of a London bus, two teenagers are engaged in animated conversation. "Safe, man," says one. "Dis my yard. It's, laak, nang, innit?"

What endz you from? You're looking buff in them low batties."

"Check the creps," says the other. "My bluds say the girls round here are nuff deep."

"Wasteman," responds the first, with alacrity. "You just begging now." The pair exit the vehicle, to blank stares of incomprehension. Later, this dialogue is related to Gus, a 13-year-old who attends an inner London

comprehensive; he wastes no time in decoding it.

"Safe just means hi," he says briskly. "Your yard is like your home, where you're from. Nang just means good. Your endz is your neighbourhood. Buff is, like, attractive. Low batties are trousers that hang really low on your waist. Creps are trainers. Bluds are your mates. Nuff means very. Deep is the same as harsh or out of order."

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Wasteman is what you say to someone when you're fed up with them. And begging," he concludes, with a flourish, "means chatting rubbish."

There's more: butters means ugly, hype is excitement, bare is a lot, cotching is hanging around, and allow it is a plea to leave something or someone alone. "Everyone in my school speaks like this," says Gus, a little wearily. "It's because you hear the cool kids saying these words and then you have to do it too. You've got to know them all and you've got to keep up. Nobody wants to be uncool," he adds, with a shudder. "That's, like ..."

Sick?

"No, sick is good," he says patiently. "I guess it would just be, you know, deep."

Gus and his ilk have been caught up in an emerging linguistic phenomenon. Researchers have found that, while most traditional cockney speech patterns have followed traditional cockneys as they've migrated out of London, teenagers in inner London, one of the world's most ethnically diverse areas, are forging a separate multi-ethnic youth-speak based on common culture rather than ethnic or social background.

"It is likely that young people have been growing up in London exposed to a mixture of second-language English

and varieties of English from other parts of the world, as well as local London English, and that this new variety has emerged from that mix," says Sue Fox, a language expert from London University's Queen Mary College, who's in the middle of a three-year project called Linguistics Innovators: The Language of Adolescents in London. "One of our most interesting findings," she says, "was that we'd have groups of students from white Anglo-Saxon backgrounds, along with those of Arab, South American, Ghanaian and Portuguese descent, and they all spoke with the same dialect. But those who use it most strongly are those of second or third generation immigrant background, followed by white boys of London origin and then white girls of London origin."

"The message is that people are beginning to sound the same regardless of their colour or ethnic background. So we prefer to use the term Multicultural London English (MLE). It's perhaps not as catchy," she says, "but it comes closer to what we're trying to describe."

"Adolescence is the life stage at which people most willingly take on new visible or audible symbols of group identification," says US Essayist, Logan Pearsall Smith. "Thus, fashions specific

to this age group change rapidly. Fashion and music often go together, and these in turn are often associated with social class and ethnicity. The same is true of language. It's most obviously observable in terms of slang and new ways of expressing themselves, such as the substitute of 'I'm, like' for 'I said' or 'I thought' a few years ago "What we're seeing with MLE is qualitatively different," continues Professor Paul Kerswill, who is leading the study. "It's a real dialect rather than simply a mode of speech, and there's already evidence that it's spreading to other multicultural cities like Birmingham, Bristol and Manchester. It'll become more mainstream through force of numbers and continued migration, and because it's considered cool."

The last word goes to Gus: "Words change all the time," he says wearily. "It's, like," (even in his out-of-school Standard English, he pronounces this "laaahhhkk") "you have to learn a whole new vocabulary every few months just to keep on top of it. It's like, just recently, swag now means bad."

And that's not nang?

"Allow it," he proclaims, switching effortlessly into standard MLE. "It's all getting bare swag."

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ACTIVITY 21

- 1 Read the article and describe how teenage slang is developing and changing in multicultural London.
- 2 Using the article as a case study, explain how code switching operates for adolescents.
- 3 Research the extent to which teenage slang is developing in the area where you live.

The functions of young people's language

So far in this unit you have learned about the stages of language development of babies, children and teenagers. These underpin all spoken and written skills throughout life.

However, we all need more than these technical skills in order to engage with those around us and to interpret and manage our lives effectively. This is where pragmatics is essential. This concerns the context and reasons for speech, and the ways in which these factors affect the way we speak.

KEY TERMS

pragmatics the study of language as it is used in a social context

We learn many of these conventions unconsciously, for example the most appropriate ways of speaking to different individuals in our lives such as a grandparent or a respected member of the community. However, we may also be taught these codes. For example, many children are taught to say *please* and *thank you* as infants whereas other parents may not emphasise this convention so much.

Pragmatics is a very broad topic and is bound up with other features of a society's accepted ways of communication. As with all forms of communication, what is acceptable changes between places and over time. Traditionally, students addressed their teachers either as Mr, Mrs or Miss and their family name: in many institutions teachers and students are now on first name terms.

In the 19th century children were largely expected to be 'seen and not heard' whereas now much greater self-expression is encouraged for children. In a stereotypical view held by some older British English speakers, American English speakers are thought to have a much greater level of friendship intimacy such as being on first name terms after a very brief acquaintance. English speakers do not have the tu/vous distinction of address which French speakers use in their personal communications.

In the section about discourse analysis in Unit 4 you learned that there are times in conversation where we say the wrong thing, resulting in discomfort or even disagreements. Throughout our lives, we continue to adapt, develop and change our pragmatic skills in order to avoid such situations.

ACTIVITY 7.2

The following would not generally be considered appropriate in the context of British English pragmatics:

- Hiya, nice to meet you. How much do you earn?
- You look so much older and more wrinkled since the last time we met.
- This is such a boring conversation, I'm off to find someone much more interesting.
- [*having dinner at someone's home*] This food is disgusting – only fit for the bin.
- Come on then, tell me how old you are. You look about 100.

Think of similar examples of inappropriate communications for the region in which you live.

Halliday's functions of language

The linguist Michael Halliday has described language as *the creature and creator of human society*. This sums up the pivotal importance of language particularly in the development of young children as they acquire skills they will continue to use throughout their lives.

Halliday identified seven functions of language that children need in their early years:

- **instrumental:** language used to fulfil a need – obtaining food, drink and comfort

- **regulatory:** language used to influence the behaviour of others – concerned with persuading, commanding or requesting other people to do things you want (*Mummy get Alex juice; play with me*)
- **interactional:** language that develops social relationships and ease the process of interaction – concerned with the phatic dimension of talk (*you're my friend; here's my teddy; shall we play pirates? Love you mummy*)
- **personal:** language that expresses the personal opinions, feelings and identity of the speaker – sometimes referred to as the 'Here I am!' function, announcing oneself to the world (*me good girl; best stripey socks; tired boy*)
- **representational:** language used to exchange information – concerned with relaying or requesting information (*need to see Granny; finished tea all gone*)
- **heuristic:** language used to explore the world and to learn and discover – children use language to learn; this may be questions and answers, or the kind of running commentary that frequently accompanies children's play (*why is that bird singing? why is the sun yellow? where does the sea go?; the dollies are having tea in the doll's house; Suki is building trains; Ted needs hat for Tigger*)
- **Imaginative:** language used to explore the imagination – may also accompany play as children create imaginary worlds, or may arise from storytelling (*teddy's going to school; farmer in his tractor driving brum brum*)

Actions and events in a child's life, however routine, are often accompanied by utterances from adults and other children around them. From about three onwards, young children often live in a constant world of language; this is much more effective if they are active speakers and hearers in their world, rather than passive receivers of language.

The influence of TV on children's language development



Many studies have been carried out to assess the influence of television on children's development. The results of this research are briefly summarised here:

- TV appears to provide no educational benefits for a child under two and the time spent watching TV is time that could be spent more productively interacting with family and other people.
- Passive TV viewing does not develop cognitive language skills which develop in the context of real life and interaction with others.

- ❑ The pictures presented on TV may numb a child's imagination.
- ❑ Children who watch cartoons and entertainment television during pre-school years have poorer pre-reading skills at age 5 (Macbeth, 1996). Children who watch entertainment TV are also less likely to read books and other print media (Wright & Huston, 1995).

There are many other studies which show that the passive nature of watching TV, even educational TV, may have negative effects on young children's language development. However, this is an area of intense debate. Many claim that pictures on TV may spark some children's imagination for example and new studies emerge regularly.

ACTIVITY 7.3

1. Watch and listen to a young child speaking. Record some of their utterances, then try to categorise them using Halliday's functions of language. These functions were drawn from English-speaking children. If you do not live in a native English-speaking culture, try to apply these functions to your own language: to what extent does the study work as a cross-culturally?
2. What is your opinion of the influence of TV and videos on young children's language development? Investigate research studies and their conclusions.
3. What are the opposing arguments on the benefits of selective TV viewing by young children?
4. Ella, aged four, is talking to her aunt. They are looking at the fish in the pond in her aunt's garden. Ella asks:
 - ❑ *Why do fish live in water?*
 - ❑ *Is the water dirty?*
 - ❑ *Why is the water dirty?*
 - ❑ *Where does the dirt come from in the pond?*
 - ❑ *Is the water dirty for the fish?*

Describe the ways in which Ella is using language.

TIP

The section below explores theories about how language is acquired. You will find it helpful to gather supporting evidence and criticisms from practical observation and research to use when evaluating theories in an essay. By now you will have probably collected some of your own examples of children speaking. You may find these helpful when exploring the theories discussed in the section.

KEY TERMS

nature in this context, the inherited genetic and physical make up of a person, for example gender and ethnicity are inherited and almost always fixed

nurture the sum total of all the environmental influences a person experiences – things like schooling and the family environment are important features in nurture

Theories of language acquisition

Language enables us to express a limitless number of ideas and utterances using a limited range of sounds. Language acquisition is a complex process and one for which there are a number of explanations. We have already examined observable events in babies, young children and teenagers, but in this section you will investigate theories about the processes which are thought to take place when children learn language. Many children learn only one native language but in some families and communities, children grow up speaking two languages (bilingual) and sometimes even more.

You will be introduced to key theories which help explain children's ability to learn language. The debate continues about the relative importance of 'nature and nurture' in language development. Another important link is between a child's language and thought. Does thinking come before the production of language? Or can we only think if we have the words to do so?

KEY TERMS

conditioning a process whereby behaviour is changed or modified due to the repeated presence of a stimulus; repetition of the stimulus over time triggers a specific form of behaviour (e.g. words of praise are a stimulus to learning language)

Imitation and reinforcement

According to the psychologist B. F. Skinner (1957), language is acquired by conditioning. This is a process whereby the child imitates the sounds around them, receives praise and approval (*good girl; that's a clever boy*) which encourages them to repeat and develop language. The reinforcement of treats, praise and an expanding world enables the child to acquire competence in language.

B. F. Skinner (1904–1990)

B. F. Skinner was an American psychologist who was very influential in developing psychology as a discipline in the mid 20th century. Skinner followed the theories of the Russian scientist Ivan Pavlov, who had worked with dogs to develop the stimulus–response mechanism to influence behaviour. The basis of this idea is that all human and animal behaviours are learned responses, which occur as a result of reinforcement; this is achieved through rewards. These rewards, in the case of children learning language, are given through praise, as well as the desired object such as food or treats or whatever the child wants. Conversely, unwanted or bad behaviour can be extinguished by punishment according to the behaviourist theories proposed by Skinner.

FURTHER RESEARCH

The behaviourist school of psychology was extremely influential in the early days of psychology.

Research the work of Pavlov, particularly his experiments with dogs relating to their learned conditioned response.

Research the work of Skinner, who developed Pavlov's investigations; his research led to his theories on how children acquire language.

Support for this behaviourist theory is evident in that we learn to speak the language we grow up with and adopt the accent of those around us. It is therefore clear that there is a strong environmental influence in the language that we speak.

An important strength of Skinner's work is that he generated early ideas about the process of language development from which other theorists developed further ideas, including those outlined below.

However, there are arguments which suggest that behaviourist theory is unlikely to account entirely for language acquisition:

- ❑ Each child produces an infinite number of utterances, many of which they will never have heard before, so they do not imitate exactly.
- ❑ Children make virtuous errors of grammar and language which adults do not generally do (*I rided my bike; me want that*). This shows that they are applying rules which they understand such as the *-ed* inflection of many verbs in the past form.
- ❑ Babies and children seem to pass through the same stages of language development; if this were entirely dependent on the people around them, there would probably be much more variation.

- Children correct their own language to a standard form even when adults do not correct them.
- Children can understand a lot more language than they are able to speak. A mother may tell her 14-month old toddler to put her toys away; the child will understand but will not be able to answer in the same way.

1. Discuss the ways in which you may have imitated your family and friends as you were acquiring language.
2. Ask your family or caregivers how they helped you to learn to speak when you were a child. What encouragement did you receive?
3. Review Skinner's theory of conditioning and evaluate its contribution towards our understanding of language acquisition.



KEY TERMS

Language Acquisition

Device an innate system in the brain which allows the spontaneous development of language in a child from birth, according to Chomsky (1965). This is in contrast to the learning of a second or subsequent language later in life

Innate language competence – the Language Acquisition Device

The inadequacies of the imitation and reinforcement theory were criticised by the eminent linguist Noam Chomsky (1965). He disagreed that all behaviour, including that of learning language, was learned and put forward an opposing theory. He suggested that the human brain has an innate ability to learn language – a **Language Acquisition Device (LAD)** – which allows children to develop language skills. The theory suggests that this device enables children to be receptive to language development and that they are able to acquire the language(s) around them.

According to this view, all children are born with an instinct for a universal grammar, which makes them receptive to the common features of all languages. Because they possess an instinctive capacity to learn grammatical structures, young children easily pick up a language when they are exposed to its particular form.

Chomsky's initial theory was supplemented and popularised by linguist Eric Lenneberg (1967), who stated that the LAD must be activated at a **critical period** for native language acquisition to take place. The time of this period was broad, but early and mid-childhood are variously proposed. There has been a further development to broaden this to a **sensitive period** when language learning might be more successful. Again, the suggested age-range is broad but from birth to puberty is considered a sensitive time for language acquisition of a native language.

Evidence for an innate human capacity to acquire language skills comes from the following observations:

- The stages of language development occur at about the same ages in most children, even though different children experience very different environments.
- Children's language development follows a similar pattern across cultures.
- Children generally acquire language skills quickly and effortlessly.
- Deaf children who have not been exposed to a language may make up their own language. These new languages resemble existing languages in sentence structure, even when they are found in different cultures.

Language Acquisition Device (LAD): key points

- Children learn to speak very rapidly and an innate capacity for language explains this.
- Children make virtuous errors of tenses and syntax by applying deep language structures before they are aware of the correct forms.
- The subject-verb form of grammar is common to all languages and children seem to be aware of this structure even when they make up their own languages.

However, the LAD may not be sufficient to explain language development. Linguistics author Harry Ritchie argues against Chomsky's Language Acquisition Device and is of the opinion that Chomsky was *brilliant but wrong*. He cites recent evidence from neurology, genetics and linguistics, which all point to there being no innate programming. Ritchie appears to veer towards a more Skinner-like view when he states that *Children learn language just as they learn all their other skills, by experience*.

The following studies show some of the limitations of the theory of the Language Acquisition Device.

Study 1: Jim

Bard and Sachs (1977) studied Jim, a child of deaf parents. His parents wanted Jim to speak normally so they did not use sign language to him and he spent much time watching TV. In this way he heard a lot of language but did not produce any himself and became very retarded in his speech development until he was placed with a speech therapist. According to Chomsky's theory, the LAD would have enabled Jim to speak but he failed to do so, suggesting that the LAD itself was not enough for Jim to learn to speak.

Study 2: Genie

Genie was an infamous case of parental neglect. She was discovered in Los Angeles in California in 1970 at the age of 13, tied to a chair in a small room in the family home where she had been confined throughout her life. She had no language and could only grunt. She was taken into care and her parents prosecuted. Genie posed an ethical dilemma for researchers: humans can never be subjected to this sort of deprivation for the sake of an experiment, so Genie's situation was used for psychology development studies as well as studies on language acquisition.

Genie soon began to make rapid progression in specific areas such as learning to use the toilet and dress herself. In her initial assessment, Genie scored only at the level of a one-year-old but she quickly began adding new words to her vocabulary. She started by learning single words and eventually began putting two and, later, three words together in sequence as in typical infant language acquisition. However, the rapid language development which would have been expected thereafter never materialised. Importantly, Genie never appeared able to sequence words which Chomsky felt was critical in the Language Acquisition Device.

Genie's unfortunate situation did prove interesting for testing theories and it would seem to support the idea of a critical period for native language acquisition. However, there are many other variables here including the innate ability of Genie as well as the severe nature of the abuse she had received. Her case could not definitively prove or disprove the theories of Chomsky and Lenneberg.

CCC FURTHER RESEARCH

Find out more about Jim and Genie in relation to the extent of their ability to acquire language.

There have been other studies of **feral children** – that is, children who have lived isolated from other humans for an extended period. Some of these children may have been reared by animals. You may wish to learn more about them. There are many books and online resources.

The Language Acquisition Support System (LASS)

Chomsky's Language Acquisition Device has limitations which were addressed by linguist Jerome Bruner (1983) with the **Language Acquisition Support System (LASS)**.

The limitations cited for the LAD were as follows:

- ❑ The theory takes no account of any interaction of the child with those around him. The LAD is assumed to be innate and so will develop automatically into the native language spoken around the child.
- ❑ There is no evidence of a grammar structure or language device in the brain.
- ❑ Studies of deprived and feral children have shown that language does not develop automatically in the absence of language stimulation around the child.
- ❑ The LAD implies that children play no active role in their language acquisition but observation shows that children are active learners.
- ❑ The LAD takes no real account of the child's social world.

According to Bruner, the innate abilities of the child (the Language Acquisition Device) are supported and brought out by parents, family and educators.

Language Acquisition Support System (LASS): key points

- ❑ Parents and carers regularly interact with the child and give help in naming while they talk to him or her. This includes caretaker language, singing songs, reading and playing games with the child. The family surrounding the child will often repeat the same words and phrases. The child is actively interacting with the caregiver.
- ❑ The Language Acquisition Support System is particularly important between the ages of two and five when the child's language learning is most intense. This links with the idea that there is a critical period for native language learning to flourish.
- ❑ Pre-school education provides a scaffold of support for the child's language development by extensive interaction with adults and other children in a variety of situations as well as broadening the child's horizons.

KEY TERMS

Language Acquisition Support System (LASS) a system of support from caregivers to children that helps them to acquire language and become sociable, according to Bruner (1983)

To find out more about virtuous errors, look back at page 258 in this unit.

ACTIVITY 7.15

Read the transcript of Alex, aged two years and ten months, talking to his mother.

- 1 Analyse the transcript and look at the **virtuous errors** Alex makes.
- 2 What observations can you make about Alex's developing language and the role his mother is playing in the conversation?
- 3 What evidence for the LAD and the LASS can you find here?

ALEX I tired (.) very tired (.) Teddy tired

MOTHER are you tired (.) you've been a busy boy; teddy must be tired too

ALEX I runned fast (.) very fast (.) teddy runned with me (.) fast (.)

MOTHER You ran so fast(.) you must be tired (.) you ran to the park and then mummy pushed you on the swing (.) you liked that swing didn't you (.)

ALEX teddy had a swing too (.) wheec [*runs around the room swinging teddy round and round*] Alex push teddy on big swing (.) nana mummy

MOTHER Say please Alex. Say please may I have a banana

ALEX pease nana mummy

KEY TERMS

cognition the mental processes involved in gaining knowledge and abilities through thought, experience, and the senses

Cognitive development

In both the LAD and LASS theories, humans have a capacity for language development that is separate from **cognitive development**; one is not dependent on the other.

However, cognitive theories link the child's language with their cognitive development. The originator and most important cognitive theorist, Jean Piaget (1896–1980), revolutionised child development ideas with the assertion that a child was not a miniature adult in their thinking, but went through stages of increasingly complex mental development alongside their language development. Piaget believed that children are born with cognitive ability which develops along with the child and upon which all subsequent learning and knowledge is based. For Piaget, language development goes hand in hand with cognitive development. In each of the stages of the child's development, a greater level of mental ability brings about a greater understanding of language and communication. For Piaget, language does not stand alone; it develops alongside the child's understanding of their world.

Piaget believed that children construct an understanding of the world around them and this understanding develops in specific stages of their thinking:

- the **sensorimotor stage**: babies acquire their earliest knowledge through their physical actions and the sensations they experience. This stage lasts until about the age of two. An important feature of this stage is the development of **object permanence** for the child where they realise that things apart from themselves have an independent existence and so have names (e.g. *ball, mummy, juice*).

In this way language begins and develops quickly with the infant's increasing engagement with the environment.

- the **pre-operational stage**: between the ages of two and five, young children are able to think in more definite terms and this is when language develops quickly although the child only thinks of the world in relation to themselves (an egocentric perception – everything is about *me*).
- the **concrete operational stage**: between the ages of five and eleven or twelve, the child is able to use language for situations outside their immediate experience and is able to think more logically about specific 'concrete' or observable situations. One important element of this stage of cognitive development is **conservation** where the child understands that something stays the same in quantity even if its appearance changes (e.g. transferring water between different-sized beakers).
- the **formal operational stage**: the final childhood stage in cognitive theory where, from the age of about twelve, adolescents are able to understand abstract ideas and the language associated with them.

Notice that there is an integration of psychology and language in this summary of Piaget's work. Educationalists have developed school curricula and styles of learning based on his work. Piaget was the first in his field so his work has been extensively reworked and developed, but essentially his theory – that children's thinking is **different** from that of adults – revolutionised the field of child development throughout the world.

Piaget's stages of development: key points

- Cognition theories form an important branch of psychology and branch out from language development. While there is almost certainly a close link between the development of cognitive understanding and language, there are other influences too.
- More recent studies have highlighted that children progress through the cognitive stages more quickly than Piaget stated and this is also reflected in their language development.
- Piaget's theories have had an enormous influence in the development of the curriculum for primary education.
- Lev Vygotsky is another cognitive theorist who took Piaget's ideas of child development stages further. He particularly emphasised the value of language in developing thought and the fact that adult interaction with children was vital in their development.

Many countries now show TV documentaries about child development, for example *Child of our Time* presented by Professor Robert Winston, is a good British example. Try to find studies of child development from your own region.

Play *Peepo* with a baby and watch their response. Why is a young baby always really pleased to see you again when you disappear behind a cushion

and re-emerge? How is this explained by Piaget's development stages?

Arrange some different shaped containers in front of a two-year-old. Pour liquid from a short, fat container into a taller, narrow one. Ask the child if there is the same amount of liquid in the second container. Try to link their responses to Piaget's stages of development.

