
UNIT 19 ENHANCING LANGUAGE SKILLS

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19.1 INTRODUCTION

In the last Block you read about the language skills of a toddler. You learnt that the child, during toddlerhood, begins to use words meaningfully and to speak in sentences. In this Unit, you will read about the development of language during the preschool years. The Unit will discuss how the preschooler's vocabulary increases, how she begins to use the rules of grammar, and how she uses language for various purposes. A remarkable achievement of this period is that the child sees the link between the printed picture or word and spoken language and begins to learn to read and write. In this Unit, we will also talk about the skills that lead to the learning of reading and writing. You have been reading in Blocks 2 and 3 about language development of infants and toddlers respectively. You should note that the specific norms and characteristics of development described in these Blocks hold true for the English language only. It is true that all children cry, coo, babble and then speak in two-word sentences, later in telegraphic speech and finally go on to speaking in complete sentences irrespective of the language they learn. But the order of learning the rules for constructing sentences will be different depending on the grammar of the language. Thus the examples mentioned in these Blocks cannot be translated to stand for norms in another language. Additionally, the milestones of development mentioned are based on averages. There is a wide range of variation in children in language learning and language use.

Objectives

After studying this Unit, you will be able to:

- list the language skills that a child learns in preschool years
- describe how the child in the age group of three to six years uses language
- list the pre-reading and pre-writing skills that the preschooler learns
- understand the importance of pre-reading and pre-writing skills for literacy
- learn about the factors that influence language development
- discuss the special role of the caregiver in fostering language development
- identify some speech problems that are common in childhood years and discuss their causes.

19.2 LANGUAGE SKILLS OF THE PRESCHOOL CHILD

You are aware that before children are of preschool age they are already using words for communicating. They can identify and combine sounds to make words, use a sizeable vocabulary and follow some rules of grammar to make sentences. You may then want to ask

what the preschooler learns that makes her different from the toddler or how the preschooler's speech is different from an earlier stage. The preschooler uses more words and speaks in longer sentences. As a result of her increasing cognitive abilities, she **begins to think of what she is saying**. She now looks at language as an important tool for communication and thinks of the right way to communicate. This is clear from the observations of children which show them stopping in mid-sentence to rephrase their sentences or correct themselves. They repeat a word, use an alternative word or rephrase their sentence. For example, "I want two toffee..... many toffee", "Can we.....I want to go home ", "Give my toy....that toy is mine"

If you spend some time listening to the speech of preschoolers, you will notice that in contrast to toddlers, they **use longer sentences**. They are also able to arrange words in different sequences to form sentences of different grammatical constructions and to construct them with **greater flexibility**. Non-verbal cues are also an important part of communication. In toddlerhood, the child is dependent on them to convey her meaning. As the child grows older, **conversation becomes increasingly dependent on words**. There is a shift from the dependence on cues to the use of symbols. By symbols we mean words, numbers or pictures that are used for communicating thoughts or feelings. Words may refer to specific objects or actions or they may be symbolic representations for concepts. Gestures and the tone of the voice are cues that provide information about what is being said.

To illustrate this point, let us read the following example. A two year old child will point to a ball lying on the shelf and say, "Mummy ball". The intonation, the content and the gesture reveal to the mother that the child wants the ball. The six year old child on the other hand will look at his mother and say, "Mummy, I want the ball on the shelf". The words of the preschooler convey the complete meaning of what she wants to say. She is not dependent on a gesture to convey her meaning. The use of symbols, whether they are words or pictures, characterize true language. The ability of understanding the many kinds of symbols (a word, a letter, a number, a picture) develops further in the preschool years.

You read in the last Block that the toddler is sometimes unable to pronounce a few sounds. By the time the child is of preschool age, she masters some of these sounds but even then she may not be able to pronounce all the sounds well. Research reveals that the sounds with which the preschooler may have problems are 'sh', 'th', 'f', 'z' and 's' as in the words 'shift', 'thing', 'flower', 'zebra' and 'simple' respectively. This is because these are difficult sounds to produce.

19.2.1 Increase in Vocabulary

You have read that children know many more words than they use in their speech. If you think carefully, you will realize that you also understand many more words than you use in your day-to-day speech. Detailed research in the area has revealed that when children are about four years of age, they can on an average use 1,200 words in their speech and are able to understand a much larger number of words. Between the period of four to six years, they acquire a larger vocabulary which contains 12,000 to 14,000 words.

After learning to say the word, the child has to learn to use it in the way it is generally used. To do so, the child needs to be familiar with the usage of the word. For example, the use of the words 'Me' and 'I'. As we know, both the words are used to signify the self, but their usage is different. For example, "I don't like this toy", "Give that book to me" The child has to learn that 'I' cannot be used in the second sentence.

There is a direct relationship between the child's growing vocabulary and her rapidly developing cognitive ability. In addition to knowing how a word is used, the child must also understand the concept which the word is a symbol. The understanding of the word is thus related to the understanding of the concept. Research findings show that in the normal course of growth, children are able to find and use the right word, only when they have understood the concept.

Children in preschool years are able to use and understand words that make comparisons between two objects or people, i.e. **comparative terms**, such as larger, shorter, less etc. Initially, when a child hears the words being used in reference to a particular object in a situation, she may use the words only in the identical way.

Later the generalization to other situations follows. By three years of age a child is able to sort objects into two categories, for example, big and small. Gradually, children learn to use words that convey this contrast. Research shows that in the usage of such words that signify a contrast, like big-small, same-different, the child can get confused if the difference is only minor. Shown a picture of a pencil and a bird—two objects that are very different to look at—the child will say they are different. But if the child is shown a picture which has two similar looking things, there is a probability of confusion. For example, if shown a picture of a horse and a donkey and asked if they are the same or different, the child may say that they are the same, because both have four legs, a tail and other common features. This is because she is not able to deal with the fact that there are similarities, but there are also differences between the two. You have read in Unit 18 that the child is not able to take into account two different aspects at the same time. Thus we see that the ability to use language is dependent on the child's cognitive development.

In preschool years, children also become aware of the **concept of space**. They comprehend that everything around them occupies space. This understanding helps them to correctly interpret and use words that signify location, i.e. words like, 'here-there' and 'below-above'. However, to be able to use words that signify location, the child has to be able to understand the other person's perspective. For example, in a sentence, words like 'here' or 'there' may be spoken from the point of reference of the speaker or of the listener. The child has to understand that the location implied by the word 'here' normally means closer to the speaker. In other sentences where phrases like 'Go there' and 'Come here' are used, the child has to know that 'go' and 'come' signify movement. Take another situation where the child is asked to 'Take this toy' or 'Bring that book'. In this context they have to be able to understand that they can move objects from one place to another, according to the words 'here' and 'there', i.e. they can cause things to happen. As they begin to develop an understanding of the concepts of space, movement and causation, they begin to use location words like here-there and in front of-behind. This happens when the child is three years of age.

Later in the preschool years, the child is better able to follow sentences and instructions like, "This is yours and that is Seema's" and "Put the ball there". By four years of age the child does not confuse the words that signify location. However, research conducted to study the ability of preschool children to use location words has shown that if a sentence is constructed in a way which sounds improbable, the child is likely to reconstruct it to make meaning. For example, the sentence "The flower vase is under the television", may be wrongly repeated as, "The flower vase is on the television", by the child, who is trying to make sense out of the sentence.

From the above discussion, it is clear that the **child's understanding of concepts and her vocabulary develop together**.

19.2.2 Understanding Language Rules

You would have learnt from the preceding subsection that the child's vocabulary increases manifold in the preschool years. Children, at this age, are also able to construct longer and more complex sentences. The four year old's sentences are usually shorter than those of a five or six year old. You have read in Unit 18 about the development of the concepts of time, space, number, shape etc. The understanding of these concepts helps language development, as you will see in this Section.

As the child understands the concept of time, she begins to use **tenses** precisely. Using the past or the present tense requires adding 'ed' or 'ing' to words. As you know, the child learns this general rule between two and three years of age. She adds these suffixes to words, constructing words like 'eated'. You also know from the last Block that children make mistakes of underextension and overgeneralization. Only later do they learn the specific endings for, and usages of, different words.

The use of the future tense in speech comes later than the past and present tenses. The immediate past in the child's actual experience is remembered more readily. Being able to use the future tense appropriately, on the other hand, involves thinking, anticipating and planning ahead. It also requires the ability to use language as a means of thinking out problems and ideas.

You read in Block 3 that the toddler can relate past events. However, occasionally it is difficult for the preschool child to talk of an event that happened some time earlier. For example, if a child is asked to tell what she did in school the last month, she may not be able to do so. This is not because the child does not understand the question. The child is being asked to use language to recall events verbally. She has to depend on her memory.

If asked to relate an event from their immediate experiences, children can do so more easily. Some cues will also help to reconstruct the action that happened a while ago. Additionally, an event is remembered if it has some special meaning for the child. As we know from our own experiences, an event of special importance is often related easily. *Take the example of Rohit. One day while his mother was using the mixer-grinder (mixi) for grinding chutney, he was watching her. She finished the job, opened the lid of the jar and looked at the chutney. Satisfied with the result she went to the shelf to pick up a bottle to store it. Wanting to try out the grinder, Rohit pressed the button and switched it on. The chutney flew all around the kitchen, getting splattered on the walls and floor. Rohit's mother ran towards the switch to put it off, slipped on the floor and got hurt. Rohit, anticipating the scolding, ran out of the kitchen, and was scolded by his father and grandmother. This incident was remembered by Rohit even a month after it happened. The scar on the mother's elbow which she got from the fall was a reminder of the incident for Rohit.*



It is only when children are four to four-and-a-half years of age, that they use future tense appropriately. However, children sometimes do get confused about the tenses even till eight to ten years of age. *Six year old Sunaina was heard saying at a gathering, "When I come the last time, we will sing the same song". On being told that she should say 'next time' and not 'last time', she repeated 'next time'.*

In toddlerhood the child uses 'No' to communicate her unwillingness, for example "No doggie" or "No, no milk" or just says "No". In the preschool years, the child is able to construct **negative sentences**. This is because now she acquires words like 'cannot', 'will not' and 'is not' to express dissent. With the help of these words she can construct sentences like, "I don't like it". However, the preschool child may produce double negatives as in the sentence, "I don't want nothing". Later the child is able to speak negative sentences that have words like 'any', 'much' and 'enough', that help to qualify them. For example, "I won't do anything", "I don't like this ball much" and "This is not enough". This is because these words represent a notion of quantity that takes time to develop.

In the preschool years, children are also able to follow various kinds of **questions**, i.e. questions that use 'what,' 'when' 'why', 'how', 'where' and help to seek information. You know that when children are two to three years old, they can only respond to questions that require yes or no answers and to 'what' and 'where' questions. When toddlers are asked 'when', 'how' and 'why' questions, they answer as if they have been asked what or where. For example Samina when asked, "Why are you eating that?" said, "It's an apple", as if she had been asked, "What are you eating"? Along with 'what' and 'where' questions, the preschooler is also able to answer 'when', 'how' and 'why' questions appropriately. The ability to understand and answer 'when' questions comes after 'what' and 'why' because it requires an understanding of the concept of time which begins to develop only in the preschool years.

Between the third and the fourth birthday, children begin to understand the **figurative** or **non-literal meaning** of phrases, i.e. they can understand the intended meaning in sentences. For example, when the mother says in a complaining tone, "Oh! My back is breaking," the child understands that the mother is implying that her back is hurting and not actually 'breaking'. This gets enhanced towards the end of the preschool period as they prepare to enter school. Some of the phrases that are figurative in nature are called similes, metaphors and irony. By the age of six years, some children are able to understand these forms of language rather well, and even use them occasionally.

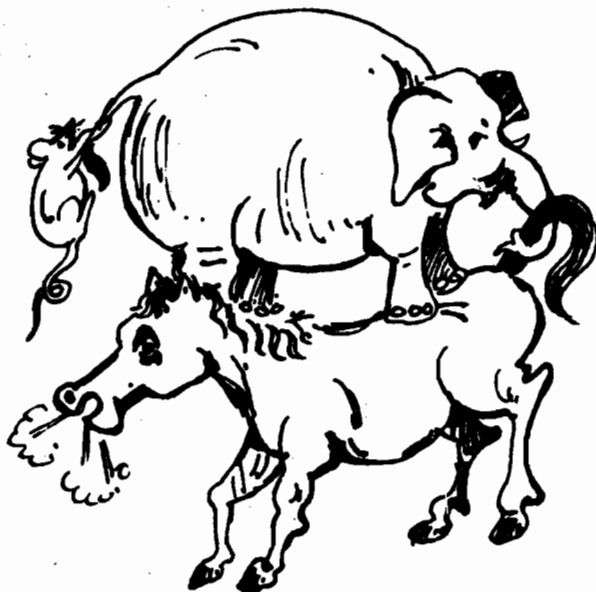
Let us go through the following paragraphs for more details. **Similes** draw a similarity between two things, people, objects etc. In these sentences the words such as 'like' and 'as' are used. For example "You run like a rabbit". In this sentence, the person is comparing the speed or the style of running and thus using the phrase—'running like a rabbit'. Such sentences are understood by preschoolers. When the child is climbing trees or jumping over furniture and is told, "You are as naughty as a monkey. Just see the way you jump around", the child understands the meaning and enjoys being compared to a monkey. She will also see the humour in it and laugh.

Phrases that do not use the words 'as' and 'like' but draw a similarity by implication between two things are **metaphors**. For example, "He is chicken-hearted", "Don't be a monkey", "She is a lamb" etc. Children follow that these sentences also have a non-literal meaning.

Ironical phrases, i.e. which say something totally opposite to the context, are also understood by preschoolers. Take the example of Nandi. She was to go for a picnic with her parents. When the day arrived, they saw that it was raining hard and their plans were ruined. Nandi's mother then said, "What beautiful weather! We will definitely have a lovely picnic today". Nandi looking at the rain, understood the irony and said, "Can we go another day, Mummy"?

BOX 19.1 : Humour

You have just read that in late preschool years children begin to understand non-literal meanings of sentences and may even find them funny. However, preschoolers are not able to understand jokes based on word play. This requires an ability to understand that a word can have two meanings and generally, at that age, a particular word has only one meaning for children. They are, on the other hand, able to appreciate the humour in situations and events that are improbable or situations that show an absurd combination of events, objects etc. Take the example of six year old Vishal. He was looking at a comic and was in splits of laughter. His aunt, surprised that he was able to understand the comic, asked him what he was laughing at. He pointed out the following picture.



The understanding of figurative speech is dependent on many aspects, including the context. For example, if it is a very hot day and the person says, "Oh! It's so hot, I am going to melt", the child may take the sentence seriously. On the other hand, if it is a very cold day and the adult says, "On a day so warm, I could drink gallons of water", the child will note that it is a very cold day and the adult is saying something not true. She will understand that the sentence is factually incorrect and thus assume that the adult must have been implying a non-literal meaning.

You would have understood from the example given above that **children are able to understand irony and metaphor when they are able to go beyond fact**. This is generally understood only by the time they are seven years old. They are now able to see things from others' perspectives, and to put it in context.

You would have seen that while talking of language, the development of the skills has been explained in relation to cognitive abilities. This is because there is a close relation between the two. Words and sentences spoken by children should not be judged in terms of adult language standards. A study of the development of language and thought together will provide information about the development of language skills.

19.2.3 Pre-reading and Pre-writing Skills

Reading and writing begin to take shape when the child is in the preschool years. The child wants to write her name, draw a flower, read a story and so on. *Five year old Tony picked up a paper bag from the floor. The bag had a colourful picture and something printed on it. He went up to his twelve year old cousin and said, "Should I tell you a story"? She asked, "Which story are you going to tell"? Tony pointed to the picture and said, "This one". His cousin agreed. He then proceeded to make up a story.* Children see letters, numbers and pictures in books, magazines, newspapers, hoardings on the streets, T.V., paperbags which are used to carry back purchases from the market etc. Such experiences in which children get an opportunity to interpret the meaning of pictures and letters, help them to become familiar with and discriminate letters. Children also develop the skill of interpreting given information. Their experiences enable them to accumulate a fund of recognizable material that will help make sense of what is written or printed.

In the preschool years, children develop an awareness about language. They begin to think of what they are saying, and learn that sentences can be constructed by the flexible use of words. An awareness that words are made of sounds also develops. These skills help them to learn to read.

Children now also begin to use written symbols, i.e. drawings like circles, squares, lines and scribbles to signify an object, thought or concept. Therefore, at this juncture, it becomes vital to provide opportunities that will help them to learn skills which will finally lead to reading and writing, i.e., provide opportunities to foster pre-reading and pre-writing skills. **Pre-reading and pre-writing skills** are those which the child needs to learn before she goes on to reading and writing. The skills that would be required before the child can read and write are as follows. The children should have the ability to:

- Control eye movement as the activity of reading requires rapid movement of the eyes.
- Control the movement of the fingers and wrist to hold the crayon, chalk or pencil and the book, and turn pages etc.
- See the minute differences in shapes such as 'E' and 'F' or a square and a rectangle.
- Associate sounds with shapes.
- Combine sounds for example, 'ca', 'ce' etc. as in 'car', 'cell' respectively.
- Understand part-to-whole relationship (which is essential to understand that letters are combined to form words and words are put together to form sentences).
- Understand the meaning of invariance (to understand that letters and words, even if written in a different colour or size, remain the same and are sounded the same way).
- Pay attention to a particular task for some time, i.e., have an adequate attention span.
- Remember and classify objects and events.

- Understand the concepts of right and left and up and down, as these help to develop reading and writing skills.

To foster development of these skills, it is important to provide opportunities for learning them. Many games can be organized for children that will further the learning of pre-reading and pre-writing skills. These games help in language development and are generally enjoyed by children. However, it is important to remember that the skills for these tasks actually develop from infancy and toddlerhood itself. To illustrate, when the infants learn to differentiate between sounds that are alike, they are learning a skill that will finally help them to differentiate between two similar sounding words like 'dog' and 'log'. Thus, they will gradually learn to identify that the sounds 'd' and 'l' are what make the words different and 'og' makes them sound similar. In this way they learn to use symbols, i.e., letters. You will read more about the activities for fostering these skills in Block 5.

Apart from providing the opportunities for developing the skills mentioned here, another important task for the caregiver is to **draw the child's attention towards the printed word and to motivate the child to read.** Some children are exposed to the world of print in their own homes. *Take the example of Sonu and Mamta. Three year old Sonu's parents go to work in the morning and his older sister goes to school. On some days he goes with his mother to her place of work and on others his sister carries him to school. He sees her reading and writing. As she studies in school, he scribbles in the sand with a stick or with her pencil on the notebook. He wants to write his name, draw pictures and do all the other things that she does. At home, she also reads stories to him from books. He has begun to understand that there is a link between the book and the story and wants to read and write.*

Mamta, on the other hand, stays at home with her grandmother as her parents work at the construction site where her father drives the road roller and her mother helps in other work. She does not have experiences with books or pencils. She plays in the sand or with pebbles on the roadside while her parents work. She is also learning pre-reading and pre-writing skills, as she makes a house from clay. As she plays she is developing fine motor skills. She is, however, not aware of the link between spoken and printed language and may not have a strong motivation to read and write.

In most preschools, the emphasis is on teaching children to recognize and write numbers and alphabets. Most parents also expect that a preschool will teach their child numbers and letters so that they are able to seek admission in a school. While it is not wrong to emphasize the learning of these concepts, we have to keep in mind that before going on to learning, reading and writing, the child has to be able to do all the tasks that we have mentioned till now as pre-reading and pre-writing skills. The child must have the readiness for reading and writing, and must want to learn to read and write.

Check Your Progress Exercise 1

- 1) State whether the following statements are correct or incorrect.
 - a) In preschool years children begin to think about language and in mid-sentence correct their sentences by using alternative words, rephrasing them or repeating a word for explicitness. ()
 - b) The preschooler uses fewer non-verbal cues such as gestures to communicate and uses more words. ()
 - c) In the 3-6 years period the child learns that words, letters, numbers, and pictures can be used as symbols to communicate with others. ()
 - d) The understanding of the meaning of words that signify location, e.g. here-there, above-under, is linked to the understanding of the concept of space, movement and causation. ()
 - e) The child learns to use the future tense before the past and the present tense. ()
 - f) The preschool child uses words like cannot, will not and do not in construction of negative sentences before she uses words such as much, enough etc. to qualify these sentences. ()

- g) The figurative or non-literal meaning of phrases can be understood by preschoolers to some extent. ()
 - h) Preschoolers can understand jokes based on word play. They find them funny. ()
- 2) What do you understand by the terms pre-reading and pre-writing skills? Write briefly in the space provided below. Also mention why it is important to provide preschoolers with experiences to develop these skills.

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19.3 USING LANGUAGE: THE FUNCTIONS SERVED

Let us now see how the preschooler uses her language skills and as a result how she becomes more efficient at using language for a variety of purposes.

Language primarily helps to communicate our thoughts and ideas, establish and maintain social contact and relationships and finally to understand society and culture. Initially, children are not able to use language for all these purposes, but as they grow, their language skills improve.

In Unit 14, Block 3 you read how the toddler uses language. You would remember that the toddler **expresses her needs and feelings, gives information, makes judgements, asks questions, and directs her own actions with the help of language.** All these functions hold true for the preschool years also. The preschool child becomes more efficient at all these tasks, and in addition, uses language for other purposes as well.

In the preschool years, talking accompanies almost all the activities of children. As children play they may be talking to themselves, commenting on what they are doing. You read in the last Block that this speech serves to guide children's actions. Research has shown that, initially, when children first learn to speak, their comments come after the activity, as two year olds can do only one thing at a time. If a two year old is doing something and an adult gives directions, she will be distracted. Later on, this is not difficult for children. They are able to listen to the directions and include them in their activity. In other words, they are able to integrate verbal directions with an activity. At two-and-a-half to three-and-a-half years, children can be helped by simple verbal directions immediately preceding an activity.

Being able to integrate verbal directions with an activity leads to the ability to use language to direct one's own activity. This happens by three-and-a-half years. When children enter preschool years, they begin to **direct their own activity verbally.** They talk of what they are about to do. By the time children are four-and-a-half to five years, i.e. towards the end of preschool years, **language begins to get internalized.** They do not have to always speak their thoughts aloud when they do something. In preschool years, this ability is developing and children are not very skilled at it. Only when they are about eight to nine years old, planning becomes a part of their thought. They do not have to speak aloud to direct their

actions. As children are now able to use language efficiently, they use thinking to plan their activities instead of relying only on the method of trial and error.



You know that cognitive and language development help and strengthen each other. Language provides labels for cognitive concepts. In preschool years, when the child learns these labels, they help her to **classify events and objects**. Language thus helps in classification of events and objects.

Children in preschool years also use language to **express their fantasy**. They will tell colourful stories. Sometimes while listening to these tales, adults may feel that children are lying. However, children may be confused between reality and fantasy. In a way they are experimenting and exploring their language skills. They use these skills to relate imaginary tales. If they narrate a story heard before, they are able to tell the story in the right sequence, with a beginning, a middle and an end. There is a lot of action and many characters appear and disappear in the story. Others listening to the narration may find it difficult to follow the action as there may be excessive and confusing activity. However, the stories told by children often reflect their way of thinking and dealing with situations.

Language serves very important social functions in that it allows us to direct another person's attention towards ourselves, communicate thoughts and make friends. Conversation helps us to get to know people and make friends with them. The preschooler uses various techniques to **begin and continue conversation**. You read in the last Block in Unit 14 that children ask questions as a device for continuing a dialogue, i.e., as a conversational device. In preschool years, along with this technique children also narrate their activities of the day before, plans of the future, happenings in the family and talk about their possessions e.g. toys, games etc. They tell a story to begin and continue conversation. With the development of social skills, the child in preschool years uses language to **form relationships** with others and to **maintain social contact**. This can be seen in their interactions with others. If you have had the opportunity to observe preschoolers interacting with children younger than them, you would have seen that four year old children modify their speech while speaking to younger children. Research reveals that this speech of theirs is different from that which they use while speaking to adults. Preschoolers are not just imitating adults. It is possible that they realize the linguistic limitation of their listener and thus modify their speech. With increasing age they become better at using a different kind of speech with younger children. The speech of preschoolers is also different when they speak with their peers than when they speak with adults. When they want something from their parents, the tone of their voice is different from when they are playing with peers and fighting over a toy. Children use language in a variety of ways to form relationships and maintain social contact.

19.4 FACTORS INFLUENCING LANGUAGE DEVELOPMENT

You would be able to recall that in Block 1, we discussed in detail the influences of heredity and environment on development. The conclusion at the end of the discussion was that heredity and environment interact to influence the development of skills in all areas, be it the development of language, cognitive, physical or social skills. In this Section, we are going to read further about the factors that influence language development. This will help us to understand the factors that contribute to the learning of language skills.

If we decide to learn a new language now, we will require considerable amount of formal training and guidance. Children, on the other hand, learn to speak without any formal training. How does the child accomplish this remarkable feat? Let us examine the various aspects in detail to obtain an insight into the process of learning language.

You read in Blocks 1 and 2 that it seems that the child has an innate ability to learn language. You also know from your reading of this Block and earlier Blocks that the child's skills in other areas, mainly the cognitive and social skills, help her to learn language. Many **cognitive abilities** are required in language learning. For example, understanding the concepts and learning to use words as symbols and remembering them are important abilities. Language and the development of concepts go together — each helping in the progress of the other.

Social skills also help in language development. Normally, in preschool years the child interacts with more people than before. By talking to others, she learns to use language more effectively. The social interactions have a direct impact on the learning of language. Adults also have a powerful influence on the vocabulary of the child and her fluency in speaking. They help the child to acquire concepts and attach words to these concepts. Children imitate them and are reinforced to learn more when their efforts are rewarded.

People around the child create an environment which aids in language learning. Their language use is suitable for the child's level. You may have noticed that parents make a special effort to talk in a manner that children understand. Children's language development also depends on how the mother/caregiver encourages their attempts to start a conversation.

However, **social interaction, imitation and reinforcement** alone cannot explain language learning. It fails to explain how children speak original sentences that they have never heard before. As you know, some parents, while talking to children, speak in childish language. How do then children acquire adult speech that is grammatically correct? Why do children make the same 'mistakes', i.e. overgeneralize and underextend terms? They never hear adults use words like 'runned' or 'eated' or call a plane a bird, or *vice-versa*. Learning to add 'ed' to the end of the word comes from interpreting the rules of grammar according to their understanding. This shows us that the child thinks and interprets information as she learns language. They have an **inborn ability** to learn language.

From the above discussion, it becomes clear that **the child's environment, social and cognitive skills along with her innate ability influences language development**. As a **part of the environment, the caregiver plays a very important role in fostering the language development of the child**. Let us see how the caregiver can do this.

19.5 FOSTERING LANGUAGE DEVELOPMENT

Children who are encouraged to speak and who are listened to when they speak develop superior language abilities. You know that children learn language through an active process of speaking and listening. Therefore, both these aspects should be given importance when activities for the development of language skills are being planned. From your reading of the earlier Section of this Unit, you know the factors that help in language learning.



If we want to foster language development, we should make verbal communication a joyful social activity for children. **The conversation with them should be such that it is fun.** It should not become a question-answer session which focuses on getting and giving information. There should be place for fun. The aim should not always be to teach the child something. **As children tend to imitate the manner in which others speak, we must provide good examples of speech.** The adult could expand the sentence so that the child becomes familiar with forms like adjectives.

We must also encourage children to express themselves freely. Talking to them on topics of their interest will provide many opportunities for them to speak freely. For example, you can ask questions that are related to the day-to-day experiences of the child, like, "What did you do at home today morning?", "I see you have a new pencil. Who got it for you?" This will initiate a dialogue and motivate the child to take part in conversation. The questions of the child should be answered with enough attention. The caregiver should be careful not to pass judgement on what the child says while talking to her. For example, when the child asks, "Can I tell you a story"?, the caregiver can probably say, "I would like to hear your story but let us first finish this task", instead of saying, "Don't interrupt. You should wait for your turn. Can't you see that we have to finish this task first"? If she speaks like this, she will inhibit the child.

To understand this better, let us read the two examples written below.

In one case this is how the conversation went between the caregiver and the child:

Child: "Aunty, look, I found a feather".

Teacher: "Really, how pretty! It is so soft".

Child: "Yes, it is black also".

Teacher: "Black"?

Child: "Look, here it is black, and the stick is pointed".

Teacher: "Stick? Oh! I see you mean this part of the feather".

Child: "It is pointed. When I press it on my hand it makes a mark".

Teacher: "Do you think we can write with it? May be, make a pen from it"?

Child: "Can we"?

Teacher: "Come on, let's all try".

In the second case, the conversation goes as follows:

Child: "Look, aunty, I found a feather".

Teacher: "Yes, its a crow's feather! It is black in colour. What colour is it Amit"?

Child: "Crow's feather"?

Teacher: "What did I say? What is the colour of the feather Amit"?

Child: "Here its black (pointing to the black part of the feather)".

Teacher: "We can make pens from feathers. What can we make from feathers"?

Child: "Don't know".

Teacher: "Come I will tell you how we can make pens from feathers".

It is easy to see that there is a difference in the style of the caregivers in the two cases. The first child's responses are given importance, whereas in the second case they are ignored. Also in the first case the ideas build on each other and the talk flows freely and continues for longer. The essential point that comes through is that even without asking formal questions to children, learning takes place.

It is important to remember that the caregiver herself will also influence the child's language. If she is angry, it will immediately be reflected in her voice. **The mood of the caregiver will affect her voice and children are sensitive to it.** While talking to them this must be kept in mind. While conversing with children one should also be a **good listener** and pay attention to what the child says as this makes the child feel comfortable and respond positively.



Finally, the caregiver should also keep in mind that children enjoy rhymes, songs and stories. These help in the development of language skills. Stories, songs and rhymes involve the child completely. In a day's routine, there are many times when a song or rhyme can be introduced. While children are waiting for food to be served, or before beginning a new activity a familiar rhyme will make the situation pleasant. Some songs from other cultures can also be introduced as children find them interesting and they enjoy pronouncing new words.

Children in preschool years like to listen to stories, repeat them, make their own stories and also read picture story books. Stories also allow children to practise their language skills. You will read more about this in Block 5.

In addition to all the points mentioned above the caregiver should also remember that the child in preschool years is learning skills that will help her to read and write. It is, therefore, also important to provide opportunities that will enhance pre-reading and pre-writing skills. You read about this in the earlier Section. The preschool children should be provided opportunities to use chalk, crayon or pencil, to look at pictures and become familiar with the printed word so that they can understand that the written word symbolises what they say. They will then want to read the written word. Books should be readily available to children. Instead of stopping them from handling books for fear of damage, preschool children should be encouraged and taught to handle books with care. Activities for fostering language development are detailed in Block 5.

Check Your Progress Exercise 2

1) You know that as compared to toddlerhood, in preschool years children use language for a greater variety of purposes. State whether the uses of language represented below are correct or incorrect with reference to preschool years.

- a) Using language to express fantasy.



- b) Using language to ask questions, and narrate events to begin and end a conversation.



c) Using language to form and maintain social contact.

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d) Using language to categorize.

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2) Write briefly in the space provided below how the cognitive skills of the child influence and foster her language development.

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3) In Section 19.5 of this Unit the various ways in which the caregiver can foster language development in preschool years have been described. Some of them are written below. Complete the list by adding the missing ones.

- a) Encourage children to express themselves and ask questions.
- b) Ensure that conversation for the child is fun.

c) Provide opportunities to enhance pre-reading and pre-writing skills.

d)

e)

f)

g)

19.6 SPEECH PROBLEMS IN CHILDHOOD

You have already read about the development of language from infancy to preschool years. You read about the milestones of development at various ages. Though one should not be unduly worried about slight delay in development, one should not ignore if the child's development does not follow the pattern described in the text. Delays can be considered as a warning sign of speech disorders. It is important to pay special attention to any speech problem because it may be an indication or a symptom of something even more serious like brain damage, hearing loss etc. Any delay in language development will hamper the development in other areas also, i.e. social and cognitive development.

There are basically three reasons, any one of which could be the cause of a disorder. These are as follows:

- If the child cannot hear, she will not be able to produce the various sounds.
- There could be a problem with the child's vocal apparatus, i.e. the nasal passage, tongue, vocal cords, larynx etc. or brain damage and this could hamper sound production.
- An emotional problem may interfere with the child's ability to understand language or to speak it.

The child may need surgical treatment, hearing aids, speech therapy and/or help for her emotional problems.

The common problems noticed in the childhood years are difficulty in articulation or pronouncing a particular sound or combination of sounds, long after others of the same age have mastered them, and stuttering or stammering. Delay in achieving milestones can also be a problem. Let us look at these to find out what the causes are and how the caregiver can help.

Articulation Problems: These disorders are the most common of all. Some children have problems in making a sound or combination of sounds. They may substitute one sound for another. For example, a child may substitute the sound 'r' with 'l' and 'q' with 't' as in the sentences, "Give me your slippel (slipper)" and "Twickly (quickly) give it to me", respectively. This sound substitution in words is known as **lisp**.

Many a time, the person's tongue movements are not co-ordinated and problems in producing certain sounds occur. The cause of this disorder can also be a hearing problem because of which the child cannot hear the difference between two sounds and, therefore, has a problem in producing them. Another reason could be that because of malformation of the speech organs, the child has a problem in producing a particular sound. By consulting a doctor, you can learn about the exact problem of a particular child. Although this disorder reduces the effectiveness of the person as a communicator and attracts a lot of attention from others, it is not a serious disorder. It can be corrected if it is detected and treated early.

In some cases children repeat a consonant or a vowel, i.e., they get stuck at a sound and repeat it again and again, for example "b-b-b-ball". This is called **stuttering**. In other cases there is a long pause in between the word for example, "Mo... .. ther". This is known as **stammering**. The causes for both these disorders are not very well known but

they are closely linked with stress, fear and anxiety. In any situation which is stressful, or which evokes fear or anxiety, the problem gets worse. Emotional or psychological conflicts can also lead to this disorder as they cause stress. Another reason for stuttering and stammering could be that the child cannot hear clearly. Some theorists even say that it could be a result of not learning to speak properly. Children who stutter or stammer often show tension through a trembling voice or tightened neck muscles. Stuttering or stammering causes anxiety in that the child wants to speak clearly and this anxiety makes the speech worse. It becomes a vicious cycle for a person who stutters or stammers.

Developmental Delay: Some children show unusual delay in learning language. The apparent causes range from hearing loss to mild brain damage to stress in the family to having to learn more than one language under stressful conditions. Some of these children, especially those with brain damage, or malformation of vocal cords or nasal passage, may never be able to reach the adult level of speech but others with special care and treatment can be helped. In some extreme cases there is a lack of adequate stimulation at home or there are no appropriate models for the child, and thus the child's speech is delayed. You read about such a case in Block 1 where the child was isolated with a mute mother and, therefore, could not acquire speech. However, with special effort the child could be taught to use language for communication.

From the reading of the preceding paragraphs, you would have gathered that these children need special care and help from a professional. What then is the caregiver's role?

First and foremost, the caregiver should **talk to other adults** in the child's environment before reaching any conclusions. If she feels that the child's language development is very much delayed as compared to the average and this delay does not have any apparent reason, **professional help may be sought.**

The early years are crucial for the treatment of such problems because these years are very important for language development. You have read earlier that if the child does not learn to speak in the early years it could be difficult to teach her to speak fluently later. The caregiver will have to ensure that the child is provided professional help early.

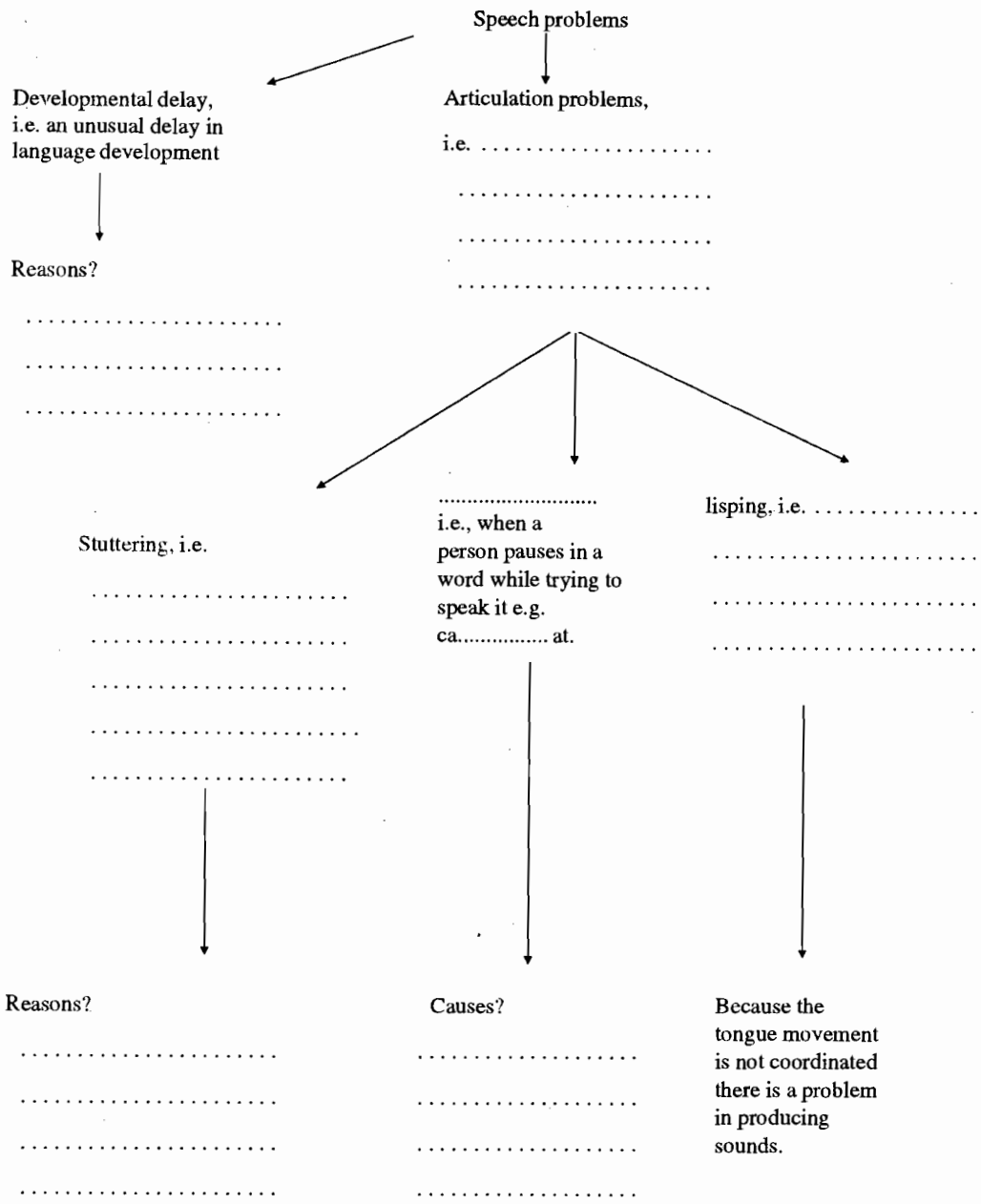
The caregiver at the same time should also remember that children with speech problems are not different from other children in any other aspect. Similar to them, they also require explanations, clarifications and opportunities for learning language. They are also expanding their understanding of language and learning to speak. **They respond to a rich linguistic environment, i.e. an environment where they are encouraged to speak and get to hear songs, stories, rhymes and conversation.** They may not be able to speak long sentences or pronounce specific words, but they understand the complex speech of adults and enjoy listening to a variety of sounds.

The caregiver should **encourage the use of speech as children are involved in play** with each other. She can structure the play setting in such a way that they talk to each other, ask for things, say what they are doing. For example, arranging for group play of five or six children together, making a collage on a large sheet of paper or making a train across the room using blocks.

It is essential for children with speech problems to have professional guidance and any progress is slow. The parents should **accept slow progress** and not expect that the speech problem will disappear in a short time span. Parents should provide a supportive environment. Speech problems like lisping, stuttering and stammering sometimes draw a lot of attention towards the child. This may make the child self-conscious. The caregiver will have to **ensure that the other people in the environment do not mock or tease the child.** In other words, teachers, parents and others will have to make everyone aware that this child is no different from other children and help create an environment conducive for the child's development.

Check Your Progress Exercise 3

1) Read the following chart carefully. It depicts the speech problems, gives definitions with examples and their causes. Some of the spaces are left blank. Based on the knowledge you have gained from the Unit, fill in the blanks appropriately.



2) In the space provided below explain the role of the caregiver in fostering language development of children with speech problems.

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19.7 SUMMING UP

This Unit details the development of language during preschool years. You read that the child's vocabulary increases. The preschool child uses more words and fewer non-verbal cues, i.e. gestures, to communicate meaning. She is able to use comparative terms, like 'larger', 'smaller' and words that imply a location, for example, 'above', 'under'. She can use past, present and future tense in her speech. Her sentence construction becomes increasingly complex. These developments are a result of the developing cognitive abilities of the child. She is able to understand the concepts of shape, size, space, movement and time which further her language development. The preschooler is mainly different from the toddler in that she begins to think of what she is saying, changes her sentences and uses different words to make herself understood.

As a result of being able to understand the other person's perspective, she also begins to understand the non-literal meaning of sentences as implied through metaphors, similes and irony.

A major advancement during these years is the child's ability to link the spoken word with the printed word. Therefore, this is the period when experiences to foster pre-reading and pre-writing skills should be provided.

The activities planned for language development should help the child gain control over her muscles, learn to substitute symbols for reality and understand that there is a link between spoken language and what is written on paper. In their play, children manipulate material, feel, touch and pick things, turn knobs, thread beads, try and complete puzzles. They play with art materials, scribble with pencils or colours on whatever surface they find. These activities provide many opportunities to practise fine motor skills and learn the concept of symbols. In the preschool years, these skills develop further and between four to six years, the child uses materials with greater control, and writes a few letters and numbers. She is aware of the relationship between a sound and a letter and between a visual shape and a letter.

The increasing skills in the area of language development help the child to use language for a greater variety of purposes, as compared to a toddler or an infant. In addition to using language for expressing needs, feelings, to give information, make judgements, ask questions and direct one's own actions, the preschooler also uses language to classify events and objects, express fantasy, begin and continue conversations and form and maintain social contact. Language becomes a vehicle for thought as it integrates speech and actions.

This Unit also discusses factors affecting language development. It concludes that both the child's inborn ability to learn language and the environment has an important role in influencing language development. Parents have a special role as the child imitates them and they provide the experiences and environment to the child. The caregiver has to focus on both the ability to speak and to listen, as the child learns through an active process of listening and speaking.

This was followed by a brief discussion on the speech problems that children may have. These are mainly problems in articulation and delay in development. These children need the same kind of language experiences that other children do. Speech problems can be symptoms of other problems like hearing loss or brain damage.

19.8 ANSWERS TO CHECK YOUR PROGRESS EXERCISES

Check Your Progress Exercise 1

- 1) a) correct
- b) correct
- c) correct
- d) correct

- e) incorrect — the future tense is perfected after the past and present tense as it requires the cognitive ability to think ahead, plan and then translate thoughts into words and communicate.
- f) correct
- g) correct
- h) incorrect—The preschooler cannot understand jokes based on word play because they assign only one meaning to a word and do not understand the second meaning of the same word.

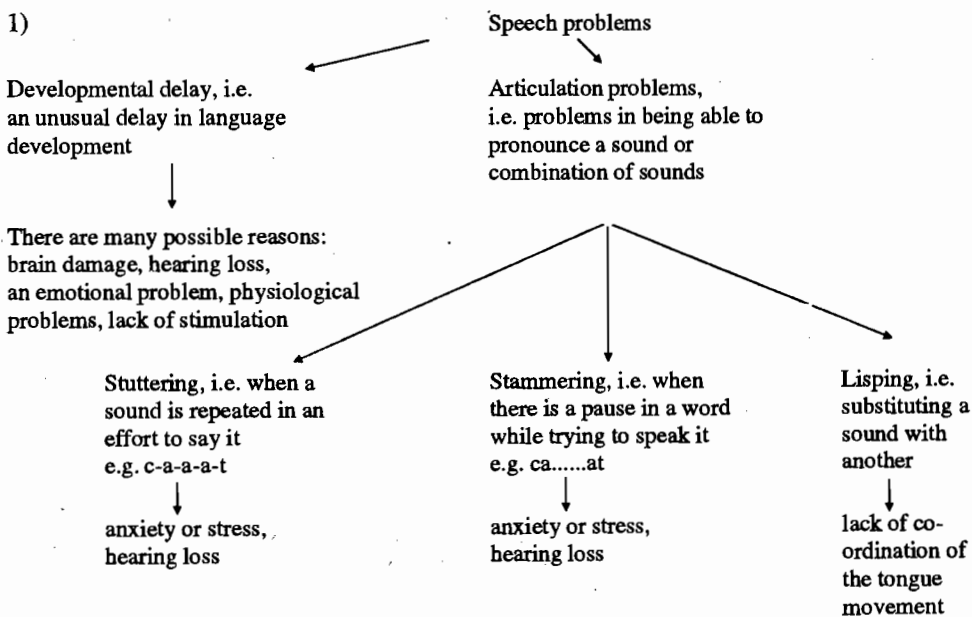
2) Pre-reading and pre-writing skills are those that will help the child to learn to read and write later, for example, developing control over fingers and wrist muscles, eye-hand co-ordination and the concepts of right and left and up and down and discriminating sounds and shapes.

Opportunities to practise these skills are important because in this period children are maturationally ready to learn. These skills will also prepare them for the coming school years where they will be required to read and write.

Check Your Progress Exercise 2

- 1) a) correct
- b) correct
- c) correct
- d) correct
- 2) Cognitive skills help in language development as they
 - provide an understanding of concepts
 - enable the child to use words as symbols or labels
 - enable the child to see things from the perspective of others
 - enable the child to understand the rules of grammar
- 3) d) Tell the child stories, sing songs and rhymes.
- e) Be a good listener.
- f) Talk in a pleasant manner without stress in the voice.
- g) Provide good examples for the child to hear.

Check Your Progress Exercise 3



- 2) The caregiver while interacting with children who have any kind of speech disorder should remember that
 - the child is similar to any other child and requires a rich language environment
 - encourage children to talk to each other while they are involved in activities
 - ensure that the children are provided professional help according to their problem
 - accept the slow progress of the child and not expect perfection
 - ensure that the child has an accepting environment