

Innatist and Social Interactionist Perspectives on Language Development and Their Implications on Academic Learning and/or Achievement

Ming-chung Yu*

Abstract

How and why can young children acquire language so very successfully and seemingly effortlessly? In the field of language development, theorists have long tried to explain why children say what they do, and most importantly, why they eventually speak like adults. Innatist and social interactionist theories can be considered two of the most competing approaches proposed for addressing these issues, with the ‘nature’ formulations of innatists on the one end of the continuum and the ‘nurture’ theses of social interactionists on the other. This kind of nature-nurture controversy is a matter of whether in the process of language acquisition special emphasis should be laid either on children themselves or the outside learning environment. The innatist, who puts forward such ideas as the ‘language acquisition device’ and ‘critical period hypothesis’, maintains that language is a species-specific phenomenon unique only to human beings, whereas the interactionist, who brings forth ideas like ‘child-directed speech’, submits that the course of development is greatly affected by the interplay between children’s social language environment as well as their linguistic and cognitive capacities. The aim of this paper is to discuss the key concepts by which these two camps’ debate has been formulated and then to further address the possible implications of both sides’ accounts on academic learning and/or achievement. Through the discussion in the present paper, it seems clear that children’s success of learning language apparently depends upon some kind of innate mechanisms that make acquisition possible in humans but not in any other species, and above all, upon the input from competent speakers in their surrounding environment. Judging from the innatist and social interactionist positions, we can notice that the eclectic nature of the social interactive approach is one of its great strengths that makes it seem to hold the most promise for us in the future to account for how we humans learn to speak.

Keywords : *The innatist, the social interactionist, language acquisition device, critical period hypothesis, child-directed speech*

* Assistant Professor, Department of English, National Chengchi University