



## Examining the Role of Imperative Sentences in Child Second Language Acquisition during a Limited of Time

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### ABSTRACT

Child Second Language Acquisition is one of the sub-areas in second language studies. Bilingualism is also considered to be an advantageous concept in terms of social, economic and educational contributions. In child language acquisition, imperatives are among the commonly used utterances that ask children to carry out a certain direction. In this research it is aimed to give information about child SLA and to show the contributions of the use of 'Imperatives' in child SLA. The study is a qualitative narrative research design. At the end of three months, Eren is able to carry out the exercised directions in English.

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### 1. Introduction

Research on child SLA has received a great deal of attention since 1970s and study of child SLA is a distinguishing subfield of second language acquisition in research areas of language learning. As children under five years of age do not have the ability to read and write, research on child first language and child second language acquisition is made on oral language studies. The tests and assessment of language studies is done orally, generally with speaking activities.

There are two distinguishing approaches on second language learning; whether the acquisition of the target language takes place *simultaneously* with the mother tongue or *sequentially* after the acquisition of the mother tongue.

Foster and Cohen (1999) defined child SLA as acquisition by individuals young enough to be within the critical period, but yet with a first language already learned. In child SLA, children learn first and the second language successively or simultaneously. In fact there is not a definite limitation about whether the second language should be learned after first language or it should be acquired simultaneously. But there is a consensus that language acquisition takes place during a critical period.

As child SLA is assumed to be important so as to teach a second language during a period that is thought to be critical for language learning, exposing children to a second language during the first six years of age is taken seriously.

In this study I aimed to study the role of being exposed to a second language (namely English) that is spoken by the mother (me) of a child in home setting with daily use of English, generally including Imperative sentence remarks. My purpose was to reveal detailed analysis of exposure to second language in a limited time of three months and to share the results of the study to show that children have an amazing ability on language learning that can be observed even with little experience of being acquainted with some of parts of a foreign language.

With regard to the domains of Critical Period Hypothesis by Lenneberg (1967), it would be possible to engage with the effects of different linguistic exposures and discourse changes around them during the period required by linguists.

In my study, I observed my son for three months on the purpose of realising the data about child second language acquisition that can also be included in the domains of critical Period Hypothesis. This study will help us to indicate the roles of early exposure to a second language in child SLA and the effects of using Imperative sentences to make the child understand what is intended to mean. Taking into consideration the important points in Child SLA, I developed some research questions as:

1. What is the effect of Imperative sentences in teaching a second language in early childhood?
2. How much does it take for a child to understand utterances in a foreign language?
3. What are the effects of being exposed to a second language in childhood?

### 2. Literature Review

#### 2.1. How languages are learnt?

In viewing the natural ability to acquire language in terms of innate capacity, language structure is genetically "given" to every human child (Saville and Troike, 2006). Babies learn some basics of language long before they produce their first utterances. They listen and discriminate among different speech sounds. They enjoy hearing a variety of sounds (Clarke, 2009). Thus, children can pronounce any different sound patterns they hear until they are three- a crucial time period for learning a language, and they pronounce what they hear most in their communication environment.

It is already a known fact that a baby starts revealing his speaking habit during the very early months. Parents can realise that children follow a similar pattern in language development. According to Tercanlioğlu (2004), the process of speaking is made in three areas; first, *sound production* that takes place between birth and first three years of a child during

which several stages such as producing basic sounds and consonant sounds, babbling, single word, two words, three words sentences etc. are encountered; second, *speech perception* referring that children's perceptual apparatus is already programmed to discriminate sounds; and third, *speech interaction* that starts with the first talk of mother or others with baby. As first language acquisition has universal features and babies all around the world uses the same process of learning their mother tongue, it is accepted that there is a critical period during which the language is acquired best. It is regarded as a problem if a baby does not direct his head towards sounds around him and does not show any production of speech until his first age. So, as there is a critical period for learning mother tongue, some researchers investigated whether there is a critical period for learning a foreign language.

There is a common belief that children learn a second language more easily and faster than adult learners. This belief is known as the Critical Period Hypothesis (CPH). According to Critical Period Hypothesis by Lennenberg (1967), language acquisition occurs during a period which ends about the age of puberty. According to Birdsong (1999) there is limited developmental period (critical period) during which it is possible to acquire a language be it L1 or L2, to normal, native like levels. Once this window of opportunity is passed, however the ability to learn a language declines.

It is generally accepted that by the age of four, children are found to have acquired the basic structures of the language or languages spoken to them in the communication environment. Much of their effort after four is spent in improving their ability to use language in a widening social interaction. As the children begin to develop metalinguistic awareness in the pre-school years, they can differentiate various styles of talking, other languages or wrong utterances. They can understand whether the speech they hear is a song, a pray or a tale or is in another language.

According to Gass (1994), there is an age-related point (generally puberty) beyond which it becomes difficult or impossible to learn a second language to the same degree as native speakers of that language. Although adults are better learners in most of the areas than children, children sometimes perform better than adults on learning a second language.

Gass (1994) states that young children are more likely to attain native-like proficiency in a second language than teenagers or adults are. Nevertheless adults often learn certain parts – some morphological and syntactic features-of a new language more quickly whereas children are better than adults in the acquisition of other parts- phonology.

As Dulay and Burt (1975) found out, child SLA is similar to child first language acquisition. This came to be known as L1=L2 Hypothesis. The process that is used when learning the first language is available for second language learning. As language learning is language learning (McLaughlin, 1978) whether it is the mother tongue or another language that is being learnt does not have any differences in terms of acquisition. Humans go through the same processes while learning a language. The same strategies are used in learning a first or second language.

According to Gass (1994) children construct their first language and a second language in similar patterns thanks to mental processes and innate propensity of all humans to learn any language regardless of their mother tongue and target language.

According to Cook (2008) second language learning studies depend on the aim of the learner. If a life-long second language is needed, acquisition studies should start in childhood. However, if the learner aims to study a foreign language for a few years and then drop it, then starting to learn a foreign language in adolescence is more advantageous.

Language transfer that has impact on learning a second language is also important in terms of facilitating language acquisition. Rocca (2007) defines language transfer as a constraint that the first language imposes on the second language options available to the learner. Child SLA is formed with the compilation of first language acquisition and adult second language acquisition. As children have already acquired a native language, it will certainly affect the acquisition of a second language. This effect may be unavoidable and it may also have some contributions on learning the language.

According to Perkins and Salomon (1992) transfer of learning occurs when learning in one context or with one set of materials impacts on performance in another context or with other related materials. In language acquisition, transfer can occur in all linguistic subsystems, including morphology and syntax. In child SLA, if the child is learning a second language after first language; a transfer on linguistic items can be mentioned; however, if the child is learning both languages simultaneously, they are assumed as different systems and learnt in their own system, little or in some aspects no impact occurring.

## 2.2. Bilingualism

A bilingual speaker is a person who has a native language and a second language. Becoming bilingual or multilingual (being able to speak more than two languages) have essential advantages in terms of social, educational, financial benefits and international relationship necessities. Nevertheless, becoming bilingual and learning a second language has some different aspects. Whereas a bilingual person has acquired his second language simultaneously with his L1, a second language can be learned after L1 settlement. Paradis (2006) makes a distinction between child bilingual and child second language learner, the first meaning simultaneous bilingual children who learn both their languages in the preschool years and the latter denoting children who have established their mother tongue before starting to learn a second language which they later learn at school. Besides, children who learn more than one language from earliest childhood are referred to as 'simultaneous bilinguals', whereas those who learn another language later may be called 'sequential bilinguals' (Lightbown and Spada, 2013).

According to Clarke's (2009) explanation on how to interact with babies and children to support them become bilingual, the maintenance of a first language is critical for children under three years of age. Between the ages of twelve and eighteen months, babies generally can produce first words or units of language. Babies who are exposed to a second language environment different from the mother tongue will also start learning single words in target language. Children will learn functional words such as 'no', 'mine', 'bye-bye'; as in the development of their first language. Parents should feel comfortable using their own language at home.

As in the acquisition process of a mother tongue, child second language learning may have different stages of acquisition. Tabors (1997) noted four early stages – home language use, non-verbal period, formulaic and telegraphic use and productive language use, in second language

development, based on the observation of children in an English preschool in the United States. According to Tabors (1997) in a second language environment, children firstly use their mother tongue (which Tabors calls Home- language use). When they realize that using first language does not facilitate communication, they keep silent that can last a few weeks or several months (that is non-verbal period). During this stage, they produce few or no utterances in the second language and often make use of gestural communication. Children's first utterances in the second language tend to be formulaic or telegraphic expressions that are memorized phrases, single words and few grammatical morphemes (formulaic and telegraphic use). The fourth stage, that includes productive language use, resembles to interlanguage which is a dynamic system balancing between first language transfer processes and with target language developmental processes that gradually moves closer to the target language system.

### 2.3. Other Factors in Child SLA

According to Gass, *Setting* is another important aspect in SLA. When children are involved in areas where there are native speaking peers; they are more liable to learn the target language easily and in correct systems. But on the case of an absence of native speaking peers, learner systems cannot develop properly. Thus, the quality of input to the learner is seen as an important variable in SLA. According to McLaughlin (1978) if the child has target language peers, there is a greater social context and the child learns the second language rules as if L2 were an L1 with no language transfer occurring. Both L1 and L2 learners use the same strategies in learning a language. Snedeker, Geren and Shafto (ND) compared young infants and three years of children who begin acquiring a second language. They found out that three-year-old children go through many of the same stages in acquiring a language as infants do.

According to Espinosa (in press), the speed of language acquisition depends on some factors both within the child and in the child's learning environment. The child's personality, aptitude for languages, interest and motivation interact with the quantity and quality of language inputs and opportunities for use to influence the rate and eventual fluency levels. In other words, psychological factors in learning a second language affect child's effort and approach toward language learning.

According to Clarke (2009) the first six years of a child is essential for language development and cultural identity. During these early years children improve their linguistic skills and knowledge about their surrounding and the world. The language or languages that children have been exposed to since birth are the basis for developing meaningful relationships and communicating particularly with other people around them.

Clark (2009) suggests that, there are many enjoyable ways of learning other languages. The best way is to surround children with natural language use in play, in conversations with adults and other children, in songs and games, activities, tales, and rhymes. All children can learn the meaning of words and expressions with such kind of activities in other languages.

According to Lightbown and Spada (2013), children need time to develop their second language abilities. Although it is assumed the earlier is the better, learning a second language with an established first language much contributes to SLA in childhood. In some situations where young children are cut off from their families for long hours and where their mother

tongue absent or forbidden, children can feel absence of self-confidence and inability to express themselves. Although preschool children acquire complex knowledge and skills for language and language use, the school setting requires new ways of using language and brings new opportunities for language development.

Providing children with opportunities of learning activities and abundant use of materials, enabling them with native speaking environment can facilitate their second language learning process.

### 3. Method

In this study, I present a narrated second language teaching study in which I examined the effects of the use of Imperative sentences in second language acquisition experiences of my son- Eren. I observed his responses towards English speech in imperative forms and transcribed them to reveal the role of imperative sentences in child SLA. Imperatives are expressions used to give orders (positive form) or warn somebody not to something (negative form). Imperatives can also be used to give instructions, to make an invitation, to reflect signs and notices, or to give friendly informal advice. (retrieved from <http://www.englishgrammarsecrets.com/imperative/menu.php>) Stress, intonation, gesture, facial expression, and, situation and context, indicate whether the use of imperative form is friendly, abrupt, angry, impatient, persuasive, etc. If 'please' is used in imperative sentences, it indicates request. (Retrieved from <http://www.englishlanguageguide.com/grammar/imperative.asp>)

### 3.1. Research Design

*Narrative research designs* are qualitative procedures in which the lives of individuals are described, and information about their experiences are gathered, told and written. This kind of research designs can be related with school classroom experiences or individual activities. (Creswell, 2012) As a distinct qualitative research, a narrative research typically studies on a single person, gathers data through the collection of stories, reports individual experiences, and the meaning of those experiences for the individual. As I studied on my child individually depending on the activities and his experiences in learning English by reporting his development in my research area, I selected to implement a narrative research design due to the fact that it best suits to my intended study.

### 3.2. Participant

In this research, a three years eight months old child (my son, Eren) is selected as the participant whose responses towards directions in a second language are transcribed by the observer (his mother) during a time period of three months. Eren's mother tongue is Turkish and he has been exposed to English by watching cartoons and listening to English songs for children since he was two years old. Eren's first language is established and his effort to learn a second language is sequential, as acquisition of a second language takes place after a settled first language. At the beginning of the exercises, although Eren did not want me to speak in English when he did not understand what I want him to do, he got accustomed to hearing English as I went on giving orders by showing the items to carry out the directions.

### 3.3. Instrument

The data was collected through observational transcriptions on Eren's behavioural replies and attitudes towards directions commanded by me in the target language. The observational process lasted for three months during

which Eren encountered new directions and learned to apply them to different directions when I helped him to understand by gestures and behaviours. The setting is our house design and the directions are related with daily commands that parents generally want children to accomplish in order to supply children's own needs or to make them learn to behave properly.

### 3.4. Procedure

When I first uttered the directions in English, I noted down Eren's responses towards speech items in another language; as I wanted to reveal the effects of using directions in second language teaching. I used no first language when directing him to carry out the commands. As shown in Table 1, the directions are daily expressions that are used mostly at home where the child is together with his mother during the day. The directions were increased day by day according to necessary conditions and each development was saved by me on a table which was later redesigned on a computer programme- Microsoft Word. I generally spoke in English regardless of my son whether he understands or not, besides I used facial expressions and some of the directions were in first language intonation form. When Eren did not understand, he spoke in the mother tongue; but I pretended as if I did not understand what he meant to say. I again used gestures and helped him to understand by doing the command together. The table below shows the Imperative sentences I used to direct Eren, the conditions when I used the directions, my gestures and behaviours for clarifying the directions and Eren's responses towards each direction at the end of three months period.

**Table 1. The Imperative sentences, their conditions, my gestures and Eren's responses.**

Imperative sentences	Conditions when the Imperative Sentences are used	My gestures	Eren's responses at the end of 3 months period
Wash your face and hands!	Every morning, when he gets up.	I act as if I was washing my face and hands.	Acts as if he is washing his face and hands; says OK. and goes into the bathroom.
Turn on the tap!	When he is about to wash his face and hands and brush his teeth.	I point at the tap.	He turns on the related items when they are off.
Wipe them on the towel!	When he needs drying his face and hands.	I point at the towel.	He uses the towel.
Have your breakfast!	Every morning, when the breakfast is ready.	I point at the breakfast table.	He sits at the table for breakfast.
Jump up and turn the light on!	When the room is dark.	I stress on the on/off postpositions when I want him to turn on or off something such as the computer, his toys to move and ring them.	He turns on the related items when he needs them.
Turn the light off!	When he gets out of a lighted room.	I point at the light.	He turns off the related items when I direct him.
Come here!	When I call him near.	I shake my hands towards me to call him near.	He runs towards me when I call him near.

Go now!	When I want him go somewhere in the house.	I shake my hands outwards.	He goes to the related location (the bathroom his room, kitchen etc.)
Sit here!	When I want him to have his meal.	I show his chair.	He sits on the chair.
Brush your teeth!	After breakfast and before going to bed.	I rattle my teeth.	He understands that I want him to brush his teeth, as he rattles his teeth, too.
Paint the drawings!	When he is to start painting on the table.	I use my hands as if I was using a crayon painting something.	He uses the referred crayons when he is painting.
Close your eyes!	When I want to make him a surprise.	I close my own eyes.	He closes his eyes (for surprise or for sleeping.)
Wear your socks!	When I want him to put on some kind of clothes.	I give him socks and wait him until he wears.	He wears what I want him to put on.
Look at me!	When I want him listen to me.	I use a Turkish intonation.	He turns his head and looks at me.
Drink your grape juice!	Every morning in the breakfast.	I behave as if I was sipping water.	He sips his milk, water etc.
Bite that olive!	During the meals (breakfast, lunch, supper etc.).	I rattle my teeth for once.	He bites the food (biscuits, fruits, bread etc.)

### 3.5. Data Analysis

As an English language teacher, I have always wanted to teach English to my children when I become a mother. It is clear that there is a critical period for language learning for humans and a second language can be acquired in two ways. A main decision on whether a second language should be taught to a child simultaneously or sequentially after an established first language should be made before deciding on the approach of second language teaching. As I live in Turkey where Turkish is the native language and where there could be found no native speaking environment of English language, I had known that teaching a second language to my son can be maintained sequentially. Being able to understand the sentences, answer the questions rationally and speak properly in his mother tongue, Eren can be said to have an established L1. Just as he is 3 years old, I would begin exposing him to English language starting with few lexical items and morphological expressions. I also needed some other materials such as English cartoons, rhymes and plays to expose my son, Eren with more functional opportunities in the target language.

During the naturalistic context of conversation, when I directed Eren for instance, to wash his face and hands, at first he was silent as he did not understand anything. When I was confronted with his silence, I took him to the bathroom, firstly I washed my face and hands and while I was doing so, I also continued speaking in English as 'now I turn on the tap, I am washing my hands, now I am washing my face and I dry them on the towel, OK?'. In the third day of our conversation, I did not go to the bathroom with him, just acted as I was washing my hands and face in his bedroom and directed him to wash his face and hands. Then he repeated my role and went to the bathroom. While he was washing his face and hands, I spoke loudly on the background, 'now, turn on the tap, take soap, (added direction) wash your face and hands

and then, wipe them on the towel, OK?'. After the work, he came near and showed his dried face and hands, and I generally replied as 'OK, Good'. After the third day, the same duty was completed each day and at the end of first month, he was able to say 'wash your face and hands'; but not 'wash my face and hands' to express that he wants to wash his own face and hands.

When he is about to use the washbasin, I direct him as 'turn on the tap' with a strong emphasis on 'on' and when he is about to turn off something, I direct him as 'turn off the light (showing the lamp); turn off your toy (pointing at his moving and ringing toy), don't turn off the computer (when his cartoon movies end) with an emphasis on 'off'. At the beginning, he carried out my directions just as looking on my signals, but about a week later, when I directed him without my gestures, he understood what I meant as the same expressions were uttered on the same conditions.

Every morning, when the breakfast is ready, I asked him to sit on the chair and have his breakfast on his own, by pointing at the table. During the meals, I directed him as 'take some bread (some cheese, egg), bite the olive (your toast, bread), drink your milk (your grape juice, water, etc.). During the first week, I always pointed at the food and directed him to eat and drink something. After the first week, I stopped pointing, just uttered the directions, and he started taking the food I referred, without any replies in the target language. He kept silence during the meals sometimes just saying 'OK' and imitating my words and carrying out my directions.

When I was in another room and wanted him near – to put some clothes on him, to hug him, to give him some candies etc, I said 'come, come here, please!' sometimes by shaking my right hand towards me if he saw me, and when I wanted him to go somewhere in the house I just said 'go, go now' by pointing at the location he was to reach. In fact he came immediately when I called him and went to the location referred, and he was sure to understand these expressions easily, because I also uttered them in Turkish intonation so as to make him get the message easily.

When he was painting his colouring book, I showed him the crayons and repeated their colours each time we painted together. When he started learning the colours, I asked him to take the 'blue crayon', later saying 'red one, black one, green crayon' etc. Through the end of the first month, he was able to pick up the correct crayon that I asked him. By this activity he also learnt the names of the colours.

After breakfast and before going to bed, I directed him to brush his teeth by rattling my teeth to refer brushing his teeth. During the first week, I also acted as if I was brushing my teeth and then went into the bathroom together and directed Eren during the work. Through the end of the first month, he was able to brush his teeth as he was rattling his teeth too just as I directed him to brush his teeth.

When I wanted to make a surprise for him with some chocolate, some candy or a new toy, my hands hidden at my back, I directed him as 'close your eyes'. As this condition had been experienced for many times in native language environment, he closed his eyes regardless of what I said to him in the target language. As repeated actions bear the same results under different circumstances, when I directed Eren to close his eyes to sleep on his bed, he replied by closing his eyes.

When he was to change his clothes or put on something different, I directed him as 'wear your socks, wear your pyjamas, your sweatshirt (with an emphasis on the verb 'wear')

and when some of the parts of his clothes got dirty or soaked; I directed him as 'take off your socks, sweater' etc. with a stress on the phrasal verb 'take off'. By this activity, he also learned the names of some of the clothes.

Some other expressions that are commonly used in daily life at home such as 'look at me, listen to me, jump, finish your meal, play with your toys, be quick, give me my telephone, the glass, my book etc' are also used according to the circumstances which are generally uttered with almost the same intonation and in the same conditions that had been experienced in the first language. For example, as I say 'baaaaaaak!' in Turkish; I say 'loooooook!' in English when I desired to take his attention on something. As I whisper as 'sessiz ol!' in Turkish, I also whisper when I say 'be quiet!'. When I want him not to do something, I wag my finger at him both in Turkish and English, also reflecting my intention in my vocalization.

#### 4. Discussion

Although Eren did not understand almost none of the directions at the very beginning, when I acted him the directions and pointed at the items he is expected to be engaged with, he did what I wanted firstly in silence, later just saying 'OK'. Nowadays, he is imitating my words and utterances. He started to understand the directions after about a period of one month after which I stopped pointing at the related items and acting out the directions. Then we tried to reinforce the repeated actions every day. When the conditions of directions changed in time, such as 'turn on the light', instead of 'turn on the tap' or 'close the door' or 'close the window' instead of 'close your eyes', Eren gave proper responses as he grasped what I wanted him to do. Certainly we have much time to develop target language skills and improve vocabulary; however, daily use of the target language is not enough for him to improve his communication skills. He needs an environment where L2 is commonly used and where a great deal of interaction takes place. He also needs outside exposure to English, however as going out is limited for children under unavailable whether conditions in fall and winter, we can just use daily expressions at the house. It is also needed to encounter with peers and adults who can speak English in order to reinforce our learning habits. Above all, we need a cultural environment to improve his complete understanding of the language. A language cannot be isolated from its culture. It is nourished with culture, and culture is one of the most determining features of a language.

As language is a living being, it always needs consolidation with proper food such as repetition, L2 environment for interaction, cultural surrounding and natural conditions for exposure to the target language. It is essential for those learning a second language always to have a lifelong interaction and exposure to the L2 in various circumstances, opportunities and conditions with various speakers.

#### 5. Conclusion

As it was stated in Tabor's (1997) stages; Eren firstly used mother tongue when he wanted to say something regardless of my speaking in another language. When I went on speaking in English, Eren wanted me to speak correctly, in his first language, Turkish. As I did not cease my English speech, Eren kept his silence when he did not understand my expressions. This silence lasted for about ten weeks. He just nodded when he understood me and did what I wanted him to do. After ten weeks he started to utter few words in the second language with the use of gestural expressions.

Those first expressions tended to be telegraphic expressions with single or few words. Although Eren has not accomplished the fourth stage of Tabor's, he can be said to be in the interlanguage period as he started to translate some of the expressions in his mother tongue. As language acquisition is a long-lasting and dynamic process, Eren certainly needs much exposure to the target language. He has been exposed to English without a native speaking environment. He also just watches English cartoons and animations and listens to flash songs on the computer. I am his unique issue to present him the opportunity of mutual conversation in English discourse. He needs an overall realization of cultural difference to realize the effects of culture in the use of target language. He also needs a literal education that after about two years he will be able to go to primary school and start reading and writing literally and it is at that time that he will encounter with a different alphabet system from one another with different pronunciation systems.

In this study I presented the effects of using directions in daily language in second language teaching. Using directions in the target language with practised exercises every day and changing them in different circumstances have been found to play an important role in the beginning period of child second language acquisition. Before using full grammatical expressions, starting with practiced imperative sentences can be a useful approach in second language studies in children. More research is needed to be done on child SLA with studies on different approaches and with different research designs.

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