

In these activities, you will analyse how children learn new concepts and how this relates to acquiring new language.

Key terminology:

egocentrism

object permanence

spatial adjective

active learner

Egocentrism and object permanence

A very young child thinks that he/she is the centre of the universe and views other objects only in relation to themselves. This stage is called **egocentrism**.

In a game of peek-a-boo, the child thinks if she can't see the caregiver, the caregiver is not there. So when the caregiver reappears, it's a surprise. Similarly, children sometimes think that if they shut their eyes so they can't see, this will cause other people to be unable to see them.

'During the earliest stages the child perceives things like a solipsist who is unaware of himself as subject and is familiar only with his own actions.' Jean Piaget



Children eventually begin to realise that that other things have an independent existence from them, and thus become less egocentric.

1. At what age approximately do you think this is?
2. At this time there is a massive growth in vocabulary. Why do you think this is?

Children begin to understand the concept of **object permanence** when they realise that an object is still there, even when it is no longer in sight. This can be seen as linking with the lexical growth from around three years old, as well as the developing ability to differ between pronouns like 'I', 'me' and 'you'.

Jean Piaget was interested in egocentrism and object permanence, as part of his research into how children acquire language. Piaget believed that children's language acquisition is connected to their developing understanding of the world. He developed **cognitive theory**, which contends that as the mind and understanding develops, language follows.

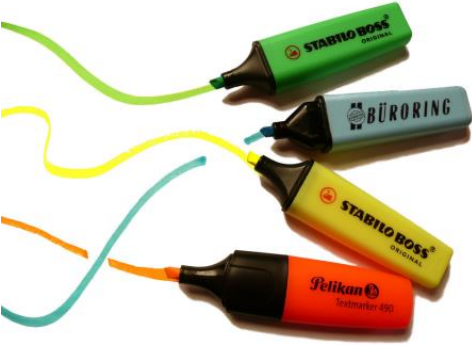
Now test how this idea would work in practice.

Activity

Work in pairs. Student A has the handout with words and images, and must keep it hidden from Student B. Student A should explain each word on the handout to Student B, without using the word itself. Student B has to guess what the word is.



wide



thick



thin



narrow

Reflection

How did Student A explain the concepts of 'wide', 'thick', etc, to Student B, without using the words themselves? Once you had identified one concept, was it easier to identify another? Can you think of any similar examples that might be difficult to explain?

Spatial adjectives

A spatial adjective is a word relating to the space, size, shape or position of something. The four words you have just been working on are all spatial adjectives.

Eve Clark (1979) found that common adjectives such as 'nice', 'good' and 'bad' are often among children's first 50 words, but spatial adjectives such as 'wide' or 'narrow' are acquired later.

Piaget says that we learn concepts, and then we learn the words to describe these concepts. Piaget believed that acquiring language comes as understanding of the world develops. So, a child will not understand something by learning the word for it, but by experiencing it and then realising it has a name. Children are **active learners** who want to discover their environment. Their language acquisition reflects this.

'Children have real understanding only of that which they invent themselves, and each time that we try to teach them too quickly, we keep them from reinventing it themselves.' **Jean Piaget (1896-1980)**

- Using Piaget's ideas, what reasons can you give for the adjectives that children typically use early on in their development?
- Why do you think children find spatial adjectives more difficult to understand and use?
- How far do you agree with Piaget's statement? Discuss your ideas with others.