

Evaluating theories of spoken language acquisition

In the exam you will be expected to **evaluate** the classic theories of spoken language acquisition.

But what exactly does evaluation involve? Consider the statement ‘to what extent do you agree with the idea that apples are better than oranges.’

In the box below consider what arguments could be made to support the statement.

Yes, apples are better than oranges because...

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What possible arguments can be made to counter the given statement?

However, oranges might be considered better than apples because...

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Evaluation means assessing the credibility of an idea. A top mark will involve you being able to evaluate and challenge different theories of explaining spoken language development.

The main theories

The main theories which attempt to explain the process of the acquisition of language are:

- Imitation/behaviourism (Skinner)
- Innateness/nativism (Chomsky)
- Social interaction (Bruner, Vygotsky)
- Cognitive approach (Piaget)
- Usage based approach (Tomasello et al)

Each of these theories is sophisticated and important. However it is possible to challenge each of them using the range of research you have covered in your studies.

Complete the table on the next page to provide an overview of the ideas which support and those which counter the main theories.

	Brief summary of the theory	Supporting evidence	Evidence which challenges the theory
Imitation/behaviourism (Skinner)	Children are born with no language ability. The principal method of learning to speak is by imitating adult speakers. Children learn to speak via a process of 'operant conditioning'. This is learning through a system of rewards and punishments.	Katherine Nelson's research. Also, where do accents come from?	Why do virtuous errors occur?
Innateness/nativism (Chomsky)	Directly refuted Skinner by saying that children are born with an innate ability for processing grammar. This is a universal feature of the human brain and connects to Chomsky's idea of a universal grammar.	Berko's Wug test. Did any adult ever say 'sheeps' or 'holded'?	What do the cases of Genie and Jim reveal?
Social interaction (Bruner, Vygotsky)	Chomsky's approach overlooks the need for interaction (consider Jim's situation). Children can only learn through interaction with caregivers in structured conversations. Inspired by Vygotsky's concept of 'scaffolding' children's learning.	Kaye's research into caregiver speech, Jim and Genie.	How are children spoken to in some tribes in Samoa and Papua New Guinea?
Cognition (Piaget)	Children can only learn to speak once they comprehend object permanence. They can then label objects and give them attributes.	Nelson's research.	What would Chomsky say?
Usage based approach (Tomasello et al)	Children learn to string sentences together by reusing parts of sentences they have heard. For example, a child may hear 'Let's go outside' and can then say 'Let's go there/ upstairs/ to the park,' etc.	Could a child in the two-word stage sing 'The wheels on the bus?'	Again, what might Chomsky say?