

Syntax Struggles: A Case Study of English as Second Language Acquisition in a 6-Year-Old Child

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ABSTRACT

This study investigates the second language acquisition of Alesha, a 6-year-old girl. Despite mastering her mother tongue, Indonesian, Alesha has been exposed to English since a young age through interactions with her parents and media. The study focuses on Alesha's ability of her second language in daily contexts, particularly in interactions with her mother. Employing a qualitative descriptive approach, the research aims to comprehend phenomena by providing detailed descriptions and interpreting their meanings, without using numbers or statistics. Data collection involves interviews, where conversations between the mother and child are recorded, with the researcher noting relevant information. Findings reveal that although Alesha can communicate in English, there are syntactic constraints evident in her sentence patterns, particularly regarding the use of auxiliary verbs and distinguishing between plural and singular nouns. These findings align with observations that Alesha's exposure to her second language is inconsistent. The article highlights the importance of consistency in second language learning patterns for children, whether through parental involvement or media exposure. Research on Alesha is beneficial for parents, language educators, and researchers in understanding children's language development and designing more effective teaching strategies. Furthermore, those interested in researching the same topic are advised to conduct a research with subjects of the same age as Alesha, as well as analysis with other related variables, for a better understanding of second language acquisition in 6-year-old children.

Keywords: *Children Acquiring; Second Languge Acquisition; Syntactic Constraints.*

INTRODUCTION

Second language acquisition in children is the process through which they learn a second language after already acquiring their native language. This process occurs through various means, including social interaction with others, exposure to bilingual environments, formal education, media influence and parental support. While children have a natural ability to acquire a second language quickly, the speed and success of language acquisition can vary depending on individual factors such as interest, motivation, and aptitude, as well as environmental factors such as opportunities for

practice and exposure to the second language. This is consistent with the opinion of American Linguist Krashen (1981) that states a positive emotions, motivation and relaxed atmosphere might promote the learning process, thus make learning less difficult.

According to Ortega (2014), second language acquisition (SLA) is the scholarly field of inquiry that investigates the human capacity to learn languages other than the first during late childhood, adolescence, or adulthood, and once the first language or languages have been acquired. It studies a wide variety of complex influences and phenomena that contribute to the puzzling range of possible outcomes when learning an additional language in various contexts. This aligns with Loewen (2020), who explains that in the context of language learning, the term "second language" refers to any language other than one's first language. In many cases, it is evident what a learner's second language is because they began learning it after their first language was already well-established. This indicates that "second language" typically refers to a language learned after one has mastered their first language.

There are many factors that influence the speed at which a child acquires their second language. Parental support is the most commonly found factor contributing to the success of children's second language acquisition. As mentioned by Dong et al. (2022), the home literacy environment (HLE) significantly impacts children's learning of English as a second language (ESL), but the influence varies. Active parental involvement in teaching literacy-such as reading with the child and teaching them how to read and write-has a stronger effect on children's English ability compared to merely having positive beliefs or providing learning materials at home. This is supported by Efrizah et al. (2024), who found that parents utilize diverse methods to instruct their children to improve their English vocabulary, ranging from vocabulary assessments to emphasizing verbal fluency.

Moreover, Istighfaroh et al. (2023) elucidate the dynamics of parental language policy concerning children's language acquisition, particularly among foreign families. Their findings emphasize the significance of parental literacy and socialization in the home, indicating that these characteristics can enhance the efficacy of foreign language instruction for children. This study provides a significant resource for Indonesian families, educators, and school stakeholders to enhance language acquisition practices for early learners. Similarly, Al-Jarf (2021) discovered that children below six years of age utilize iPads to acquire fundamental language skills, including the alphabet and arithmetic, especially in English. However, older children predominantly engage with the gadget for enjoyment, indicating that while interactive applications improve early language acquisition through compelling multimedia, the advantages may wane as children mature and gravitate towards non-educational material.

Consistency is crucial in second language acquisition. Consistent exposure to the second language allows children to continually practice their language skills and strengthen their understanding of the language. Through consistent interaction with the second language-whether through social interactions, bilingual environments, or media-children have more opportunities to practice, comprehend, and use the language, which

supports the process of second language acquisition. This is in line with Caldwell-Harris (2023), who notes that when children are exposed to two languages at home and in the community, they tend to learn both languages similarly to how they acquire their first language, through immersion. Yang (2023) analyzes the impact of early second language learning, demonstrating its advantages for children's development. The results indicate that bilingual education promotes substantial psychological and biological benefits, enhancing comprehension of dual language acquisition.

Recently, a study conducted by Susanti et al. (2024) found that consistently watching English-language music videos is an effective method for enhancing one's understanding and use of the language. These songs convey profound messages and incorporate artistic elements like rhythm, melody, and emotional expression. Regular engagement with these videos can significantly improve an individual's psycholinguistic abilities, aiding in better comprehension and utilization of English. Language acquisition in young learners can be significantly enhanced through engaging tools and supportive environments. For instance, Genelza (2024) recognizes YouTube Kids as a valuable resource for English language acquisition, providing entertaining educational content that fosters learning. However, he emphasizes the necessity for parental and teacher oversight to ensure content quality and to prevent exposure to incorrect grammar and pronunciation. Similarly, Yokutkhon (2024) highlights the importance of a supportive environment and meaningful interactions in successful second language acquisition (SLA), suggesting that these elements are crucial for effective language learning.

Hummel (2021) further elucidates the innate capacity of younger children to absorb languages more spontaneously, noting that they are more likely to achieve native-like fluency when immersed in authentic language-use situations. She discusses the Critical Period Hypothesis, which posits an optimal timeframe for language acquisition that diminishes with age. Hummel also emphasizes the roles of play, social engagement, and context-rich experiences in promoting children's language development. This development includes improvements in understanding grammatical morphemes and manipulating sentence structures, allowing children to construct more complex statements. Notably, Yufrizal (2023) observes that children acquire negative and interrogative forms in a similar order, showcasing their ability to navigate various grammatical structures as they progress in their language learning journey.

Despite the benefits of consistent exposure and practice in second language acquisition, challenges often emerge, particularly in mastering syntax. These challenges encompass children's difficulties in comprehending and applying diverse syntax rules, forming grammatically accurate and meaningful sentences, and grasping the connections between sentences in longer texts. It is vital to recognize and tackle these obstacles through targeted practice and appropriate support in second language learning. Hassan (2023) asserts that "children's acquisition of complex English syntax as a second language is considerably affected by multiple factors, including age, the quality and quantity of linguistic input, and cognitive abilities." The interaction of these variables influences both their ability to comprehend intricate grammatical structures and their

overall language development. This critical evaluation emphasizes the significance of these characteristics in promoting efficient language acquisition in children.

The two studies discussed highlight different constraints in second language acquisition. The first study conducted by Rajabi (2022) found that children emphasize that functional morphology, such as verb forms and subject-verb agreement, poses the greatest difficulty, while syntax and semantics tend to be comparatively easier. In contrast, the study conducted by Abduljawad (2020) on English as a second language learners in Saudi Arabia reveals that the primary barrier lies in the syntax-Information Structure interface. Despite being able to produce grammatically correct sentences, learners often struggle to organize information contextually within sentences, resulting in less comprehensible utterances in conversational contexts. Jensen and Westergaard (2023) discovered that "both lexical and syntactic similarities influence cross-linguistic interaction," suggesting that past knowledge significantly affects third language (L3) acquisition. These differences underscore the specific challenges faced by learners based on their first language background and learning environment.

Furthermore, Xie and Yeung (2022) discovered that children's second language vocabulary, syntactic awareness, and reading comprehension are interconnected, with vocabulary serving as a predictor for the development of both syntactic awareness and reading comprehension. Moreover, reading comprehension enhanced vocabulary acquisition and forecasted the advancement of syntactic awareness, especially among Grade 4 pupils. These findings underscore the significance of incorporating these linguistic competencies into teaching methodologies for young learners. Similarly, Muhibatun-Asroriyah and Irela (2023) contend that "the environment significantly influences second language acquisition in children aged 1.5 years," emphasizing the importance of interactive learning experiences and emotional regulation in promoting language development.

Unsworth (2023) examines the function of structural priming in cross-linguistic influence, positing that "between-language priming emerges from previous linguistic exposure and common syntactic representations." The research indicated that bilingual children exhibit enduring effects of between-language priming, contingent upon skill, although within-language priming was generally more pronounced. Lastly, Silvey et al. (2021) examine the role of early linguistic input on children's language outcomes, demonstrating that its effects vary for vocabulary and grammar. Children whose parents offered varied linguistic input at both 14 and 30 months exhibited superior vocabulary results, but those whose parents progressively enhanced syntactic complexity demonstrated advanced syntax development. This study emphasizes the necessity for customized strategies to facilitate children's language development, contingent upon the particular nature and timing of parental input.

Additionally, in early childhood, the age range is typically 3 to 6 years old, syntax difficulties may present a significant hurdle in second language acquisition. Despite children's remarkable language absorption capabilities, they may encounter struggles in understanding and utilizing complex syntactic rules. For example, they might find it challenging to comprehend sentence structures differing from their first language or

encounter difficulty in constructing grammatically coherent sentences in the second language acquisition. Second language learners are thus the most likely agents of fundamental syntactic change. In short, the resilience of syntactic phenomena cannot rely exclusively on structural aspects. It results from an interaction of syntactic and developmental factors, defined by grammatical constraint, acquisition principles, and processing demands Rivera et al. (2023).

Based on the background provided above, the research article is titled “ Syntax Struggles : A case study of english as second language acquisition in a 6-year-old child”. The discussion will emphasize the hurdles of acquiring a second language in a 6-year-old child, who generally obtains her second language through parental involvement in communication and by engaging with ESL-related books and media. However, the focus of this research is to examine whether there are syntactic struggles faced by the child of this age in acquiring her second language.

METHOD

This study employs a qualitative descriptive approach to comprehend phenomena by providing detailed descriptions and interpreting their meanings, without using numbers or statistics. This aligns with Saidah (2024), who used a qualitative descriptive approach to examine the efficacy of English songs as a tool for second language acquisition in Indonesian infants. The study demonstrates that toddlers acquire vocabulary through repetitive exposure to English songs, learn accurate pronunciation by singing, and reinforce their comprehension of words through associated physical motions.

Data collection involves interviews, where conversations between a mother and child are recorded, with the researcher recording and noting relevant information. The research subject is a six-year-old girl named Alesha. Alesha is the first child who has mastered her mother tongue, which is Indonesian, well. Alesha, a 6-year-old child, can already read and write in her first language. At the age of 1, Alesha was exposed to English, albeit not intensively. This exposure came from her parents' use of English and the influence of media such as books and gadgets. By the age of 6, Alesha has become quite accustomed to speaking English in her family environment.

Occasionally, Alesha combines both her first and second languages. Alesha's second language is acquired passively. There are no special English classes to acquire her second language. In analyzing the second language acquisition of Alesha, there will be a conversation between Alesha and her mom. The study is supported by recorded data, subsequently transcribed for analysis. Recordings were made using an audio recorder discreetly to ensure the research subject remained unaware. The obtained data will be analyzed with a focus on the syntactic aspect of the child's second language acquisition.

FINDINGS AND DISCUSSION

Based on the data obtained from English conversations between Alesha and her mother, it was found that Alesha is capable of uttering various expressions such as nouns, adjectives, verbs, phrases, and simple sentences in the form of questions and commands. Her ability to express certain vocabulary stems from frequently hearing her parents say the same things repeatedly. Although Alesha may not fully grasp the grammar yet, she can use and understand the meaning of the utterances. In general, children acquire language skills through language sounds he heard around them or ruled accidental. Proficiency evolves continuously in accordance with the development of intelligence and socio-cultural backgrounds that make it up Pratiwi et al. (2023). Additionally, Alesha can describe things, albeit with a mixture of her first language. This tendency repeats if Alesha feels unsure about the meaning of the words in her second language.

Table 1 . Vocabularies Acquisition

No	Noun	Adjective	Verb	Phrase
1	Books	Happy	Ask	My friend
2	Pen	Angry	Buy	Ice cream
3	Fruit	Sad	Go	One day
4	Shoe	Cute	Drink	Help me
5	Rabbit	Sweet	Eat	Pencil case
6	Bedroom	Fat	Tell	Come here
7	Monkey	Green	Like	Stand up
8	Banana	Crispy	Have	Sit down
9	Hospital	Cool	Want	Watch out
10	Daddy	Beautiful	Sleep	Take off
11	Backpack	Best	Close	Potato fried

Table. 1 shows vocabularies in conversation between Alesha and her mother, there are several vocabulary items that Alesha is able to express. These include a variety of words, including nouns, adjectives, verbs, and some phrases. A research conducted by Nuraini et al., (2024) in linw with this study that found children at the age of 3 are already capable of acquiring several types of words in English. Typically, they can already articulate verbs, nouns, numerals, adjectives, and adverbs. This ability reflects their early development in English during the preschool years. This happened with Alesha that when she was in preschool years, Alesha and her mom did a stimuli conversation of English. Alesha and her mother understanding each other's context of speech. This is because Alesha frequently communicates in English within her family environment. The length of exposure to English, and richness of the child's English environment were significant predictors of variation in children's L2 outcomes. However, on balance, childinternal factors explained more of the variance in outcomes than child-external factors Paradis (2011).

In this case, when alesha used the noun "books" indicated plural noun, but sometimes Alesha also uses a plural noun to express singular one. This also happen with phrase. Alesha can use some phrases in her utterances, but sometimes the construction

of a phrase is incorrect, like the phrase "potato fried". However, the challenge faced by Alesha often lies in the syntax of sentences. Alesha has not fully distinguished the use of phrases, singular and plural nouns, as well as verbs and their auxiliaries. This challenge becomes even more evident in longer utterances, such as sentences.

Table 2. Sentences Acquisition

No.	Sentence
1	I don't know
2	You can ask me
3	Open the door
4	Brother, don't touch my book
5	I don't have pet
6	My daddy is so cool
7	This is my elbow
8	My hobby <u>its</u> swimming
9	I am six years old
10	I read a book animal
11	The <u>doctors</u> check my brother

Table. 2 shows several sentences uttered by Alesha. From the data above, it can be observed that the sentences spoken by Alesha are syntactically correct. This is consistent with findings by Dewi (2021) from similar research on children of Alesha's age, which demonstrates her use of English as evidence that she acquires knowledge of the language from the media, as she does it repeatedly. This aligns with the behaviorist theory outlined in the introduction, suggesting that language acquisition can occur through habit or practice. However, the underlined words above appear to be incorrect in the use of auxiliary verbs, personal pronouns, and phrase forms. To further investigate the syntactic constraints faced by Alesha, the following will display Alesha's utterances during the conversation process with her mother. There are several recorded moments in the conversation between Alesha nad her mom, here is the data.

First Moment (Struggle with Auxiliary Verb and Plural & Singular Noun usage)

Mom : Alesha how old are you ?

Child : I am six years old.

Mom : Do you have a hobby ?

Child : My *hobbies* its *Swimming*.

In this conversation, Alesha sometimes confuses the sound of "its" and "is," occasionally using them interchangeably in the same sentence context. Nevertheless, Alesha and her mother understand the meaning and intention behind the sentences uttered by Alesha. The correct sentence should be "My hobby is swimming" because "hobby" is a singular noun that requires the singular verb "is" to link it to the adjective or noun phrase. Alesha may not fully understand the difference between "hobby" and "hobbies".

In this case, "swimming" is the activity mentioned as the hobby, so using "is" conforms to the correct grammar rule. The error in the sentence may stem from the use

of the plural verb "are" (in "hobbies"), which does not match the singular noun "hobby." Therefore, it needs to be corrected to adhere to proper grammar. In short, when Alesha speaks, she sometimes struggles to form sentences that combine nouns and verbs. She speaks unconsciously, and sometimes her utterances are correct, sometimes they are incorrect.

Second Moment (Sometimes she uses auxiliary verbs correctly)

Mom : Alesha why do you like Miss Nia ?

Child : Because, She not angry.

Mom : Why do you like Mahira ?

Child : Because, She is so cute.

In second moment shows the syntactic error in Alesha's speech lies in the incorrect placement of the negation "not." In English, when negating a verb, the adverb "not" typically comes after the auxiliary verb or the verb "to be." In the given sentence "Because, She not angry," the negation "not" should follow the verb "is." Therefore, the corrected sentence would be: "Because she is not angry".

However, when her mother asked the same question context to a different object, Alesha could answer correctly. The sentence "She is so cute" is grammatically correct in English. In this sentence, the subject is "She," which means "Mahira, her girl friend". The verb "is" is used to state the condition or characteristic of the subject, which in this case is "cute." The addition of "so" here indicates a degree or extent, so the overall meaning of the sentence is "She is very cute. Alesha's awareness of using auxiliary verbs is not yet strong. While her parents occasionally provide explanations, the practical application doesn't always align with the theoretical understanding. This might also be influenced by the fact that English has two sentence formations, where there's a distinction between nominal and verbal sentences. This could be a contributing factors to her difficulties.

Third Moment (Sentence with Complex Syntax: Tenses & Phrase)

Mom : Echa, Tell ummi what echa did at the library ?

Child : Oneday, I go to library. I want to read, I read a book animals and I am, so love it.

The sentences uttered by Alesha in this data are quite lengthy and indicate a fairly complex syntax. There are several errors that need to be corrected to make it clearer and grammatically correct. Firstly, the phrase "Oneday, I go to library." should be written as "One day, I went to the library." by adding the word "One" to denote time correctly and changing the word "go" to "went" because the sentence refers to a past event. These challenges can be understood because in Alesha's first language, there are no changes in verbs like in English, where "go" becomes "went" in the past tense.

In line with Ayoola's research (2023) on the acquisition of verb participle forms in English by nursery and primary school pupils who speak Yoruba in Nigeria, the findings indicate that the majority of students have limited understanding of the correct usage of

participle forms. Most instances of misuse stem from confusion between various inflectional forms such as -ing, -ed, and -en. This highlights variability in students' ability to use inflectional morphemes, particularly in the context of regular and irregular verbs in English. This indicates that children in Nigeria who are the same age as Alesha are experiencing similar difficulties.

Secondly, the phrase "a book animals" should be changed to "a book about animals" or "an animal book" to provide a more accurate structure. Lastly, in the sentence "I am, so love it.", is needed to add an additional verb to make the sentence complete and clear. So, the phrase can be changed to "I love it so much" or "I am loving it" to express the feeling correctly. Alesha may encounter several challenges in using phrases in English. She may have limited vocabulary, which affects the variety of phrases she use. Additionally, she may struggle to understand the meanings of complex or idiomatic phrases and to form grammatically correct phrases such us noun phrase, adjective phrase and phrsal verb. Limited expressive abilities may also impact her ability to use phrases effectively in conversation.

Fourth Moment (Giving a Short Narrative)

Mom : Alesha, would you like to introduce yourself in English, please !

Child : My name its Alesha. I am 6 years old. I have brother, his name is Raziq Abqari. I have toys. The toys its Barbie. I so very like.

In this moment, the conversation shows that Alesha is aksed to introduce herself in English. The utterance contains several syntactic errors that need to be corrected to clarify their meaning. Firstly, in the expression "My name its Alesha.", the use of "its" is incorrect; it should be replaced with "is" to properly introduce oneself. Next, in the sentence "I have brother, his name is Raziq Abqari.", an article "a" should be added before "brother" to specify that she has one brother. Additionally, a comma is needed after "brother" to properly structure the sentence. Lastly, in the sentence "The toys its Barbie.", "its" should be replaced with "are" because "toys" is plural, not singular. Adding "are" will make the sentence syntactically correct.

Furthermore, the phrase "I so very like" can be improved to "I like it very much" to convey preferences more clearly and succinctly. By making these corrections, the narrative will become smoother and easier to understand for the reader. Alesha's difficulty in complex syntax might stem from her age of six and her still developing proficiency in English. Her first language is Indonesian, which has different syntactic structures compared to English. Additionally, her lack of understanding of English grammar rules also impacts her ability.

Fifth Moment (Giving a brief description)

Mom : Alesha, Please tell me story, about animal in jungle.

Child : One day, everything animals jalan-jalan, because he want to eat. The elephanth eat a banana, and monkey . the rabbit eat carrot, the turtle eat the strawberry, everthing animals likes the food eat (to eat) , he want to eat again.

Apparently, Alesha is capable of giving brief descriptive of an object, and her mother comprehends her speech. However, there are some complex syntactic struggles evident in the simple paragraph spoken by Alesha. The paragraph displays several syntactical errors. Firstly, there's a subject-verb disagreement with "everything animals," which should be corrected to "all the animals." Secondly, there's a tense inconsistency with "jalan-jalan" (walking), which should align with the overall tense of the paragraph, perhaps as "walking" or "were walking". Alesha didn't know the meaning of "jalan-jalan" so she combined her first language. Similar cases often occur in Alesha's speech when she encounters difficulties in understanding the meaning. Thirdly, there's a pronoun ambiguity with "he" in "because he want to eat," which doesn't specify which animal it refers to. Additionally, articles are missing before "elepanth" and "strawberry," and there are spelling mistakes with "elepanth" (elephant) and "strawberry" (strawberry). The structure lacks parallelism, notably with "and monkey," disrupting the pattern of "eat a banana," "eat carrot," and "eat strawberry." Lastly, "likes the food eat" is grammatically incorrect. This expression can be revised to "likes to eat the food" or "enjoys eating the food" to make it more grammatical.

CONCLUSION

Alesha, a 6-year-old, she is proficient in her mother tongue, Indonesian. She can read and write in Indonesian while still learning in English. At 1 year old, she was exposed to English, mainly through her parents and media. By age 6, Alesha is comfortable speaking English at home, occasionally mixing it with Indonesian. Her English is acquired passively, without formal classes, although her parents provide some practice. A study showed that Alesha and her mother can understand each other's daily language, but Alesha faces syntactic challenges in English, notably with auxiliary verbs and distinguishing plural/singular nouns. Longer utterances pose difficulties, including with phrases, vocabulary, and tenses. This may be due to inconsistent exposure to English. The study suggests that consistent learning methods, like parental involvement and media exposure, are key for effective second language acquisition in children, especially for Alesha. Further research with similar age groups and related variables is recommended for a better understanding.

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