

AN ANALYSIS OF LANGUAGE ACQUISITION IN A 3-YEAR-OLD: PHONOLOGY, MORPHOLOGY, AND SEMANTICS

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Abstract

Language acquisition is a profound growth path that takes place early in childhood, as children are acquiring the complex systems of their first language. This research discusses first language acquisition in three-year-old children, specifically examining aspects of phonology, morphology and semantics. The study aims to find out how children develop as they acquire their first language and to analyze the linguistic features mastered by three-year-olds based on these aspects. A descriptive-qualitative method was used to analyze the data, which was collected through video recordings and observations of a three-year-old participant named Galih Alfarizky. Chomsky's (1965) theory of competence and performance was used as the main framework for data analysis. Based on the results of the study, Galih's language acquisition is significantly influenced by his environment and is well developed in all three linguistic features. Although there are some phoneme errors and morphological simplifications, which are common in children of his age, his overall communication ability shows a strong and developed understanding of language. This suggests that his linguistic development is normal for a three-year-old, with continued refinement as he gets older.

Keywords: First language acquisition, Phonology, Morphology, Semantic

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INTRODUCTION

Human language is an extraordinarily complex system. Children can master their first language in a few years without conscious effort from their parents or formal education. As Noam Chomsky (as cited in Makepeace, 2010) explains in the documentary *We Still Live Here - Âs Nutayuneân*, "Language is not just words. It is culture, tradition, community unity, history that shapes what that community is. All of that

is embodied in language.". According to Chomsky (1965), first language acquisition involves two crucial phases: competence and performance. Competence refers to the unconscious and internalized mastery of the basic grammar of a language, including phonology, morphology, syntax, and semantics. This is the abstract knowledge possessed by speakers. Performance, on the other hand, is the actual use of this linguistic knowledge in real-world communication, such as speaking and understanding.

This study aims to analyze the language acquisition process in three-year-old children, focusing on the development of their phonological, morphological, and semantic aspects. George Yule (1996) defines phonology as the study of the sound system of a language and its role in creating meaning, exploring how sounds in a language are organized and how these sounds form linguistic units to convey meaning. Additionally, morphology, as explained by Katamba and Stonham (2006), is a branch of linguistics that studies the internal structure of words and the rules governing word formation. Finally, Kreidler (1998) explains that semantics is the systematic study of meaning, with linguistic semantics specifically investigating how language organizes and expresses meaning. By examining these three core linguistic aspects (phonology, morphology, and semantics) within the context of natural language use, this study aims to provide insights into the process of language acquisition at this critical stage of development and the innate mechanisms underlying linguistic mastery. It is hoped that the findings of this study will provide a more comprehensive understanding of the stages and characteristics of language acquisition in the Indonesian child population, serving as a basis for the development of more effective language education interventions. This article will discuss the research methodology used, data analysis from child words or utterances, findings, discussion, and conclusions.

METHODOLOGY

This study employs a descriptive-qualitative research methodology. The participant in this study is a three-year-old child named Galih Alfarizky. Galih has a twin brother who is often called *Babang*, while Galih himself is called *Dedek*. However, this study will exclusively focus on analyzing Dedek's (Galih) language acquisition. Galih was born to a mother of Sundanese ethnicity, but he and his family communicate in Bahasa Indonesia on a daily basis. Like other children his age, Galih is an active child, enjoys watching trains, playing with his friends, and is curious about new things. According to Moleong (2005), descriptive qualitative research focuses on analyzing data collected in the form of words and videos rather than numerical data. To comprehensively understand a child's linguistic development, it is crucial to examine the multifaceted nature of language acquisition. As Luhur et al. (2024) articulate, "The acquisition of language involves multiple cognitive and linguistic processes. In this process, children learn the sound system of their language, how words are used to represent meaning, and how words can be combined to form sentences." Guided by this comprehensive view of language acquisition, this research aims to describe and analyze the phonological, morphological, and semantic aspects of language acquisition in Galih

Alfarizky, including any observed phoneme errors and their relation to meaning within these linguistic domains.

Data will be primarily collected through video recordings of the child's natural conversations. During the recording process, observation and note-taking techniques will be utilized to capture relevant contextual information, paying special attention to the influence of adult speech, peer interactions, and the general environment on Galih's language development. Subsequently, all video recordings will be thoroughly transcribed. The transcribed data will then be analyzed based on established theories of phonology, morphology, and semantic acquisition.

DATA FINDING AND DISCUSSION

In this section, the researchers observed and analyzed the first language acquisition in the form of phonology, morphology and semantics. In the form of phonology, the researchers found some of Galih's utterances as follows :

Table 1. List Utterances of Phonology

No.	Utterances	Meaning	Translate
1.	Pink	Pink	Pink
2.	Pipis	Pipis	Pee
3.	Dedek	Dedek	Dedek
4.	Bebek	Bebek	Duck
5.	Emoo	(Suara Sapi) Moo	Moo
6.	Meong	(Suara Kucing) Meong	Meong
7.	Ooo	(Suara Ayam) Ooo	Ooo
8.	Wek Wek	(Suara Bebek) Wek Wek	Wek Wek
9.	Tut tut tut	(Suara Kereta Api) Tut Tut Tut	Tut Tut Tut
10.	He'em	Iya/Benar	Yes

Based on phonological analysis, particularly in terms of phoneme mastery, Galih has mastered the vowels [a], [i], [u], [e], [o] and several consonants such as [p], [d], [b], [w], [s], [m], [n], [t], [u]. This evolving mastery reflects Galih's developing phonological competence, which shows his knowledge of the Indonesian sound system has been integrated. This is evident from his ability to pronounce words such as

Pink, *Pipis*, *Dedek*, *Bebek*, and *Moo* with clear vowels. He is also able to produce various phonemes and can distinguish the meanings of the words he pronounces, as seen from his ability to distinguish *Pipis* (*pee*) from *Bebek* (*duck*). Galih also masters most consonants. Based on the data, he is able to pronounce initial consonants such as /p/ in *Pink* and *Pipis*, /d/ in *Dedek*, /b/ in *Bebek*, /m/ in *Moo* and *Meong*, and /t/ in *Tut tut tut*. He also demonstrates mastery of final consonants in words such as *Pink* and *Meong*. Additionally, Galih demonstrates the ability to imitate and produce onomatopoeic sounds involving the repetition of syllables or simple phoneme combinations, such as *Moo* (the sound of a cow), *Meong* (the sound of a cat), *Ooo* (the sound of a chicken), *Wek Wek* (the sound of a duck), and *Tut tut tut* (the sound of a train). This indicates good articulation coordination to produce sound sequences. Patricia K. Kuhl (2004) highlights that infants utilize computational strategies to detect statistical and prosodic patterns in language input, a crucial mechanism that leads to the discovery and subsequent production of phonemes and words.

From the available data, it is evident that Galih is able to pronounce the words in the table well. The number of phonemes is still not complete and perfect due to the growth of his canine teeth. Factors such as an incomplete set of teeth and tongue development, as mentioned earlier, particularly affect its phonological performance, leading to variations in the production of certain more complex phonemes. However, despite the limitations of this performance, the underlying competencies continue to evolve.

In the form of morphology

Table 2. List Words of Morphology

No.	Words	Meaning	Translate
1.	Telon	Telur	Eggs
2.	Ican	Ikan	fish
3.	Kolah	Sekolah	School
4.	Mam	Makan	Eat
5.	Ereta	Kereta	Train
6.	Nnyah	Punya	Have
7.	Tih	Putih	White
8.	Noh	Disana	There
9.	Tam	Hitam	Black
10.	Tia	Tiga	Three

From a morphological perspective, Galih demonstrates developing mastery of various word types,

primarily focusing on monomorphemic words or root forms. Although his articulation may not yet be completely clear, his consistent use of these words indicates a developing morphological competence, reflecting his internalized knowledge of basic lexical units and their meanings. Examples from his speech, as shown in Table 2, include: *Telon* (egg - noun), *Ican* (fish - noun), *Kolah* (school - noun), *Mam* (eat - verb), *Ereta* (train - noun), *Nnyah* (have - verb), *Tih* (white - adjective), *Noh* (There - adverb), *Tam* (Black - adjective), and *Tia* (Three). The production of these words often involves simplification strategies, such as phoneme reduction or syllable omission, where the meanings still accurately refer to their original forms. This phenomenon directly illustrates Galih's current morphological performance, which is still in the process of mastering the complete phonological and morphological structure of words. Clark (1993) explains that children frequently apply such phonological simplification strategies to longer or more complex words as they construct their morphological systems. This strategy allows them to produce words even though their phonological capacity is not yet fully developed. Even with performance simplifications, Galih's consistent word use reflects his developing morphological competence."Morphological and syntactical knowledge is important for the success of their speech production correctly and understands adult speech" (Rohimajaya & Hamer, 2020, p. 123).

In the form of semantic

Table 3. List Utterances of Semantic

No.	Utterances	Meaning	Translate
1.	Dedek mam iyi	Dedek makan sendiri	Dedek eats by himself
2.	Liat ta api noh	Lihat kereta api disana	Look at the Train Over There
3.	Mat aun	Selamat Ulang Tahun	Happy Birthday
4.	Ntan ntin ya?	Nanti berhentiin ya?	Stop later, okay?
5.	Bang ni aja ni	Abang ini saja ya	Bro, take this, okay?
6.	Tut ke sono	Ikut kesana	Go There
7.	Teteh dede mau ikut kolah	Teteh, adik mau ikut sekolah	Sister, I want to go to school with you
8.	Mamah mau mam	Mamah mau makan	Mom, i want to eat
9.	Di iyis	Di iris	Cut it
10.	Mam ama telon	Makan sama telur	Eat with egg

According to Wagner (2010), “Semantics is the study of how linguistic elements convey meaning. To master the semantics of a language, a child must do three things: first, he must identify the relevant linguistic elements; second, he must identify (and understand) the meanings associated with those elements; and third, he must learn how those forms are connected to meaning” (p. 519). In line with this definition, observations in Table 3 show that Galih has demonstrated this ability. He effectively identifies and uses linguistic elements to express his thoughts and communicate well through his meaningful utterances, indicating a developing semantic competence, his internalized knowledge of how forms are linked to meaning.

Galih's semantic performance is evident in his ability to convey various meanings, such as expressing actions or states in the utterances *Dedek mam iyi* (*Dedek eats by himself*), *Mamah mau mam* (*Mom, i want to eat*), *Di iyis* (*Cut it*), and *Mam ama telon* (*Eat with eggs*). He is also able to convey information about locations and objects through utterances such as *Liat ta api noh* (*Look at the train over there*). Galih's ability to express desires or requests is evident in utterances such as *Ntan ntin ya?* (*Stop later, okay?*), *Teteh dede mau ikut kolah* (*Sister, I want to go to school with you*), *Tut ke sono* (*Go there*), and *Bang ni aja ni* (*Bro, take this, okay?*). In addition, Galih is also able to say conventional phrases or social expressions, such as *Mat aun* (*Happy Birthday*). Overall, Galih is able to communicate effectively. Although there are still some phonemic errors that affect his phonological performance, his strong semantic competence allows him to convey his desires and interact meaningfully through conversation consistently.

CONCLUSION

The findings from this study provide valuable insights into the intricate process of first language acquisition in a three-year-old child, Galih Alfarizky, analyzed through Chomsky's lens of competence and performance. From the data collected, it can be concluded that Galih demonstrates robust communication skills for his age. Linguistically, Galih shows rapid linguistic competence across all domains. Phonologically, Galih is able to pronounce all vowels and a wide range of consonants. He effectively differentiates word meanings and imitates sounds, showing developed articulation coordination. Morphologically, he has mastered a variety of monomorphemic words, including nouns, verbs, adjectives and adverbs, indicating familiarity with a diverse range of word types. His ability to convey complex thoughts and understand discourse is semantically evident. He expresses actions, locations, desires, and social expressions effectively.

However, Galih's linguistic performance still shows developmental aspects. Physiological factors, such as his developing tongue and incomplete canines, cause phonemic errors and word simplifications. Still, his communication is on track for his age, confirming strong, evolving linguistic competence. Future observations anticipate speech improvement as performance aligns with competence.

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