

Academic Reading

READING PASSAGE 1 Questions 1–13

You should spend about 20 minutes on Questions 1–13, which are based on Reading Passage 1 below.

Child language development: the early years

Research shows that children don't learn their native language like little robots who can only notice and copy what they hear. For example, from the first moments of life babies begin to make sounds: they cry, coo and chatter. Although they make sounds that sound very much like words, these sounds have no conventional meaning. This is shown by the fact that deaf babies, who can't hear what others are saying, chatter in the same way.

Children already begin to recognize what their caregivers are saying at an early age. For example, some six-month-olds will regularly glance up at the ceiling light in response to their mother saying 'light'. Actual talking begins sometime between about ten and twenty months of age. Almost invariably, children's first utterances are one word long. Some first words refer to simple interactions with adults, such as 'hi' and 'peekaboo'. Others are names, such as 'Mama' and 'Fido'. Most of the rest are simple nouns, such as 'duck' and 'spoon', adjectives such as 'hot' and 'big', and action verbs such as 'give' and 'push'. And one of the first words is almost always an emphatic 'No'.

The early vocabulary tends to concern things that can be moved around, or that move by themselves in the child's environment. For example, children are less likely to talk about ceilings than about rolling balls. And this early vocabulary refers more often to attributes and actions children can perceive in the outside world, such as shape or movement, than to internal states and feelings, such as pain or ideas.

It is hard to understand what children mean by the words they say. Even though we hear them say 'rabbit' or 'ball', we don't know exactly what these mean to their young users. For example, if a young child says 'rabbit' when he sees a rabbit, he may mean 'tail', or 'animal', or 'white', or even 'runs by'.

The same problem that makes it hard for investigators to find out exactly what children mean probably makes it hard for children themselves to discover these meanings. Even if the helpful mother points out a rabbit to her child, saying 'rabbit', the child still has a big job to do. He has to make up his mind whether the word 'rabbit' means a particular animal (in which case

'rabbit' is a name, like 'Peter Rabbit'), anything that falls within the animal kingdom (in which case 'rabbit' means 'animal'), anything within a particular species (so 'rabbit' means 'rabbit'), or even some property, part, or action of a rabbit (in which case 'rabbit' means 'white', or 'tail', or 'hops'). Because of problems like these, beginners often *under-generalize* the meaning of a word. They may know that the word 'house' refers to small toy buildings, but not that it also refers to large real buildings. They may also *over-generalize* the meaning of other words. They may think that the word 'Daddy' refers to any man, not just their own father.

These overgeneralizations and under-generalizations are common for the first seventy-five or so words the child utters, but very rare after that. At later stages of learning, the child is almost exactly on the mark in using words to refer to the right thing in the world. However, it is important to realize that even the young over-generalizer is surprisingly correct in what he has learned. Though he just about always observes the ground when he sees a rabbit (and hears the word 'rabbit'), because rabbits can't fly and so are nearly always found near the ground, still he virtually never mistakenly learns that 'rabbit' means 'ground', or that 'ground' means 'rabbit'. He just makes the category a bit too broad or narrow at first.

At about the child's second birthday many drastic changes take place. The child's vocabulary begins to increase rapidly, rising to many hundreds of words. Soon he begins to put words together into 'sentences'. Although we can clearly recognize ideas in these first sentences, they hardly sound like adult speech. Generally each one is only two words long, and each of these words is a content word. The function words and morphemes (word parts) are still largely missing, and so these sentences sound like the short ones we use in text messages: 'Throw ball!', 'Daddy shoe', or 'No eat!'. However, despite their simplicity they show evidence of organization. For example, young English speakers will put the doer of the action first, and will say 'Mummy throw' if they want the mother to throw the ball. In fact these short sentences are so clear in meaning that one may wonder why children bother to learn anything more.

Practice Test

Questions 1–7

Do the following statements agree with the information given in Reading Passage 1?

In boxes 1–7 on your answer sheet write

TRUE if the statement agrees with the information

FALSE if the statement contradicts the information

NOT GIVEN if there is no information on this

- 1 Children as young as six months may demonstrate understanding of certain words.
- 2 The ability to understand meanings precedes the ability to express meanings.
- 3 The development of speech in a child under one year of age is an indication of above-average intelligence.
- 4 Young children talk about fixed objects more often than moving objects.
- 5 If young children hurt themselves, they usually try to talk about it.
- 6 When young children say a word, they may be using it in an unusual sense.
- 7 Parents can ensure that children understand a word correctly, by pointing as they say it.

Questions 8–13

Answer the questions below.

Choose **NO MORE THAN TWO WORDS AND/OR A NUMBER** from the passage for each answer.

Write your answers in boxes 8–13 on your answer sheet.

- 8 Which word is given as an example of possible under-generalisation?
- 9 Which word is given as an example of possible over-generalisation?
- 10 When children stop over- and under-generalising, approximately how many words can they say?
- 11 Which word's meaning do young children hardly ever confuse with 'rabbit'?
- 12 What are children's early sentences compared to?
- 13 Which characteristic of children's first simple sentences makes them easy to understand?