

C1 / Video activity: Are we born to speak?

Is language an innate ability or is it something we learn from others?

In a BBC special on language, Stephen Fry tells the story of a French feral child to raise this question.



- Use the word IN CAPITALS at the end of some lines to form a word that fits the gap in the same line.

But how _____, ⁽¹⁾ how automatic is language? Is it **INTRINSICALLY** like eating and sleeping, or is it at some extent a learned skill? It's really a kind of nature versus nurture question, the kind of question that has beguiled and _____ ⁽²⁾ scientists **FASCINATION** and philosophers since time began, and it's not often that nature affords us an opportunity to investigate.

In the midst of the _____ ⁽³⁾ of the French revolution, a **CRAZY** young boy was discovered in the forests of the _____ ⁽⁴⁾ Massif Saint-Trou, one of the wildest and **SOUTHEAST** least inhabited regions in Europe. It appeared that the boy had been living alone and like an animal for some years. Feral children have fascinated philosophers for centuries, offering a window into human nature _____ ⁽⁵⁾ by society **TAINT** structures, and in doing so, revealing how language might be formed. Finding a real-life feral child was nothing short of sensational. He was captured and ended up in Paris under the care of _____ ⁽⁶⁾ doctor Jean Marc Itard, who was **INNOVATE** working at the recently established Institute for Deaf-Mutes. The boy, whom they named Victor, having experienced almost nothing of society and no education, was considered something of a blank slate. Most _____ ⁽⁷⁾ he was unable to **SIGNIFY** speak, suggesting that language is not just _____, ⁽⁸⁾ **GENE** it needs to be learned from others.

For the next five years, Itard _____⁽⁹⁾ himself to Victor. He taught him how to eat, how to use the toilet, how to restrain his animal _____,⁽¹⁰⁾ in particular with the female inmates once he reached puberty; and of course, how to speak French.

DEVOTION

Itard : Victor ... Victor. Va cherchez la plume. Va cherchez la plume.

Victor's vocal cords, like any muscle _____⁽¹¹⁾ to exercise needed training, and just as a baby learns to babble, so Victor started to learn to articulate sounds.

URGENCY

Despite remaining in Itard's care until his death aged 42, Victor never learned to talk. The reasons why were never established. Perhaps it was a congenital defect, or _____⁽¹²⁾ trauma ... or perhaps Victor simply started to learn too late.

USE

The trouble is cases like Victor make for messy _____⁽¹³⁾ study, because by definition, with all feral children, their backgrounds are unclear. What seems certain is there's a window for language acquisition which closes round about early puberty, say. After that it's much more difficult to _____⁽¹⁴⁾ language. Of course we do, as we often learn foreign languages, but as most of us can testify, it becomes a lot more difficult as the brain loses _____.⁽¹⁵⁾ One thing though is certain, by the age of five, most of us will have acquired the gift of language.

PSYCHOLOGY

SCIENCE

ACQUISITION

PLASTIC