

THE STUDY OF FIRST LANGUAGE ACQUISITION ON DEAF-BLINDNESS CHILDREN IN THE MOVIE ENTITLED *BLACK*

Luh Putu Suyasinta Yanti, I Made Netra, Gede Primahadi Wijaya Rajeg
suyasintayanti@gmail.com
English Department, Faculty of Humanities, Udayana University

ABSTRACT

The study is concerned with analyzing the first language acquisition passed by Michele McNally as a deaf-blind child in the movie *Black*, which Sanjay Leela Bhansali directed in 2005. The aim of this study investigated the stages of the first language acquisition process were undergone by Michele McNally as a deaf-blind child. This study, using the language acquisition process theory by Aitchison (2011) and theory by Goldin-Meadow (2003) which studied the language acquisition process on deaf-blind children. The data source is taken from the movie itself and it is focused on utterances and non-verbal signs by using qualitative research methods since it involved observation and documentation. The result found that the first language acquisition passed by a deaf-blind child is different from normal children because they pass through the stage of Manual Babbling, Pointing Gesture, and Iconic Gesture which normal children did not pass.

Keywords: First Language Acquisition, Language Acquisition Process, Deaf-blind Child

ABSTRAK

Penelitian ini berkaitan dengan menganalisis pemerolehan bahasa pertama yang dilalui oleh Michele McNally sebagai anak tuli-butu dalam film Black, yang disutradarai oleh Sanjay Leela Bhansali di tahun 2005. Tujuan dari penelitian ini menyelidiki tahapan dalam proses pemerolehan bahasa pertama yang dialami oleh Michele McNally sebagai anak buta-tuli. Penelitian ini menggunakan teori proses pemerolehan bahasa oleh Aitchison (2011) dan teori oleh Goldin-Meadow (2003) yang mempelajari proses pemerolehan bahasa pada anak-anak buta-tuli. Sumber data diambil dari film itu sendiri dan berfokus pada ujaran dan isyarat non-verbal dengan menggunakan metode penelitian kualitatif karena melibatkan observasi dan dokumentasi. Hasil dari penelitian ini menemukan bahwa pemerolehan bahasa pertama yang dilalui oleh anak tuli-butu berbeda dengan anak-anak normal karena mereka melewati tahapan Babbling Manual, Gestur Menunjuk, Gestur Ikonik yang mana tidak dilalui oleh anak-anak normal.

Kata Kunci: Pemerolehan Bahasa Pertama, Proses Pemerolehan Bahasa Pertama, Anak Tuli-butu

I. INTRODUCTION

Language acquisition is the process that occurs in children's brains when acquiring their first language or mother tongue, which relates to first language acquisition, a language that people acquire when they first get to know the language

(Chomsky, 2006, p. 24). It is an essential part in human life because when humans are born, they cannot speak and need to learn the language for communication in daily life (Clark, 2009, p. 1). In studying the process of language acquisition there two theories with different points of view in

first language acquisition and this is commonly called Behaviorism theory and Nativism theory. Behaviorism theory was purposed by B. F. Skinner (1957) and Nativism theory was proposed by Noam Chomsky (1959).

Theory of behaviorism by Skinner (1957) stated that language is learned from experience. In this theory, the necessary factor in language acquisition is imitation. Children in acquiring the language based on the common process of learning also engage in studying many other phenomena. The theory stated that language acquisition is instinctive and influenced by social influences. Theory of nativism by Chomsky (1959) stated that when humans are born, they have some linguistic knowledge and automatically already have or use grammar innately. Thus, human brains contain an innate mechanism called Universal Grammar (UG) that is the basis for acquiring of languages and an innate device to acquire languages called Language Acquisition Device (LAD) to support them to have language (Chomsky, 1986, p. 3). Therefore, in the first language acquisition process, each child goes through stages in a relatively similar chronological order, starting with pre-language, one-word utterances, two-word utterances, word inflections, question negatives, rare or complex constructions, and to the mature speech stage, where they comprehend language (Aitchison, 2011, p. 68).

However, the language acquisition process is complicated for some children who are born with disabilities, especially deaf-blindness children. Deaf-blindness disability is a combination of visual and hearing impairments that affect the ability of humans to communicate, access all kinds of information, and move around. When children have difficulty acquiring their first language, it could identify that they may be too late to learn their language. That means deaf-blindness children will be passed several different stages from normal children acquiring language (Lenneberg, 1967). According to Goldin-Meadow

(2003), Children with hearing and visual impairment in the language acquisition process maintain several gesture systems. It is also the different stages in acquiring language as deaf-blindness children that help them understand the language and communicate well in daily life. Children can develop their gesture systems only from the movements they learn in the surrounding conversations. The famous movie from India (2005), directed by Sanjay Leela Bhansali, entitled *Black*, has similar cases in first language acquisition on disabilities children. The movie tells the story of the relationship between a deaf-blind young girl named Michele McNally since she was a baby and a teacher who contributed to her life, Debraj Sahai. The movie was chosen because it shows how Michele McNally acquired her first language, which she learned from Debraj Sahai, and how the stages of the first language acquisition process was undergone by Michele McNally as a deaf-blind child.

II. RESEARCH METHODS

This study used two data sources; the primary data source was taken from the famous Indian movie named the *Black* movie directed by Sanjay Leela Bhansali in 2005 and it is downloaded on Layarkaca21.com. The secondary data source is obtained movie transcript from Subslikescript.com. The movie was chosen as the data source because the conversation between Michele McNally and Debraj Sahai and the communication acts in the movie reflect the stages of first language acquisition passed by Michele McNally as a deaf-blind child. To collect the data, this study adopted the observation and documentation methods. Observation is the way of collecting data by observing the movie scenes that present communication acts or nonverbal signs. Documentation is the way of collecting data referring to utterances in the movie script.

The method used in this study is a qualitative approach by Creswell (2014)

and by applying the descriptive method. The study used a qualitative approach because the data is analyzed and described in the form of words and pictures rather than numbers and statistics, also applying descriptive method because the data analysis is presented descriptively. According to (Sudaryanto, 1993), there are two methods in presenting the result of the data analysis; formal and informal method. This study using the informal method to present the result in each data and explain descriptively with analysis based on problems of this study in the form of words, phrases, sentences, and paragraphs. Therefore, this study also uses the formal method, which is a simple image to describe nonverbal signs that contain the first language acquisition process on the main characters in the movie's scenes.

III. RESULTS AND DISCUSSION

This part contains the data analysis taken from the conversation between Michele McNally and Debraj Sahai and also the communication acts in the movie reflects the stages of first language acquisition passed by her as a deaf-blind child. Starting with the pre-language stage and ending with the mature stage, where Michele McNally comprehends language using non-verbal signs.

Pre-language Stage

According to Aitchison (2011) before children can acquire their first language, they start from the pre-language stage, which is in this stage the new-borns come into the world crying. Afterward, the stages such as cooing, babbling, and intonation pattern that will go through. The pre-language stage starts at the data below.

Cooing Stage

(3-1)



(Minute: 00:08:08 – 00:09:18)

Mrs. McNally: Michele... my beautiful baby...

Michele: (Cooing) | (Her hand and leg waving)

Mrs. McNally: You're not sick anymore... now you can play in water. | Look who has come! Papa! What has the doctor told papa?

Mr. McNally: The doctor has said that Michele can't see or hear.

Mrs. McNally: (Shocked) | What did you say?

Mr. McNally: Our Michelle has gone blind and deaf.

Mrs. McNally: (Waved her hand at Michele) Michele... | (Flicked both her hands and clapped to attract Michele's attention) | Look at me! Michele!

In the movie's scene, Michele also passes through the pre-language stage (crying and cooing) like the other infants, even though the crying stage does not show in the movie. Based on Woźniak (2012), cooing stage appear by interactions between children and parents or caregiver. Mrs. McNally interacts with Michele while she was bathing in the baby bath. She picked up and took Michele into her arms and said, "*Michele... my beautiful baby...*" and Michele responded by waving her arms and kicking legs into her mother. Cooing seems to be a universal sound. That could be the vocal equivalent to waving the arms and legs. It means infants instinctively strengthen their muscles by kicking their legs and swinging their arms about; cooing can help them gain control over their vocal apparatus (Aitchison, 2011, p. 69).

However, when Mr. McNally arrives and informs his wife that the doctor has diagnosed Michele that she cannot see and hear, Mrs. McNally could not take it. "*Michele... Look at me! Michele!*" but Michele did not respond to her mother's calls when she was put in the baby bath and away from her mother's arms. Michele can only react to her mother's calls and interact with her when Mrs. McNally touched her.

When Michele does not sense her mother's presence, she cannot respond because Michele is deaf and blind.

Manual Babbling (3-2)



(Minute: 00:19:31 – 00:19:36)

Michele: (Touch her own cheek) |
(Her hand is waving like she was looking for an object)

Mr. Sahai: (Turn head) what is she doing?

Mrs. McNally: That's her sign for me. Her mother (Touched her cheek)

The conversation above shows the interaction between Mr. Sahai and Michele as they were getting acquainted. Mr. Sahai is trying to communicate with Michele, and at the same time, watching her behavior. In the middle of their conversation, Michele moved her hand forward like waving the hand. Meier & Willerman (1991), in the book *Language, Gesture, and Space* by Emmorey and Reilly (1995), stated that the main thing in manual babbling is to move the hand like reaching and waving. Michele does manual babbling by waving her hand, which shows that deaf-blind children are more likely to perform manual babbling by hand instead of with their mouth, like children who can hear. It is the linguistic knowledge that Michele has in her brain because babbling, as well as in manual babbling, views it as one key mechanism that permits infants to discover and produce the patterned structure of natural language (Petitto and Marentette, 1991).

Intonation Pattern (3-3)



(Minute: 00:18:29 – 00:19:21)

McNally: (Touching Sahai's hand)

Mr. Sahai: Yes. Yes... someone new... a new buddy.

Michele: (Touching Sahai's glasses and face, then touching own face)

Mr. Sahai: You like my glasses, don't you? | Well... you can have them... here... there you go. | Happy? | **Teacher... TEACHER (Taking Michele's hand on the mouth and uttering word)**

Michele: (Touching Sahai's mouth) | Tch... tch... (Trying to imitate the Sahai mouth when uttering the word TEACHER)

Mrs. McNally: (Happy) Mr. Sahai, she understands?

Mr. Sahai: No, she's just imitating me | Good... good girl (Holding Michele's hand to his cheek, shakes head up and down)

According to Aitchison (2011), children will begin to imitate the intonation pattern. In this stage, the sound produced is approaching a pattern that the parents can understand, and the child seems to be attempting to imitate the adult's conversation. However, most of the sounds are not easily identified by the adults around them. This scene shows, for the first time, Michele meeting a stranger in her life, Mr. Sahai. When they meet for the first time, Mr. Sahai let Michele touch his face, which is her way as a deaf-blind child to recognize someone. Then, Mr. Sahai holding her hand into his lips and taught her to say, "TEACHER". The first word that Mr. Sahai taught her. He wanted to know how responsive Michele was to learning language and led her hand to touch his lips. She seemed to imitate what Mr. Sahai said that she learned from his lips movements. Even though the sound was not clear when Michele uttered it, the sound produced a pattern that Mr. Sahai could understand. In addition, Michele still does not know what she is saying because she is just imitating it without knowing the meaning of the word. It can be seen in the conversation between Mrs. McNally and Mr. Sahai when Mrs.

McNally asked, “*She understands?*” Mr. Sahai replied, “*No, she’s just imitating me.*”

Pointing Gesture

(3-4)



(Minute: 00:23:31 – 00:23:40)

Michele: (Wriggling hysterically on the floor) | (Her hand pointed at something)

Mr. Sahai: I am very hungry. I am going to eat... and if you behave then you can eat too.

Michele: (Her hand still acted like pointing at something)

In this stage, deaf-blind children use pointing gestures to describe the meaning so that others can understand it. They use pointing gestures as sign language to pointing themselves, objects, places, or persons (Goldin-Meadow, 2003). This scene, Sahai and the McNallys are enjoying lunch together. When Mr. McNally took the lead to pray before lunch, Michele rummaged and scumbled the plates on the table. Moreover, Michele eats her food with her hands instead of taking other person’s food and disturbing them. When she tries to walk towards Mr. Sahai to reach his food, he pushes her away and makes Michele go rampant. After that, Mr. Sahai asks everyone to leave them in the dining room, and Michele’s behavior is getting out of control with her hand pointing towards the dining table. In this scene, Michele’s hand is raised as pointing to an object on the table, which is interpreted as a pointing gesture to mean to the lunch prepared on the table because Mr. Sahai does not let her eat if she does not eat his food properly. Michele made the pointing gesture several times to ensure that Mr. Sahai understood what she meant.

Iconic Gesture
(3-5)



(Minute: 00:19:31 – 00:19:36)

Mr. Sahai: (Taking Michele’s hand to touch his cheek) | Good... good girl (Shakes head up and down)

Michele: (Touch her own cheek) | (Her hand is waving like she was looking for an object)

Mr. Sahai: (Turn head) what is she doing?

Mrs. McNally: That’s her sign for me. Her mother (Touched her cheek)

Iconic gestures are movements that seem to reflect the meaning of what is said. children use iconic gestures as communication to be understood by others, which they have learned since birth (Goldin-Meadow, 2003, p. 75). The conversation in the data above shows the iconic gesture made by Michele. When Mr. Sahai tries to approach and interact with Michele because, in her life, she has never met other people outside her environment, so, that Michele can be acquainted with new people. Mr. Sahai taught her to say “TEACHER,” and Michele imitated it without knowing the meaning of the word. As Mr. Sahai took Michele’s hand to touch her cheek, she nodded her head up and down, saying, “*Good ... good girl.*” After that, Michele also touched her cheek, but the gesture had another purpose. “*What is she doing?*” Mr. Sahai asked. Her mother answered, “*That’s her sign for me. Her mother.*” According to Goldin-Meadow (2003), Michele makes the iconic gesture “touch her cheek” as a “MOTHER” gesture as a form of communication for Mrs. McNally, whom she has learned since birth.

One-word until Two-word
Utterances
(3-6)



(Minute: 00:43:30 – 00:43:57)

Mr. Sahai: This is... Napkin...

(Holding Michele's to touch his mouth when he said NAPKIN and leads for Michele to do it)

Michele: (Takes Sahai's hand on her mouth) | **Poon...** (**Michele's mouth said the word SPOON**)

Mr. Sahai: No. no. this is not spoon. | This is... (His finger points to napkin) napkin... | (Sahai puts Michele's hand on his mouth) napkin... napkin. | (Release Michele's hand) Say NAPKIN.

Michele: Poon... (**Still her mouth utters the word SPOON**)

Mr. Sahai: (Michele's hand touched Sahai's head as sign language) Ah! I am fed up.

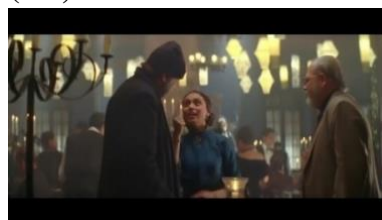
Michele: (Imitating Sahai)

The one-word until two-word utterances stage is concerned with how children begin to use one-word until two-word utterances in communication with adults around them. In this stage, children can acquire their first language by saying a single word or one word, like the simple words that they can memorize in general, such as peoples' names, animals, or objects (Woźniak, 2012). Children can begin learning and storing the language, but each child's comprehension of the language will vary. Deaf-blindness children will have difficulty in this stage because their abilities are limited. For several days, Mr. Sahai continuously taught Michele about the names of objects around her, and it was not the only one in this scene that Michele was able to say the one-word utterances.

When Mr. Sahai started teaching her the word "NAPKIN," Michele replied with the word "SPOON." In this scene, Michele recognizes the words that have been taught but still does not know the meaning. It is shown in the conversation above where Michele says "SPOON" while Mr. Sahai

taught her the word "NAPKIN." Nonetheless, Michele had learned and memorized the word "SPOON" that Mr. Sahai had previously taught her. Thus, it is indicated that Michele has acquired her first language by pronouncing a word like "SPOON" even though she still mispronounces the object's name.

(3-7)



(Minute: 01:01:36 – 01:02:08)

Mr. Sahai: Michele... Michele, meet your principal (Using sign language)

Michele: (Shake hands) | **Tell him...** (**Using sign language**)

Mr. Sahai: Yes. Yes, I've told him... you want admission in arts, not science.

Mr. Fernandez: Mr. Sahai, I will have to consult the trustees on this.

Mr. Sahai: You get few chances for good deeds. And I hope that you will not lose this opportunity.

Mr. Sahai: Cheers?

Michele not only passed the one-word utterances stage, but she also passed the two-word utterances stage. When a child reaches this stage, their vocabulary develops significantly. Children will arrange two-word sentences that are more understandable and have memorized hundreds of vocabulary words. In this scene, Michele has grown up and is going to study at university. Mr. Sahai invited her to meet the headmaster of the university where she would be studying. After they shake hands, Michele moved her lips like spoken language as though they were talking, and she said, "Tell him..." while her hands use sign language. At this time, Michele's vocabulary and grammar developed rapidly. She begins to use two words in speaking.

Understanding the Words and Every Statement

- Petitto, L., Marentette, P., 1991. Babbling in the manual mode: evidence for the ontogeny of language. *Science* 251, 1493–1496. <https://doi.org/10.1126/science.2006424>
- Skinner, B.F., 1957. *Verbal Behavior*, The Century Psychology Series. Appletton-Century-Crofts, Inc. New York.
- Sudaryanto, 1993. *Metode dan aneka teknik analisis bahasa: pengantar penelitian wahana kebudayaan secara linguistis*, Seri ILDEP. Duta Wacana University Press, Yogyakarta.
- Woźniak, P.K., 2012. *The Early Stages of First Language Acquisition*. Praca dyplomowa Paulina Woźniak.

Michele: Eyes don't see dreams but the mind does. I can't see with my eyes, but I have a dream. My dream is one day I will graduate.

Student: (All students applaud her)

This stage also describes Michele's language comprehension, especially in each statement. Michele has been learning to use sign language to pronounce long statement and understand every statement she has used. From the conversation above, Michele understood what her lecturer said with Mr. Sahai as a sign language interpreter. When the lecturer said, "*What you see is what you dream*" of a line in a poem, Michele automatically refutes the statement and said, "*The eye does not see the dream but the mind sees it. I cannot see with my eyes, but I have dream. My dream that someday I will pass.*" Based on Michele's statement, Michele acquired and explored the language better. Because she can respond quickly when the teacher stated a line of poetry, she moved her lip as though she was speaking verbally and used sign language. It was assisted by Mr. Sahai to explain to everyone in the class. It means Michele understands the situation around

her and understands the statements made by her lecturer.

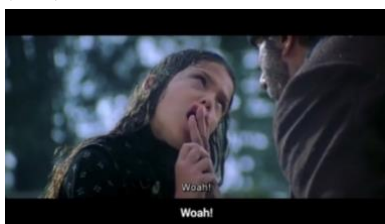
IV. CONCLUSION

Based on findings and discussion, it can be concluded that the stages in acquiring the first language that Michele passed as a deaf-blind child in the movie *Black* (2005) are different from normal children. Michele acquired her first language starting with the pre-language stage (Cooing stage, Manual Babbling stage, and Intonation Patterns), Imitating Process Pointing Gestures, Iconic Gestures, the One-word until Two-word Utterances, Understanding the word, and every statement. However, not all the stages Michele went through as a deaf-blind child were different from normal children. They have several stages where normal children and Michele go through the same stages, such as Crying, Cooing, Intonation Patterns, and Word Inflections. In normal children, they begin to acquire their first language orally or through verbal communication. While Michele uses hand gestures, body gestures, and facial expressions, which are part of non-verbal communication.

REFERENCES

- Aitchison, J., 2011. *The articulate mammal: an introduction to psycholinguistics*, Routledge classics ed. ed, Routledge classics. Routledge, London ; New York.
- Chomsky, N., 2006. *Language and mind*, 3rd ed. ed. Cambridge University Press, Cambridge ; New York.
- Chomsky, N., 1986. *Knowledge of language: its nature, origin, and use*, Convergence. Praeger, New York.
- Chomsky, N., 1959. A review of BF Skinner's *Verbal Behavior*. *Readings in the Philosophy of Psychology* 1, 48–63.
- Clark, E.V., 2009. *First language acquisition*, 2nd ed. ed. Cambridge University Press, Cambridge ; New York.
- Creswell, J.W., 2014. *Research design: qualitative, quantitative, and mixed methods approaches*, 4th ed. ed. SAGE Publications, Thousand Oaks.
- Emmorey, K., Reilly, J.S. (Eds.), 1995. *Language, gesture, and space*. Lawrence Erlbaum Associates, Hillsdale, N.J.
- Goldin-Meadow, S., 2003. *The resilience of language: what gesture creation in deaf children can tell us about how all children learn language*, *Essays in developmental psychology*. Psychology Press, New York, NY.
- Lenneberg, E.H., 1967. *Biological Foundations of Language*. John Wiley & Sons.

(3-8)



(Minute: 00:50:00 – 00:52:58)

Mr. Sahai: Come on, come here... | You brat... you want to throw water at me! | Let me teach you what water is! Come here! What water is, come on! | (Forcing Michele into the fountain) this is water... water... water... | Give me your hand... this is woah... water... water... (Utters rashly) Understand? Water! (Throw Michele into the fountain)

Michele: (Feels the water is) | (Signing and waving her hand to call Sahai) | (Taking Sahai's hand on her mouth) | (Signing word WATER through her lips) woah... woah...

Mr. Sahai: (Holding her hand and put on Sahai's mouth) | (Revising the word uttered by Michele's earlier) water... it's water | W-A-T-E-R (Spell the word WATER on Michele's hand using fingerspelling)

Michele: (Using fingerspelling for word WATER that thought by Sahai)

Mr. Sahai: Mrs. McNally!!!
(Calling Michele's mother)

Michele: (Run and grope the grass)

Mr. Sahai: Yes... this is GRASS

Michele: (Give her hand to Mr. Sahai and asks how to spelling the GRASS)

Mr. Sahai: (Spell the word GRASS through fingerspelling alphabet on Michele's hand) | G-R-A-S-S spell it...

Michele: (Spell word GRASS with her finger)

Sahai: Very good... very good! | Mrs. McNally!!

Michele: (She runs to garden and touches flowers) | (Giver her hand and asks Sahai to quickly spell the word FLOWER)

Mr. Sahai: That FLOWER... flower... flower... (Spell the word

FLOWER using his hand) F-L-O-W-E-R... FLOWER.

Michele: (Touching the flower and try to spell the word FLOWER) | (She smiles because know the object is FLOWER)

The stage explains how children begin to comprehend the language. This part, Michele starts to understand that every word has a meaning, and the objects that she touched also have a name. In this scene shows a heartwarming scene where Michele finally begins to understand that every object she touches has a name and every word that is spoken through mouth movements or using sign language has a meaning. Mr. Sahai was angry with Michele and pushed her into the fountain. Miraculously, Michele seized Mr. Sahai at that moment and understands the meaning, make Mr. Sahai realized that Michele was starting to understand words. It is evidenced in the conversation above; when Michele felt water in her hand, she immediately grabbed Mr. Sahai's hand to her mouth and said, "Woah ... woah ..." which refers to the word "WATER." Mr. Sahai corrected her pronunciation while spelling out the word "WATER" using fingerspelling to see if Michele understands the language, and Michele can do it well.

(3-16)



(Minute: 01:12:50 – 01:13:22)

Lecturer: (Give a lesson in front of class) what you see is what you dream.

Michele: (Suddenly get up and hit the table)

Mr. Sahai: No. she, she... she disagrees... she disagrees with the poet.

(She repudiated what her teacher said using sign language and Sahai explaining for them)