**Chomsky’s model of language acquisition.**

Noam Chomsky (1959) believed that the ability to develop a signed or spoken language is genetically programmed into individuals. This means that all individuals have the ability to understand and use language, regardless of other abilities, and to become fluent in their first language by the age of five or six. He claims that certain linguistic structures which children use so accurately must be already imprinted on the child’s mind. It's as if the child's brain is a CD player already set to "play" language; when the CD for a certain language is inserted, that is the language the child learns. He rejects the notion that all language must be learned afresh by each child. Instead, Chomsky says, normal children everywhere are born with a kind of hard-wired syntax that enables them to grasp the basic workings of language. The child then chooses the particular grammar and language of the environment from the available options in the brain.

**Language Acquisition Device (LAD)**

Chomsky states that individuals are born with a ‘Language Acquisition Device’ (LAD) that enables children to recognise and develop the languages they experience. According to Chomsky’s theory, children are ‘preprogrammed’ to acquire language and it evolves naturally in the same way that children have the ability to stand and to walk. The ability to use language develops because of maturation- it is the unfolding of an individual’s biological potential. Chomsky points out that a child could not possibly learn a language through ***imitation alone*** because the language spoken around them is highly irregular – adult’s speech is often broken up and even sometimes ungrammatical. Chomsky’s theory applies to all languages as they all contain nouns, verbs, consonants and vowels and children appear to be ‘hard-wired’ to acquire the grammar. Every language is extremely complex, often with subtle distinctions which even native speakers are unaware of. However, all children, regardless of their intellectual ability, become fluent in their native language within five or six years.

Chomsky believes that babies need to experience other people using language but that they do not need to be trained in order to speak. He noted that even if adults around a child use correct grammar or even correct a child, they will continue to apply plural ‘rules’ for instance ‘deers’ or ‘geeses’, if they have reached that particular stage of language development. Mistakes such as ‘I drawed’ instead of ‘I drew’ show they are not learning through imitation alone.

**Critics of Chomsky’s theory**

Critics of Chomsky’s theory say that although it is clear that children don’t learn language through imitation alone, this does not prove that they must have an LAD  – language learning could merely be through general learning and understanding abilities and interactions with other people. Critics also point out the lack of scientific evidence to support his theory. Social constructivists such as Bruner would argue that social interaction, particularly in the early stages of language development, is critical and has far more influence on the grammar in sentence structure rather than how children construct meaning from their sentences. Chomsky did not take into consideration children who experience delayed language development for a variety of reasons, for example children who have a learning disability or hearing or speech impairments. Children with Down’s syndrome are among those whose language is frequently delayed.

Dialogue –

**Parent and Child (3 years old)**

Parent: What did you do today?

Child: Me drawed a cat. (applies –ed suffix rule but gets wrong)

Parent: You drew a cat?

Child: Yeah. (understands correction)

Parent: Who did you play with at breaktime?

Child: Me played with Sarah and Helen. (wrong pronoun – not learnt passively)

Parent: That sound fun. Now what do you want for tea?

Child: Dunno. What you having?

Parent: Daddy and I are having fish.

Child: You having fishes? (incorrect use of plural noun but shows child applying rules)

Parent: Yes. I’ll do you some fish fingers and if you’re a good girl and eat    them all you can have a sweetie. (applying plural noun rule)

Child: Me want two sweeties.

Parent: Alright then. Now go and watch Postman Pat while I start the tea.

Child: When Daddy coming home? (gets SVO order correct all the time)

Parent: He’ll be here soon.