

Accentuating Language Acquisition in Kids: A Study of the Works of Robert Munsch

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ABSTRACT

Children's literature is intended to entertain children by keeping them turning the pages to see what happens next and how the story finishes. The dialogue in children's stories is an action-enhancing tool since many actions take place in the dialogues. The present article is an effort to examine the process of language acquisition in kids through selected short stories by Robert Munsch. In order to acquire a more scientific understanding of the language acquisition process in general, the study includes a discussion on language acquisition from utterance to the understanding of words to producing proper sentences. The stories were picked from a collection of Short Stories for Children written by Robert Munsch, an American-Canadian children's author whose works were not yet analysed from the perspective of teaching the English language. The impressions and messages contained in children's stories can have a lifetime impact on their minds, which is why if we introduce kids to early reading habits it may act as effective vehicles for helping children to acquire any language including their native one. This is possible because of the language employed in these stories. Children can develop better communication skills if the process of acquiring language follows up through a pattern that will be discussed as a finding for the present paper.

KEYWORDS: Robert Munsch, Rarefying, Language Acquisition, Kids, Jean Piaget

Introduction:

When we wonder how the process of language acquisition happens, we get the answer from observing how children learn to speak in infancy before they have even started their formal schooling. There is no doubt that language acquisition begins naturally. As children grow, they adopt the language of their surroundings, as it is also one of the innate processes of learning like other skills or habits which a child learns naturally as per the human sciences (Aitchison, 2007). Taking a dig into this matter, we can say that language is a mirror of a child's environment in which they are growing up. When children learn to utter a word they first develop an understanding of the sounds and later refine those words and develop communication skills. Language Acquisition develops through a pattern in children as they grow up. It is evident for ages that when babies are born they can hear different sounds and

the process of language acquisition uses all those sounds which fall under the category of 'Phonetic' in linguistics and is considered the very first step of language acquisition. The sound of the spoken words will help in developing reading skills in children.

The best way of language acquisition is through communication. When parents and other elders communicate with the child they hear the sounds being spoken, then start understanding them and very soon begin to produce sounds in the form of babbling. In his book, EV Clark states, "These phrases, which are generally dismissed as unintelligible, as nonsense sequences, or as babbling, may, in fact, be attempts at producing larger chunks of speech" (Clark, 1978, p.152). The more they are exposed to the language spoken around them, the more they understand the sounds which help them in uttering words. In Bloom's Taxonomy of motor (learning) skills, the practical experiences have been given the highest weightage,

i.e., the more practical environment we give to the babies the more they adapt to the phonetic patterns of different words.

Authors of children's literature excel in producing works that are not only interesting for children but also help them in learning phonetic patterns. One such author is Robert Munsch, who is an American-born Canadian author of children's books. He was born on June 11, 1945, in Pittsburgh, Pennsylvania. He enjoys meeting and listening to children for getting ideas for stories. His works do not have the repetition of characters. It takes him days or even years to perfect one story. Robert Munsch perfects his stories by telling them over and over again before publishing them in a book. To delight his young readers, he uses exaggerated expressions and a variety of voices. He is known for his inventive and hilarious stories. This paper includes discussions about how the writings of Robert Munsch help in the process of language acquisition in children.

Adaptation of language from utterance to sentence framing

I) Understanding Phonetics

Babies start understanding the rhythm of language even before they are born. During the foetal stage, they have an innate sense of understanding the pitch of the sounds as well as the rise and fall in tones. Gradually within 3-4 months of age, they begin distinguishing the sounds made by some toys and the voices of people. They also start responding to a few sounds like the sound of clapping and the sounds of toys. Later, when they acquire the habit of sitting they start to babble, which is a sign of response to what others are saying and also shows that they are developing an understanding of the phonetic patterns. Phonemes are the smallest and the basic unit of sound features that distinguish one unit from the other which results in making the relevant pattern of

speech, called allophones (Browman et al., 2020). Thus, it can be said that phonemes are abstracted sounds that proceed towards the continuity of speech. If we take a glance into the writings of Robert Munsch in the story written for children, we can see that he abstractly employs words that reflect various figures of speech, such as onomatopoeia, and that he utilises interjections, which are described as words used to communicate a certain emotion or attitude (such as joy, grief, a sudden feeling of attention, etc.) on the part of the speaker. There are three kinds of interjections: Cognitive (words that express feelings that are more related to cognition or information), Emotive (words that express unexpected emotions such as surprise, delight, fear, and disgust), and Volitive (used to express command, request, or deny). As in the short story *Too Much Stuff!*¹, Munsch makes use of the emotive interjection "AAAAAH" (p.13) twice, through the character of the officer who makes this sound, while looking into Temina's backpack as it passes through the X-ray machine. He was then shocked to see the toys, and when Temina unzipped her bag, all the toys fell over, making the sound "KAFOOSHHHH!" (p.14) which is an example of onomatopoeia. Similarly, in *Braids!*² he again makes use of an emotive interjection "Ahhhh!" (pp. 4,16) as a screaming sound when Ashley's mother is trying to catch her, and again when Ashley and her grandmother try to catch her mother to braid her hair. Later in the story, we hear the same interjection with more emphasis, "Ahhhhhhhhhh," (p.24) when her teacher yells and runs down the street as Ashley's mom, her grandmother, and Ashley herself are trying to catch her teacher to braid her hair. In the story *Put Me in a Book*³, we see that Hailey is stuck in the book and her friends are trying to help her come out of it. And for that purpose, they are trying out different methods, like flipping the book. While doing so, Munsch makes use of the emotive interjection, "Gwackh!" (p.12) which gives the sensation of

¹ See Munsch, R. (2020). *Too Much Stuff!* Scholastic Canada (pp.13, 14.) for detailed description.

² See Munsch, R. (2019). *Braids.* Scholastic Canada (pp.4, 16, 24.) for detailed description.

³ Munsch, R. (2010). *Put Me in a Book.* Scholastic Canada (pp. 12, 15, 17, 18, 22.)

something being flipped-flopped. Hailey's friends tried different methods too, like stretching, squishing, etc., but every time they do something, Hailey is seen yelling loudly, producing sounds like "AHHHHHHHHH!" (pp.15,17, 18, 22).

If we look into other stories like *We Share Everything!*⁴, Munsch again makes use of emotive interjections like "AAAHHHHH" (p.10) for a loud scream. When Amanda and Jeremiah are fighting, to make it more appealing Munsch uses the sounds of words to denote particular actions. For example, when Amanda puts the book in Jeremiah's mouth, it makes the sounds "BLUMPH" and "GAWCCK!" (p.12) which depict that something has got stuck in someone's mouth, and a few more such words that produce sounds denoting particular actions while reading, such as "CRASH!, OUCH!, OWWW!" (p.18). Similarly, in *Moose!*⁵ and *SMELLY SOCKS*, he made use of onomatopoeia such as the sleeping sound "ZZZZ.. ZZZ.. ZZZ" (*MOOSE!*, pp. 4, 8), "GWACKKH" (*MOOSE!*, pp. 6, 10), "sniff-sniff" (*MOOSE!*, p.14) for smelling, "crunch crunch" (*MOOSE!*, p.14) as eating sound, and "SKRONK! SKRONK!" (*MOOSE!*, p.26) for squirting. He uses onomatopoeia to describe the movement of the boat as "SPLASH-SPLASH" and "SWISH! SWISH!" and again as "SPLASH-SPLASH" (p.6), whereas the knocking sound on the door as "Blam Blam Blam!" (p.18), and "SCRUB SCRUB SCRUB!" (pp. 20, 22) for washing the socks in the story *SMELLY SOCKS*⁶. Onomatopoeia can also be seen as a prime example in other children's nursery rhymes such as *The Wheels on the bus* (Zelinsky and Baruffi, 1990), where many such instances can be observed, for example,

"...The wipers on the bus go 'Swish, swish, swish, Swish, swish, swish, swish, swish, swish, swish...'" (Coyle and Gómez Gracia, 2014)

Robert Munsch makes use of onomatopoeia and

interjections to make the stories more realistic and attract the little audience's attention towards the stories. Making use of these phonetic words in short stories helps little readers to read easily so that they can push themselves to read more and more which in turn will help them in acquiring language more realistically through a non-directed form of reading.

II) Developing the ability to learn Morphemes

Once a child develops the understanding of phonemes, he/she gradually starts making sense of those sounds resulting in producing a few complete words. The children then develop the skill of joining two sounds together as they can understand the beginning and end of words which are called word boundaries in the language learning process (Castles et al., 2018). In the stories of Munsch words such as CRASH! OUCH! OWWW! SKRONK! SKRONK, SPLASH SPLASH SPLASH, CRUNCH CRUNCH, and HUNTERS were capitalized to depict that the characters were yelling when the activities happened. More such words were used to make children understand the word boundaries by joining two words (which describe sounds) together which would help children to develop an understanding of reading out words. This whole process can be summarized as learning of morphemes, i.e., learning of part of the smallest word or chunks of letters that are combined to form a proper word.

At this stage of language learning, it is good to encourage the child toward reading; which helps him/her in developing communication and social skills. To encourage reading skills in children, they must be introduced to snappier sentences with short words so that they can spell them out easily and can start reading (Sunde et al., 2020). In the stories of Robert Munsch, he uses small words in a repeated manner which when read by children ultimately helps them to refine their language and promote language learning more easily. Taking a look into the writings of Munsch

⁴ Munsch, R. (2020). *We Share Everything*. Scholastic Canada. (pp.10, 12, 18.)

⁵ See, Munsch, R. (2019). *Moose*. Scholastic Canada. (pp.4, 6, 8, 10, 14, 26.), for detailed description.

⁶ Munsch, R. (2019). *Smelly Socks*. Scholastic Canada. (pp.6, 18, 20, 22.)

we see a pattern of words that are used throughout, it can be 3-4 letter words or more that are present in a repetitive manner which follows the rhythmic pattern that enables the child to grasp things conveniently. His short stories like *SMELLY SOCKS*, make use of words such as “Socks –Across” (p.2) and repetitive words like “round and round and round” (p.10) to describe movements of boats and repetitive use of the phrase “Socks! Socks! Wonderful Socks!” (pp.12, 14). The repetition of the word ‘Never’ is used in different sound patterns such as “Never” (pp.12,14), and “Nnnnnever” (p.14) to make it more appealing for children to read, which will help the child to understand the normal way of communication. In *Moose!* we see the words like “grabbed, whapped, jumped” (p.14) in consecutive lines and repetition of “Moose!” (pp. 2,6, 11, 12) in a bold and emphasised way throughout the story. Likewise, repetition of words like Daddy, and Mommy, with changes in the speech pattern such as “DAAAAADY” (p.4), and “MOOOOMY” (p.8), encourages the child to understand different emotions while reading the text.

In *We Share EVERYTHING!* the repetition of the title itself throughout the story helps the child to understand the message behind it as it was also used in a form of command by the teacher. The phrase, “we share everything” (pp. 20, 24, 30, 32), repetitively, enables the readers to link the words in the snappier form of a sentence that promotes children to follow the command that is given to them (O’fallon et al., 2020). Similarly, in the story *HUGS!*⁷, the same technique is used in giving a message through repetition of short sentences like “How about a hug for my little brother?” (pp. 10,14, 16), phrases like “Just right, Just right hug”(p.24) and repetition of some words like ‘hug’, ‘walked and walked’, ‘slime’, ‘stink’, ‘needles’, ‘yelled’ and the name ‘Thea’ helps them to learn different words that can be an add-on in language learning for children. A similar pattern can be seen in

his other stories also like *Braids!*, *Class Clown*⁸, *The Enormous Suitcase*⁹, *Ready, Set, Go!*¹⁰

Munsch, R. (2015).

Ready, Set, Go!

North Winds Press. (pp. 12, 14.), *Put Me in a Book!*, and *Too Much Stuff!*. The repetition of short words that make snappy sentences and phrases in Munsch’s stories are as follows: “back and forth AND up and down AND round and round” (*Braids!*, pp. 6, 18, 26), “Look at your hair. It needs some Braids!”, “Oh, look! It’s beautiful, it’s wonderful. But it took forever” (*Braids!*, pp. 8, 20); “This baby is soooo funny!” (*Class Clown*, pp. 2, 4, 6), “really, really, Really mad” (*Class Clown*, p.24); “Kelsey opened her suitcase and put in clean clothes, a big box of coloured pencils, four books” (*The Enormous Suitcase*, pp.2, 8, 12) (plus, an add-on of the one extra item she takes every time with her while leaving for her mom’s and dad’s house); “Have you seen my dad? His name is Peter.”; “Pipsqueaks don’t belong in this race” (*Ready, Set, Go!*, pp. 12, 14).

He uses few words in a much-emphasised manner by putting them in bold letters that attract the kids and speed up their learning process. Like in the story *Put me in a Book!*, he made use of words such as “STRETCHING” (p.17), “SCRUNCHING” (p.18), and “SQUISHING” (p.23) and in *Too Much Stuff!* the word “Forever” (pp. 8, 9) making it easier for the kids to learn. Other examples of repetitive sentences can be seen in the story *Too Much Stuff!* which includes “You can bring just one doll. You can’t bring ALL your dolls. You must have 500 dolls”, “HA!” said Temina ‘I have Just 37 dolls. You know that I have just 37 dolls, not 500 dolls”, “OK! OK! OK!” said Temina” (pp. 2, 4).

As P.C. Wren communicates, there is a Direct Method of teaching to read that makes use of the smallest

⁷ See, Munsch, R. (2018). *Hugs*. Scholastic Canada. (pp. 10, 14, 16, 24.) for detailed description.

⁸ Munsch, R. (2007). *Class Clown*. Scholastic Canada. (pp.2, 4 6, 24.)

⁹ Munsch, R. (2017). *The Enormous Suitcase*. Scholastic Canada. (pp.2, 8, 12.)

¹⁰ Munsch, R. (2015). *Ready, Set, Go!* North Winds Press. (pp. 12, 14.)

sub-unit of teaching, and that is – word (Shipton, 2019). In this method, there is a direct connection of words with some objects or pictures which establishes the meaningful association to understand the meaning. Reading by this method draws the attention of the child to understand what he is reading by creating an image in the mind. A restriction of this method has been highlighted by Thompson and Wyatt which leads to learning one word at a time which is time taking so they introduced advancement in the Direct Method of teaching that includes not only words but also focuses on a specific phrase by applying drill method which includes repetition of the phrases and related phrases which are already learnt. Thus, it gives more meaningful learning through reading as it includes not only pictures but also auditory images which when read by the young readers, create an image directly connected with their day-to-day actions (Manjula, 2018). Similar to the concept of “Signifier and Signified” given by Swiss linguist Ferdinand de Saussure, wherein he emphasised two main components that are “content” as signified and “expression” as a signifier. Any smallest thing that signifies is signifier e.g. words on a page, facial expressions or an image. Whereas, signified are the concepts that signifiers refer to i.e., the smallest unit of meaning, anything that can be used to communicate.

This technique can easily be witnessed in the writings of Robert Munsch as mentioned above in this article. The selections of words that are directly connected with the actions create an auditory image while reading his stories.

Munsch also made use of new phrases in a repetitive pattern so that children easily get the meaning of the words or actions which will later help them to read complete sentences in a meaningful manner. Throughout this process, parents act as a mentor to encourage their children to enhance their innate quality of language without any forceful actions. Every story that is written with some purpose encapsulates some or the other message which helps the child to learn by reading as well as develops certain habits. For instance, as the child learns

morphemes, the activities like reading out to them and then trying to mimic their words to enhance their understanding of meaningful words on a daily basis helps the child to build a relationship between the words and the actions which in turn help them to acquire language and develop an understanding of exchanging broken sentences that helps them improve communication.

III) Producing sentences:

Soon after infants (after approximately 18 months) start uttering broken words, it is believed that they start making short sentences as they develop the understanding of putting words in the correct order. Children have a sense of understanding and differentiating between correct grammar and meaningful sentences and they utter sentences accordingly (Chomsky et al., 1959). As the teaching of words or short phrases in a repetitive manner alone is not enough for a child to acquire language which they can use for communication, they must be carefully arranged in a syntactical pattern called syntax. At this stage, we can introduce children to picture books and give them the chance to communicate what they see inside the books. Thus, a constant habit of reading under supervision without personal interventions helps children to communicate and it also helps them to ask questions. The mentors must encourage the child to keep on asking questions so that they develop the mechanism of dialogue exchange (Larsen-Freeman, 2012). This can only be achieved when they learn to read and understand the sentences. We must encourage kids to read and narrate the dialogues to the mentor who may start a fruitful conversation with the child, thus, making the child read and question simultaneously, and promoting an indirect way of communication through reading.

If we look into the writings of Robert Munsch, we will find that he writes in a story-telling method. There is a continuous communication process that can be witnessed in his writing, not merely the dialogue exchange, which attracts the child as it feels that they are living the character the way the sentences have been written in his stories.

The story method of teaching English helps the child to understand the sentences in a meaningful manner. Peggy Hickman states, “Teachers can use this strategy to systematically build the vocabulary and comprehension skills of primary-grade English-language learners through daily read-alouds” (Hickman, 2004, p.721). In a story, there are sequences of events used to frame the story which enlivens the interest of the reader to recognise the sentences within the story.

This technique of reading comprises sentences, phrases, and words; altogether resulting in language acquisition in a child. When we say ‘sentence’ it indicates a group of words expressing complete thought or meaning, and when we say ‘syntax’ it is considered as a study of pattern for constructing sentences in a meaningful set of words or morphemes.

Children must be exposed to learning morphemes in their early stage to complete the process of learning morphemes, words, phrases and then sentences. As per Jean Piaget’s theory of cognitive development, children between 2-3 years of age are all set to acquire language in the pre-operational stage. Later in the operational stage of development, children link the new knowledge with what they have already learnt

(Sudbery and Whittaker, 2018). Thus, once the child develops the understanding of a few words, he/she becomes ready to read sentences which ultimately build up the blocks for mastery of spoken language.

A complete sentence always comprises of ‘Subject’ and ‘Verb’, subject is generally a noun and verb indicates the action of the subject, i.e., what the subject is doing. So it is all about subject and verb which provides complete sense. As said by Noam Chomsky, there is a universal set of grammar which can be seen in almost every kind of language and a child is born with that innate understanding of language. By this Chomsky meant subject-verb agreement, i.e., there is always a subject who is always linked with some appropriate action. The child, while acquiring a language, can easily grasp the action words and the subject (he/she/me/my/they, etc. and proper nouns) for understanding and producing meaningful sentences.

If we take a glance into the stories written by Robert Munsch to see how the basic sentences are written which can easily be read by young readers, we will find that along with the subject, there are sight words and/or action words that make the complete sentence. A few examples from his writings are mentioned below in table 1:

Table 1: List of a few model sentences from the writings of Robert Munsch

S. No.	Name of the Story	Sentence = Subject + Verb (main/action/helping) + Rest part
1.	<i>Class clown</i>	“When-Leonardo +was-a baby, his mother +laughed +all the time” (p.2)
2.	<i>Smelly Socks</i>	The motor+ is+ not+ working+ on the boat” (p.4)
3.	<i>Braids!</i>	Ashley+ was + sitting + at the breakfast table” (p.2)
4.	<i>We Share EVERYTHING!</i>	Amanda and Jeremiah+ walked+ into the kindergarten classroom- and- Amanda + picked up+ a book.” (p.8)
5.	<i>Hugs</i>	The day that- Thea+ was + mad at Mommy, ‘She+ took+ her little brother Tate’s hand and+ walked+ out of the front door’.”(p.3)
6.	<i>Put Me in a Book!</i>	Mrs O’Dell’s class + saw + a man + sitting + on a park bench, holding a big book.” (p.4)

S. No.	Name of the Story	Sentence = Subject + Verb (main/action/helping) + Rest part
7.	<i>Too Much Stuff!</i>	I + can + take + all my dolls on the airplane.” (p.2)
8.	<i>Moose!</i>	One Saturday morning - Luke + woke-up + very very early.” (p.2)
9.	<i>Ready, Set, Go!</i>	Before her father’s big race - Miranda and her dad + went out+ for breakfast.” (p.2)
10.	<i>The Enormous Suitcase</i>	Kelsey and her mom + drove + over to her dad’s house.” (p.6)

Rarefying Language Acquisition and development of communication skills:

Early intervention is very important for language development in a child and this process results in the development of different skills too. According to the research findings of Catherine Ayoub, “EHS (Early Head Start) intervention protects parenting, child language, and self-regulatory development from the effects of demographic risks and parenting stress, and thus supports parents to raise healthy children” (Ayoub et al., 2011, p.583). Once children enter preschool age, they start using full words, simple sentences and also complex dialogue exchanges.

If we relate all this with the process of communication which states that there is a message by the sender that is encoded from one party and then the same message is decoded by the receiver to respond to the given message (Pingree, 2007), while connecting the links we can conclude that there is a message encoded in a child’s mind to acquire language and that has been delivered by the child to their adults who receive the encoded message and decode them when received, later helps the child to correct the pronunciation on receiving the feedback on their encoded messages. The same process of communication takes place again when the correct word has been encoded by the adult that will then be decoded by the child with the correct utterance of the word (imitation of the word) and has been reinforced with praise by the adults which result in the process of feedback. This continuing process helps the child in developing communication skills. Once children are acquainted with the apt manner of communication, it helps them to have a healthy

interaction and also leads to other developments like behavioural, moral etc. If a child lags in expressive speech, it will lead him to cerebral palsy which makes the child a slow learner, or can even result in stunted development. In his research on cerebral palsy and communication, Lindsay Pennington states, “Cerebral palsy (CP) can cause disturbances in sensory and cognitive development as well as motor disorders. Problems in these areas of functioning can affect children’s speech, language and communication development.” (Pennington, 2008, p.405). Thus, it is very important to make a child acquire language properly so that they can communicate what they feel. As a parent, we must encourage children towards positive learning by welcoming their thoughts and correcting them in the required manner, if needed (Noddings, 2015).

Conclusion

To conclude, we can say that literature is a medium of learning communication and communication is a way of acquiring language to express oneself. Thus, reading is the only formal means that helps children to navigate the new words that can be used to polish their communication skills which ultimately encourages them to interact with others. In children, if we develop the habit of reading, it will transform them completely because of the message a story holds and the way of dialogue exchange used in the story which helps children in acquiring language. Children may find different reasons for reading that will help them grow but one factor that remains constant is learning the target language, i.e., we must give children the story books that are written in the language we want them to learn/acquire. The choice

of appropriate books for this task is also an important decision that must be carefully done by the parents/mentors. The language gets refined through reading as it adds more and more glossaries which is a rich lexical resource.

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