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# Language Acquisition and Teaching Strategies for Children with Mental Retardation

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**Abstract**: Delays in language acquisition and learning experienced by children with mental retardation cause the language production process to be disrupted. This study aims to describe and find the right strategy for language teaching in children with mental retardation aged 5;0 – 10;0 years. This study is a qualitative study using a descriptive method. The research findings show that: (1) the word classes mastered by children with mild mental retardation include nouns, verbs, numerals, adjectives, interrogatives, and prepositions. (2) The types of meanings mastered include referential meaning and denotative meaning, (3) The research subjects are also at the meaning field stage, meaning that children have been able to classify words based on their respective meaning fields. (4) Cooperative learning strategies are considered more effective for teaching language to mentally retarded children. This research is expected to contribute to efforts to acquire and teach language to mentally retarded children aged 5;0 – 10;0 years.

**Keywords**: *language acquisition, language teaching, mentally retarded children.*

## I. Introduction

Humans, as social beings, need others to fulfill their needs and continue their lives. This nature requires language as the primary means to establish social interactions formed through socialization and communication. Language exists in human life because humans need it to communicate. (Nurgiyantoro, 2014).

Language is not just a tool for communication between individuals, but it also shapes a person's reasoning (cognitive) which ultimately forms the culture of a particular society (Chaer, 2003). Language is not directly mastered by humans, but rather through stages and processes of language acquisition known as LAD. (Language Acquisition Device). The term acquisition refers to the process of language mastery that a child undergoes naturally while learning their mother tongue. Children can acquire any language because there is something that universally enhances these languages together. (Rosmiati, 2019).

The process of language mastery and acquisition faces obstacles and challenges in children with intellectual disabilities. Intellectual disability is defined as a term or designation for someone who experiences intellectual impairment or thinking abilities that indirectly affect the adaptive behavior of an individual under the age of 18. (Hardianti & Huda, 2017). A child with intellectual disabilities is a child who has a deficiency in terms of IQ, specifically having an IQ of 70 or below. (Ramadhona & Sihkabuden, 2017).

Children with intellectual disabilities require educational services that cater to their special needs because their learning abilities and social adaptation skills are below the average capabilities of children in general. (Louk & Sukoco, 2016). Therefore, the acquisition and teaching of language in children with intellectual disabilities require special methods and techniques so that their language production abilities can be improved.

Research on language acquisition in children with intellectual disabilities has been conducted previously. Research (Pandudinata et al, 2018) titled "Language Acquisition of Sixth Grade Students with Intellectual Disabilities" found that (1) subjects with mild intellectual disabilities were able to understand vocabulary at a rate of 79%, and (2) subjects with severe intellectual disabilities were able to understand vocabulary at a rate of 46%. This study focuses on the vocabulary comprehension of children with intellectual disabilities in relation to their mother tongue only, while this research

examines the lexical language acquisition of children with intellectual disabilities, including parts of speech, types of meaning, and semantic fields.

The next research, titled "The Acquisition of Indonesian Language in Children with Intellectual Disabilities at the Cognitive Development Stage" by (Rosmiati, 2019). The focus of the research conducted is phonological, morphological, and syntactic, concluding that children with intellectual disabilities aged 7 to 12 years at the State Special School of Kedungkandang are at the stage of cognitive development. The aspects observed from the research conducted by Rosmiati are sound pronunciation, word formation, and sentence construction. In contrast, this research focuses more on the lexical aspects of language acquisition and examines appropriate teaching methods in accordance with the findings of the acquisition.

Next, the research titled "Language Acquisition in Children with Intellectual Disabilities at the State Special School of Jepara" maksan (Isyah, 2019). The results of the research indicate that (1) the comprehension score achieved in understanding the relationship between words and referents in children with intellectual disabilities, when taught to interpret images, vocabulary mastery, and sentence construction, is highest at 91.2, and (2) the vocabulary mastery of children with intellectual disabilities is more focused on basic nouns to understand the functions of the objects they see every day.

Based on the literature review above, this research examines the language acquisition in children with intellectual disabilities from a psycholinguistic perspective, focusing on lexical aspects that include mastery of word classes, types of meaning, and fields of meaning. Furthermore, the findings are then linked to language teaching methods that are appropriate for the language acquisition level of children with intellectual disabilities, so that language instruction for these children can be improved.

## II. Method

This research is a qualitative study using a descriptive method. This research aims to understand the phenomenon of language acquisition by the research subjects and then describe it through the results and findings of the study.

The data in this study consists of the acquisition of word classes, types of meanings, and the semantic fields of speech acts by children with intellectual disabilities. The data is sourced from children's speech events and explanations from those around the child, specifically at SLB Perwari Ulak Karang Padang. The method used for data collection is the observation method with the techniques of free involvement observation, involved observation, and interviews. To maintain the accuracy of the data obtained through the techniques of involved observation, free involvement observation, and interviews, it is then followed up with recording and note-taking techniques. Both techniques are intended to document the data obtained to prevent errors in data collection, ensuring that valid data is achieved. The device used to record the speech of informants/research subjects is the Clarity CM 3000 recorder. After the child's utterance is obtained, the data is then transcribed into written form.

The data validation technique is carried out using triangulation. The stages of data analysis are carried out through the following steps: (1) translating children's utterances, (2) identifying the data to be studied, (3) classifying vocabulary according to parts of speech, (4) classifying word meanings, (5) classifying semantic fields, (6) determining word categories, (7) determining types of meanings, (8) determining semantic fields, (9) determining appropriate language teaching methods for children with intellectual disabilities.

## III. Results and Discussion

### *A. Result*

Based on research conducted over three consecutive weeks, it was found that children with intellectual disabilities are able to use words according to their parts of speech in their daily speech. Children with intellectual disabilities have a good command of vocabulary, consisting of 151 words that include 16 verb classes, 5 adjective classes, 63 nouns, 6 pronouns, 52 numerals, 4 interrogatives, and 5 prepositions. For further clarification, please refer to the table 1.

Table 1. Classification of Parts of Speech

| Number | Class of Words | Total |
|---|---|---|
| 1 | Verbs | 16 |
| 2 | Adjectives | 5 |
| 3 | Adverbs | 0 |
| 4 | Nouns | 63 |
| 5 | Pronouns | 6 |
| 6 | Numerals | 52 |
| 7 | Interrogatives | 4 |
| 8 | Demonstratives | 0 |
| 9 | Articles | 0 |
| 10 | Prepositions | 5 |
| 11 | Conjunctions | 0 |
| 12 | Fatih categories | 0 |
| 13 | Interjections | 0 |
| | Total | 151 |

Furthermore, based on the research, it was found that children with intellectual disabilities are able to use three types of fields of meaning, namely 45 types of referential meaning and 115 types of denotative meaning. For further clarity, please refer to the following table 2.

Table 2. Classification of Types of Meaning

| Number | Class of Type of Meaning | Total |
|---|---|---|
| 1 | Lexical | 0 |
| 2 | Grammatical | 0 |
| 3 | Referential | 45 |
| 4 | Non-referential | 0 |
| 5 | Denotative | 115 |
| 6 | Connotative | 0 |
| 7 | Metaphorical | 0 |
| 8 | Idiomatic | 0 |
| 9 | Terminology | 0 |
| 10 | Word | 0 |
| | Total | 160 |

Next, the results of further research found that the mastery of meaning fields for children with intellectual disabilities includes names of occupations, names of family members, numbers, letters/alphabet, subjects, learning activities, names of days, and animals. For further clarity, please refer to the following table 3.

Table 3. Classification of Meaning Fields

| Number | Field of Meaning | Total |
|---|---|---|
| 1 | Lexical | 7 |
| 2 | Grammatical | 6 |
| 3 | Referential | 20 |
| 4 | Non-referential | 26 |
| 5 | Denotative | 4 |
| 6 | Connotative | 7 |
| 7 | Metaphorical | 8 |
| | Total | 78 |

## *B. Discussion*

### *1) Acquisition of Parts of Speech*

#### *a) Noun Class*

Nouns are referred to as words that denote humans, animals, objects, and concepts or ideas. Children with intellectual disabilities have been able to use noun classes, and they have a good understanding of the meanings they express. This can be seen from the sentences spoken by children that use noun types in their sentences. Based on the research findings, there is a tendency for children to use noun types to refer to people. This is because subjects often use terms of address in

everyday communication, such as using words like "apa," "ama," "nenek," "adik," "abang," "kakak," and people's names. Additionally, the subjects appear to be familiar with the people around them, which leads them to frequently use noun types to refer to individuals. This is in line with Clark's opinion (Chaer, 2002) which concludes that the development of semantic acquisition is divided into four stages, one of which is the generalization stage that occurs after the child reaches the age of five. At this stage, the child has been able to recognize the same objects from a perceptual perspective. Based on this research, it turns out that children with mild intellectual disabilities are already able to recognize objects and people around them based on their perceptions.

*b) Verb Class*

Words contain inherent meanings of actions, processes, and states. Based on the research conducted, it was found that children with intellectual disabilities have used action verbs, passive verbs, process verbs, and active verbs. The use of the types of verbs spoken by the child is correct, as seen from the sentences spoken by the child. Children express words according to the meaning they wish to convey. Based on research conducted, children with intellectual disabilities are already capable of using action verbs, passive verbs, process verbs, and active verbs. This is in line with Clark's opinion (Chaer, 2002) which states that children at this stage of generalization are already able to use words according to their perceptions.

*c) Adjective Class*

Adjectives are words that provide more specific information about something expressed by a noun in a sentence. The types of adjectives used in children's speech are big, small, and far. Based on research conducted on children with intellectual disabilities, it turns out that they are already able to use adjectives to express what is on their minds. For example, the child's statement "Bima's house is small" clearly shows that they are already able to use adjectives to express that the house is small. This proves that the children are already at the stage of generalization, even though they are classified as intellectually disabled; they are capable of expressing something according to their perception.

*d) Numeral Class*

Numerals are a category that can accompany nouns in syntactic constructions, have the potential to accompany other numerals, and cannot combine with "not" or "very." Children with intellectual disabilities are now able to use numeral classes, specifically cardinal numerals and collective numerals. The cardinal numerals can be observed from the child's ability to count from one to twenty, while the collective numerals can be seen in phrases like "first child, second child, third child, and fourth child." This is in line with the opinion expressed by Eve Clark (Maksan, 1993), who stated that initially a child only knows two or three semantic features of a word. Then gradually, the semantic features of the child will increase until they eventually match those of an adult.

*e) Interrogative Class*

Interrogative is a category in interrogative sentences that serves to replace something that the speaker wants to know or to confirm what the speaker already knows. Based on research conducted on children with intellectual disabilities, they are already capable of using interrogative sentences. An example in the utterance "What does your dad do for a living?" "The vegetable trading" children are now able to reinforce what they have learned.This is not much different from the opinion expressed by Clark (Chaer, 2002), where children in the stage of generalization are already able to communicate their perceptions.

*f) Preposition Class*

Prepositions are a category that appears before another category (especially nouns), forming directive exocentric phrases. Based on research, children with intellectual disabilities are already able to use prepositional phrases such as "at home, outside, behind." Although children with intellectual disabilities may find communication somewhat challenging, they are already able to use the right words to express what is in their individual perceptions.

*2) Acquisition of Types of Meaning*

Meaning is the study of words that serve as a link between language and the external world, according to the agreement of its users, which distinguishes it from other words. Based on research conducted on children with intellectual disabilities, they are already capable of using referential and

denotative meanings. They often use referential meaning to mention names, whether for themselves, friends, teachers, or family members. Meanwhile, for denotative meaning, the children have been able to use this meaning well to express what is on their minds. Children use this meaning more in communication. For example, a child expresses their age, the occupations of those around them, details about their family life, and so on.

This aligns with the opinion expressed by Eve Clark (Maksan, 1993), who stated that children's semantic features are the same as those of adults. Initially, a child only knows two or three semantic features of a word. Then gradually, the semantic features of the child will increase until they eventually match those of an adult. Children who learn from their surroundings will learn gradually, including enriching their semantic features, allowing them to express what is around them. Although children with intellectual disabilities have slower development compared to normal children, they can still continue to hone their abilities to express what is around them, as illustrated in the example above.

*3) Acquisition of Field of Meaning*

A field of meaning refers to lexemes or words in each language whose meanings are interconnected and closely related within a specific domain that can be grouped into a particular area of activity or a field of study. Based on research conducted on children with intellectual disabilities, it was found that the words spoken by the children are limited to a specific area.

Among the meanings that children can express are names of occupations, names of family members, numbers, letters of the alphabet, names of subjects and activities in learning, names of days, and names of animals. The words that children use most frequently are in the area of numbers. The child can already state their age, the number of family members, the number of rooms in their house, and can count.

This aligns with Clark's opinion (Chaer, 2002), which concludes that children at the stage of generalization, specifically after the age of five, are already able to recognize objects from the same perspective, understanding that these objects share the same semantic features. So, when children are between the ages of five and seven, they are able to recognize what is meant by animals, whichincludes all creatures that are classified as animals.

*4) Cooperative Learning Strategies*

Children with intellectual disabilities who have delays and deficiencies compared to typically developing children require special approaches and strategies in the learning process, including language learning. One of the learning strategies that is suitable for implementation in the education of children with intellectual disabilities is the cooperative learning strategy.

Cooperative learning can be a means to develop students' awareness to think, solve problems, and integrate and apply their knowledge. (Slavin, 2005). To be able to engage and motivate children with intellectual disabilities in learning, it is necessary to approach the learning environment both by teachers and fellow learners. Therefore, cooperative strategies can be one alternative to create a conducive learning environment for children with intellectual disabilities.

Through cooperative learning, children with intellectual disabilities receive more intense stimulation to express what is on their minds. In cooperative strategies, children with intellectual disabilities communicate more with their learning peers, both in pairs and in groups. This condition creates better communication stimulation as the children can express their thoughts freely. For that reason, language learning becomes more effective.

## IV. Conclusion

Based on the research findings and discussion, it can be concluded that: (1) children with intellectual disabilities are able to use parts of speech such as nouns, verbs, numerals, adjectives, interrogatives, and prepositions; (2) children with intellectual disabilities are already able to use types of referential meaning and denotative meaning; (3) children with intellectual disabilities are at the stage of meaning fields, which means that they are capable of categorizing objects based on their respective meaning fields; and (4) cooperative learning strategies are one of the learning strategies that can be applied in the teaching process (of language) for children with intellectual disabilities.

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