Section 5: FOCUSING ON THE LINGUISTIC AND NON-LINGUISTIC OUTCOMES OF EARLY EFL LEARNING

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FOREIGN LANGUAGE ACQUISITION IN CHILDREN: SOME EVIDENCE FROM TESTING ENGLISH WITH FIRST GRADERS

Within the Zagreb research project on the early introduction of foreign languages (English, French, Italian and German) into the school curriculum[10], English was taught with first graders in four primary schools in Zagreb during the 1991/92 school year. The first graders received one period of English instruction a day, that is, five periods per week throughout the school year.

In order to gain a more in-depth knowledge of the ways children acquire a second language[11], in this case specifically of the ways children aged 7-8 years acquire English

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[10] On the underlying conception of the Project and on the educative value of beginning foreign language learning early, see Mirjana Vilke's chapter. Also, the Zagreb project is seen as part of an overall project organized under the auspices of the Council of Europe.

[11] *Foreign language acquisition* is used in this paper to refer to a phenomenon that – though it may be related to – should not be a priori identified with second language acquisition. Research in second language study clearly delimits first and second language acquisition yet fails, at times, to make a clear distinction between second and foreign language acquisition/learning (either by incorporating the notion of foreign language into that of second language, or, for instance, by taking the term second language to refer to any language being learned other than the first language, cf. Singleton, 1989). In our circumstances English is felt to be a foreign language rather than a second one. Furthermore, one must mention the hypothesis that the processes Krashen and others have called *acquisition* (the unconscious formulation of grammatical principles) and *learning* (the conscious cognitive-based study of grammar) represent two systems for internalizing knowledge about language. This is important for our study in that at the age of eight the child predominantly *acquires* a foreign language, despite the fact that he is exposed to it – though very intensively – in a formal environment. T. D. Tarrell, who advocates the natural approach to language teaching, emphasizes that the activities promoting acquisition "are indispensable for all students" (1988:67). However, it is especially at the early age that the unconscious acquisition process is superior to the learning one (due to the child's level of cognitive development). It is here that the role of foreign language teacher comes in: "since in most cases of foreign language (and often even in second language) study, the student has little chance for acquisition outside the classroom, the instructor must provide this kind of experience". (Tarrell, 1988:67)
The term foreign language acquisition is felt then to describe most accurately (as distinctive from second language acquisition/learning and foreign language learning) the process the child has undergone in the study.

in the early stage of their formal education, an interview was carried out in the four schools towards the end of the school year.

This chapter is concerned with some essential insights into foreign language acquisition in children, based upon the analysis of the data obtained in the interview. It is believed that the insights derived from the study may have important implications both theoretically and educationally.

Part I of the chapter relates to the process of conducting the research, data collecting procedures and the conditions prevailing during the data collection[12]. In part II patterns and regularities observed in and derived from the analysis of the data are reported.

I. The purpose of the research. One hundred and five first graders were interviewed in the four Zagreb primary schools towards the end of school year 1991/92. The first graders, their average age being 7-8, had had five periods of English teaching during the first year of formal schooling.

The purpose of the research was to get insights into foreign language acquisition in young learners who had received intensive English instruction in a formal classroom environment. At a more specific level, the research was aimed at getting insights into the ways children cope with understanding English and producing English utterances, to see whether there are any strategies that they use, and if there are, whether there are any regularities in the usage. The purpose of the research determined its heuristic/inductive nature: we wanted to proceed from the data (data-driven as opposed to hypothesis-driven research) to patterns which are suggested by the data themselves.[13]

I.1. English instruction and the interview data. One specific point must be made first as to the nature of English instruction to the first graders. The Project assumed the versatility of teaching approaches as one of its basic principles; no insistence was placed upon one preferred teaching method or approach towards young language learners. This resulted in the differing and experimental nature of English language teaching in the primary schools. The four teachers of English were creating what might be called a common nucleus of English syllabus for first graders, but the syllabus was more of a descriptive than a prescriptive nature. This allowed for the possibility of the teacher's highly individual self-expression in classroom activities; the individual impact was felt

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[12] The information is relevant when reporting results from qualitative research. (cf. Seliger & Shohamy, 1990)

[13] In the methodology of second language research, the terms heuristic and deductive relate to the purpose of the research. The basic distinction lies in that the heuristic research is data driven, it means it starts with no preconceptions about the data, and the product of such research is description or hypothesis; by contrast, if the aim of the research is deductive, the research is hypothesis driven, it makes predictions and tests hypotheses, and the product of such research is a theory. (cf. Seliger & Shohamy, 1989, pp. 30-31)

both on the level of the teacher's worldview or the type of psychological attitude taken towards children and on the level of a particular teaching approach or techniques the teacher engaged in. The point at issue here is that this had implications for the nature of data obtained from the children: it has strongly been observed in data analysis that if the teacher, for instance, persistently insisted on precise and accurate pronunciation of English sounds, this affected to a large extent the phonological quality of the utterances children produced; or that, if the teacher insisted on the creative use of communicative patterns in classroom activities, children's utterances were felt to be more unexpected/unpredictable, that is, language was used as a means to communicate something the child thought it necessary to communicate.[14]

I.2. Data collection procedures. Vocabulary and grammar structures in the teaching of English in the four schools were taken as the basis for the content/questions of the interview. A number of investigators had attended the English classes, observing and recording English utterances produced by the teacher and the children in classroom activities. On the basis of the recorded material it was possible to make a corpus of the vocabulary and structures that were common to all four classes.[15]

The analysis of the corpus has revealed that certain thematic elements were used in the teaching of English in all four schools. The themes are inherently connected with the sensitive elements of the child's world: members of family, friends (therefore the common vocabulary: *mummy, daddy, brother, sister, friend*); colours (the number of colours taught varies from eight to ten, the most frequent being *pink, red, blue, green, white, black*); the world of animals (the core vocabulary reveals that it is the animals from the jungle that are most exciting for the child's imagination – *snake, elephant, tiger, lion*; but *cat* and *dog* are obligatory); parts of the body (with the structures *I can see, I can hear, I can smell, Can you see?, No, I can't, Yes, I can* appearing alongside); the

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[14] I would like to point out that, at the interpretive level of the research data, what I am implying here is: first, that the second/foreign language teacher serves as a *model* of language behaviour and language use to young learners and that any aspect of the model the teacher is inclined to use consistently is readily imitated/adopted by the children; second, the model figure of the language teacher may be crucial for the *quality* of early language learning experience. In the educational debate over early second language instruction the issue of a positive/negative early experience of second language learning is seen as important as the maturational or the age factor issue. (cf. Singleton, 1989: 244)

[15] I would like to point out the issue of *subjectivity* in the process of recording the English utterances. The corpus of words and structures recorded by the investigators is only a part of the overall usage of language expressions in classroom communication. The recorded material is based upon empirical data and is necessarily determined by the investigator's subjective selection. This does not imply, however, that the collected data are not valid; they are linguistically valid and relevant for the research as far as any empirical linguistic data can be. The point is that the researcher should be aware of the degree of subjectivity involved in research procedures. In our case, the heuristic/inductive nature of the research accounts for the "low-level of explicitness" (Seliger & Shohamy, 1989) in data collecting procedures.

world of nature, countryside (especially *flowers, birds, the sun, the moon*) versatile vocabulary and structures from numerous songs and games the children sang and played.

The analysis of the corpus of the common syntactic structures[16] has revealed that, taking a somewhat grammatical perspective, the usage of basic auxiliaries (*can, have*) is predominant, particularly in communicative patterns where questions and answers (affirmative and negative) are interrelated, as in a simple case: *Have you got a brother/ sister?*, or especially in requests like *Can I have a cup of tea?, Can I play with you?*. The analysis has also revealed a predominant tendency that a number of structures are used with a variety of themes, that is, that they can be strongly thematized by being used with diverse thematic vocabulary. Furthermore, the core structures show that some of the main verbs (e.g., *go, come, do, see, hear*) are represented by means of imperatives functioning as commands or requests (it is suggested that the context of classroom activities, that is, various games, "required" the particular usage). Last but not least, much insistence has been placed on communicative usage of greetings (e.g., *Good morning, Good night, Bye, bye*) and on the verbal gestures of cultured behaviour (*Thank you, Please*).

I.3. The interview – type, methodology, design. The material being observed, recorded and analysed in terms of core vocabulary and grammatical structures used in a formal classroom environment at the primary level of English teaching, the interviewing of 105 young learners, aged 7-8, was carried out towards the end of the school year.

The interviews[17], which averaged 10-15 minutes in length with each child, were tape recorded and transcribed.

The questions of the interview were determined beforehand.

1. The child was first asked in English: *What is your name? How old are you? Have you got a brother/sister? What is your brother's/sister's name? How old is he/she?*
2. The child was then shown two large sheets of paper with 19 coloured pictures of beings (humans, animals) and objects on it; the child was asked - *What can you see in this pictures?* – to name the beings/objects that he/she recognised.
3. The child was then asked to read five cards having mathematical operations of plus and minus (with numbers to 12) on each (e.g., three plus five is eight).

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[16] It is only for the purpose of the research analysis that the observed and recorded material of the language used in classroom communication is divided into categories of basic vocabulary and grammar structures. Apart from the analytic abstraction, the two are inseparable in language use. It must be noted that they are inseparable and interrelated especially from the point of the child's use of the foreign language, which is characterised by absence of conceptualisation and by an unconscious search for regularities. By contrast, in classroom context teachers usually do make a conscious effort to teach particular vocabulary and particular grammar rules.

[17] Bearing in mind the heuristic/inductive purpose of the research, it should be noted that the interviews, as personalized form, "permit a level of in-depth information gathering, free response and flexibility that cannot be obtained by other procedures" (Seliger & Shohamy, 1989: 166)

4. In this part the child was asked *Kako Englezi kažu?* [*How do English people say this?*] – *Dobro jutro* [*Good morning*], *Laku noć* [*Good night*], *Gladan sam* [*I'm hungry*], *Pospan sam* [*I'm sleepy*], *Kako si?* [*How are you?*], *Dobro sam* [*I'm fine*], *Mogu li dobiti malo vode?* [*May/can I have some water please?*].

5. Towards the end of the interview the child was shown a picture of a funny monster holding pencils of different colours; the child was asked *What colours can you see in this picture?* and to say which colour he liked most (two alternative questions: *What colour do you like best?* or *What is your favourite colour?*).

6. Finally, there was a picture of six cats, eight dogs and ten flowers under the coloured picture; the child was asked to say how many cats/dogs/flowers he/she could see.

The interview, as a type of data collecting procedure, was a semi-open or semi-structured interview[18], and had a low degree of explicitness. Though the interview questions, by their very nature, are inclined to elicit specific answers from children (e.g., whether and how they use personal pronouns in 1) or whether and how, for instance, they use plural in 6) so that the research analysis may focus on investigating these particular segments, the analysis of data obtained in the interview show that there is an array of "unexpected" and "unpredicted" answers on the part of the interviewees. This is partly due to the conditions under which the research was conducted in the four schools; the interviewers used different techniques of asking and eliciting answers – sometimes they "helped" the child by suggesting a possible answer, or provoked the child's production of an utterance by evoking a situational context in which it was presumed that he had heard it, or elaborated the question and gave more time to the child to think and speak.[19]

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[18] According to the degrees of explicitness and structure, interviews range from very open to very structured ones. In second language research methodology there are three main types of interviews: open, semi-open, and structured. Open interviews have broad freedom of expression and elaboration and often resemble informal talk; semi-open or semi-structured interviews "consist of specific and defined questions determined beforehand, but at the same time allow some elaboration in the questions and answers"; structured interviews are used when specific information is needed and no elaboration is allowed in either the questions or answers. (Cf. Seliger & Shohamy, 1989: 16ff)

[19] This brings us, I think, to the very important question of what constitutes the child's "knowledge" of a foreign language in the early stage of his acquiring and how it can be assessed. The analysis of data obtained suggests that it is rather hard to say what the child's real knowledge (in terms of "objective" knowledge) is, which, it seems to me, implies that the research in early second language acquisition can hardly measure some objective knowledge of children for at least three reasons: acquiring of a second language in the early stage is a process; children use language primarily to communicate and convey meaning; the child may understand what they ask him but need not know how to produce the utterance he would like to, that is, the levels of understanding and production in early second language acquisition are delimited.

It should be therefore noted that in the process of conducting the research there were contextual variables that to a certain degree influenced the type of utterances children came to produce in the interview. Finally, one must also mention the possibility that the child was aware of the fact that some kind of "testing" was being done, and that this awareness may have affected the child's particular use of language in a communicational context. Tarone (1981) claims that a language learner's performance "depends on whether they are participating in planned or unplanned discourse" and that "second language learners can be observed to make *different use* (italicised by M.K.) of their interlanguage systems in different tasks. Thus performance in one set of circumstances does not guarantee an identical or even similar performance in a different situation".[20]

In sum, what was obvious in analyzing the transcribed data was that, as to the nature of data obtained, there were four different sets of transcripts. From a methodological point of view, it seems then important to be aware that

· the interview data obtained are to a certain extent different in each of the four schools, due to a contextual variable (the degree of elaboration and intervention in the questions and answers) and the teaching approach variable (discussed in I.1);

· it is only on a more general level that it is possible to identify typical commonalities and regularities in children's language use across the overall transcribed data;

· the differing nature of the data requires that the four transcripts be analyzed separately, and then compared.

II. Findings on a general level. Let me start with an interpretative suggestion that, in the process of listening to the tapes, transcribing and analyzing the interview data,

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It seems to me, therefore, that it is useful to make s distinction between the interviews and tests as done by Seliger & Shohamy (1989). Tests investigate *knowledge* of the second language (grammar, vocabulary, reading, metalinguistic awareness, general proficiency), whereas interviews are used to collect data on, on one hand, attitudes and motivation, and on the other hand, "they have also been used recently for obtaining information about *strategies* (italicized by M.K.) which language learners use in the process of producing and acquiring a second language in a variety of contexts". (Seliger & Shohamy, 1989: 167)

Though this is not suggested by Seliger and Shohamy, I would imply that, at a methodological level, tests seem to be most appropriate for adult second language learners, whereas interviews, besides being especially appropriate for obtaining data on adult learners' strategies (i.e., verbal reporting) and on attitudes and motivation, are of much importance in getting insights into the child's strategies in acquiring a second language. Unlike the adult, the child cannot report on the strategies he uses to acquire a new language – due to unconscious and unconceptualized nature of early acquiring – but from the child's very usage of the new language we can infer, by means of analytic and interpretative procedures, what the strategies are. This means that the term "learner strategy" when applied to young learners requires a redefinition of the term as it is used in literature (Rubin, 1981; Wenden, 1982; 1986;, O'Malley & Chamot, 1990) to refer to adult learner strategy.

[20]   Quoted according to Seliger & Shohamy, 1989: 181.

it was the child's pronunciation and the quality of the acquired phonetic system that fascinated most.[21] Secondly, in analyzing the material a whole array of regularities and regular patterns was observed a) in the ways children used second language structures, b) in the strategies they specifically used in producing idioms, c) in the ways they shifted from their mother tongue to the second language and vice versa.

Data analysis shows most explicitly that children have attained a high standard of pronunciation. The majority of children appear to have had no difficulty in acquiring the English phonetic system; the striking feature in their production of English utterances is that they pronounce the characteristic English sounds – the ones that do not appear in the Croatian phonetic system – in a manner that can hardly be distinguished from that of native speakers. The child's pronunciation is observed to have the qualities of fluency and softness.

This relates particularly to the sounds [t] and [d], which are strongly observed to be pronounced as authentic English sounds, e.g., as alveolar in *ten, twelve, No, I haven't, dog*. The majority of children excel at pronouncing the specific English sounds [æ] and [θ], using them with remarkably high degree of authenticity in *cat, rabbit, apple* for instance, and especially in *thank you* and *three*. The utterance *five minus three is two* is indicative of the quality of the acquired pronunciation (the "softness" of the diphthong [ai], short [∂] in *minus*, [θ] in *three*, alveolar [t] in *two*). A very fine pronunciation of the typical English sound [r] is heard in *rabbit* and *hungry*.

Data analysis shows that most of the children imitate intonation patterns they have heard in the classroom situational context, especially in questions like *How are you?*, with special stress being placed on *are*. Furthermore, a striking correlation between the child's psychological traits concerning his/her attitude towards communication and the use of intonation patterns has been observed. As a rule, the children who expressed eagerness to communicate in English and who gave a quick response to the questions asked – the tone of their voice being cheerful and lively – used intonation most naturally; the "silent" children, who were reluctant to express themselves through language – the tone of their voice having a shy and depressing quality – did not use marked intonation.

II.1. The analysis of the ways children answered the questions in the interview circumstances shows that most of the children – boys especially – definitely prefer giving short answers (*yes* or *no*).[22] In analyzing the answers to the questions *What's*

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[21] I am aware that the term "fascination" may seem inappropriate for the type of discourse the research report belongs to; still, I am using the term at a highly interpretative level to suggest a degree of quality the children showed in pronouncing English utterances.

[22] It will be argued later that children in this development stage use language to convey meaning. For the child, it seems to me, a short answer to a question (e.g., *Have you got a brother?*) is sufficient in so far as it has conveyed the basic message. It can be hypothesized that the child has acquired the elaborated form (e.g., *Yes, I have got a brother*), but the reason he is not using it does not lie in that

your name? and *How old are you?* a regularity has been observed in that most of the children give full answers, using first person singular in both the personal and possessive pronoun (e.g., *My name is Ines,* or *I'm Davor,* or *I'm seven*). It has strongly been observed, however, that first noticeable silence in the course of the interview with most children appears when the question *How old is your brother/sister?* is asked, that is, when the child is supposed to start with *he/she*; most of the children understand the question and then, after a short silence/pause, a brief answer devoid of the third person singular pronoun, yet still conveying the essential message, is given (e.g., *eight, ten*). A small number of children did not give any answer to the question, and, at an interpretive level, I would suggest that they did understand the question but did not know how to cope with *he/she*.[23]

In sum, data analysis shows that most of the children understand the meaning of pronouns, but that at the level of production only *I* is systematically used whereas *he/she* is avoided by giving a short structural form (e.g., instead of *She is ten*, first a pause, then *Ten*).[24] It seems as if the very concept of *he/she* is somewhat vague in children's perception at that age.

Let me now give a striking example of the strategies the child uses in communicating meaning:

– *How old is your brother?*
  The child: ... (*a long pause*) ...*On ima mjeseci.* [*He has got months*]
– Ah, onda ništa. [*Well, then, it's OK*]
  The child: *Small boy.*

What that example shows is that, first, the child understands the meaning of *How old is your brother?*, second, that the child turns to his mother tongue to express what he finds he cannot express in the foreign language (*On ima mjeseci*), and third that

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the child is not capable of producing it, but in that the child *thinks/feels* that the full answer is not necessary.

[23] Children were very confident in answering the previous question *How old are you?* with a full structure *I'm seven*. As they know the meaning of the words *your brother/sister* it can hardly be supposed that they could not "catch" the analogy in meaning between the two-

  How old are you?
  How old is your brother/sister?

[24] In her study of the acquisition of syntactic structures in children whose native language was English, between the ages 5 and 10, Carol Chomsky (1969) came up with the results: "Contrary to the commonly held view that a child has mastered the structures of his native language by the time he reaches the age of 6, we find that active syntactic acquisition is taking place up to the age of 9 and perhaps even beyond" (Chomsky, 1973: 121, fourth edition).

  Mirjana Vilke's reporting on the results of a test item on pronominalization within the earlier Zagreb research project is almost identical to our findings: "most children understand what *he* and *she* stand for, but prefer using nouns, which probably look less abstract" (Vilke, 1988:124).

he now shifts to English, using the known words to convey the same meaning (*Small boy*). The example is indicative of a regularity observed in the data, namely, that

- the level of understanding English is superior to the level of production
- the child uses both his mother and second language to communicate meaning
- as the level of production has a restricted scope in the early stage of acquiring English, the child uses creative strategies to convey the intended meaning. The key category in the strategies is the noun.

II.2. The very data have led us to focus on the usage of the indefinite article, as it has been observed that most of the children do not make a distinction in using *a/an*. In connection with this, a strong tendency has been traced in that the children persistently stick to the acquired structures, for which it is presumed that they have long been repeated in the very initial stage of learning, (e.g., *I can see a girl, This is a boy, It's a flower*); the acquired structures (specifically *I can see a ..., This is a ..., It's a...*) are "coined" automatically with various nouns (e.g., *I can see a elephant, This is a apple, It's a orange*). A small group of children is observed to have "felt" that something was wrong and to have corrected themselves by using the appropriate *an* (e.g., first *I can see a orange,* then a pause, then corrects himself (*I can see an orange*).

I would suggest that the self-correction procedures, observed in children at different points of their foreign language use, imply that in the process of acquiring a foreign language the child unconsciously notices that the new language has rules of its own. In the interview data it is in the field of the unexpected (the child's unexpected responses/reactions) that most of the child's unconscious thinking over the new language has been traced. An example may illustrate the depth of the "unconscious meta-reflection":

- *Kako bi Englez rekao "Gladan sam"?* [*How would an Englishman say „Gladan sam" = "I'm hungry"?*]
  The child: *Hungry.*
- *A pospan sam?* [*And what about "pospan sam" = "I'm sleepy"*]
  The child: *... (silence) ... Mogu li ja sam pospan? ...* [*May I say „Ja sam pospan"?*]
- (a little bit confused) *Da, da, možeš.* [*Yes, you may*]
  The child: *I'm ... I'm ...*

The example shows that the child a) identifies, possibly by means of simple analogy, *gladan sam* and *hungry*,[25] that is, omits the subject in his English utterance, b) does not respond to *pospan sam,* but unexpectedly asks to say *ja sam pospan,*[26] c) *starts his English equivalent I'm ...I'm.* The example shows that the child has come to the point – under the "pressure" of an immediate communicative context – to compare the two

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[25]   The Croatian utterance *Gladan sam* does not have the explicit subject, that is, the subject is "hidden behind".

[26]   In the Croatian utterance *Ja sam pospan*, *ja* is the explicit subject *I*.

language systems, and to unconsciously notice the difference between the two, namely, that English requires the subject (*I'm.. I'm*) and that its word order is fixed.[27]

II.3. Data findings indicate that most of the children find it difficult to produce an idiomatic structure fully. In trying to find an English equivalent to *Mogu li dobiti malo vode?* [*May/can I have some water please?*] only 12 of 105 began their sentence with *Can I...* (silence) or *Can I have...*(silence) or *Can I have water*. The children who could not remember the idiom are observed to use a highly regular language pattern: first silence and then a structure *Water, please* or *Please, water*. For instance, a boy had a long period of silence; then he asked in Croatian *Kako se kaže voda?* [*How do you say "voda"?*]; the interviewer said *Water*, after which the child immediately created his equivalent of the idiom – *Please, water*. The child's utterances show that he a) focuses on meaning, b) uses strategies of a regular pattern to create the meaning (the noun + the verbal gesture of cultured behaviour).

III. Conclusion. This chapter has reported on some basic findings of a study carried out to gain insights into the ways children aged 7-8 acquire English at the primary level of formal education. At a more general level, the basic findings, under the interview conditions stipulated, are:

·   children have acquired the English phonetic system with a high degree of authentic pronunciation
·   the level of comprehension is superior to the level of production (performance)
·   at the level of performance, regularities have been observed in the ways children use structures and idioms; their primary communicative intention is to convey meaning, and they use the strategies to communicate the intended meaning; the key category in focus is the noun
·   children systematically use *I/my* but do not use *he/she*, though they understand the meaning; the findings ought to be related to those from the study of Carol Chomsky (1969) and are in line with the findings reported by Mirjana Vilke (1974, 1988)
·   some children use self-correction procedures, which implies that they unconsciously recognise that the second language they are learning functions in a specific way.

A special analysis of the four transcripts, with different aspects in focus, as to show to what degree and how different approaches in foreign language teaching affect the early acquiring of the language, is needed. The findings of the analysis may have important educational implications.

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[27]   The metalanguage I am using here is the researcher's interpretative metalanguage and is, therefore, far from the child's perception of the language he is acquiring.

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