

The Chinese University of Hong Kong
Department of Linguistics and Modern Languages
First Term of 2025-26

Course code and title

LING5103A Foundations in Language Acquisition 語言獲得基礎

Instructor and Teaching Assistant

Instructor: Dr. Margaret Lei

Teaching Assistants: Ms. Zhuoqun Wang; Mr. Zhan Liu

Lecture time and venue

Wednesdays, 6:30pm-8:15pm; Room 507, Wu Ho Man Yuen Building (WMY 507)

Tutorial time and venue

Wednesdays, 8:30pm-9:15pm; Room 507, Wu Ho Man Yuen Building (WMY 507)

Course overview

This course introduces students to major themes in language acquisition research: language as a species-specific property, the biological foundations of language acquisition, the nature and role of linguistic experience, and issues of language learnability. It highlights the major milestones in children's acquisition of phonetics, phonology, semantics, syntax, and morphology, with special reference made to the acquisition of Chinese. The course will discuss the characteristics of nativist and usage-based approaches to the study of language acquisition, as well as key methods used in language acquisition studies. Attention will be devoted to language acquisition in different contexts, covering monolingual and bilingual first as well as second language acquisition.

Learning outcomes

Students are expected to achieve the following learning outcomes:

- (a) An awareness of the roles of biological factors as well as input in language acquisition;
- (b) A basic understanding of the key concepts in children's acquisition of phonetics, phonology, semantics, syntax, and morphology;
- (c) An appreciation of the complexity of language acquisition in different contexts;
- (d) A basic grasp of the methods used in language acquisition studies, and how they are used to address specific issues of language acquisition.

List of topics

Topic	Contents/fundamental concepts
Module 1: Fundamental concepts of language acquisition	
1A Introduction to language acquisition	<ul style="list-style-type: none">■ Different types of language acquisition: monolingual and bilingual first language acquisition, second vs. heritage language acquisition, and atypical language development■ The logical problem of language acquisition
1B Biological foundations of language acquisition	<ul style="list-style-type: none">■ Human language versus other animal communication systems; unique features of human language■ The critical period hypothesis
1C The nature and role of linguistic experience in language acquisition	<ul style="list-style-type: none">■ Child-directed speech and recast■ Positive and negative evidence
<hr/> Module 2: Major milestones in child language acquisition	
2A Phonetic and phonological development	<ul style="list-style-type: none">■ Infant speech perception and vocalization; word segmentation; phonological characteristics and rules in child language
2B Lexical and semantic development	<ul style="list-style-type: none">■ The Gavagai problem; lexical/vocabulary spurt; innate biases for learning the meanings of words; overextension and underextension
2C Syntactic development	<ul style="list-style-type: none">■ Stages of language development; the onset of functional and lexical categories in grammatical development; the acquisition of word order, negation and questions
2D Morphological development	<ul style="list-style-type: none">■ The acquisition of regular morphological rules; knowledge of the constraints on word formation; overregularization

Module 3: Methods of studying language acquisition

3A Methods for analyzing naturalistic speech	■ Observational methods for analyzing naturalistic speech
3B Methods for examining early linguistic competence	■ Experimental methods for studying language comprehension in preverbal infants
3C Methods for examining language comprehension	■ Experimental methods for studying language comprehension in preschool children
3D Methods for examining language production	■ Experimental methods for eliciting language production in preschool children

Learning activities

Lecture		Interactive tutorial		Assigned readings		Writing assignments		Web discussions		Quiz & Exam		Research report	
(hr)		(hr)		(hr)		(hr)		(hr)		(hr)		(hr)	
in	out class	in	out class	in	out class	in	out class	in	out class	in	out class	in	out class
26	0	12	0	0	60	0	20	0	3	4	0	6	30
M	NA	M	NA	NA	M & O	NA	M	NA	O	M	NA	M	M

M: Mandatory activity in the course / O: Optional activity / NA: Not applicable

Assessment scheme

Task nature	Weight
Short assignments (a total of three)	30%
Quiz #1	10%
Quiz #2	15%
Final examination	30%
In-class mini-exercises	15%

Each unexcused absence from classes will result in a 2% deduction from the overall mark.

Grade descriptors for assessment

Grade	Overall course
A	Outstanding performance on all learning outcomes, as reflected in excellent performance in class participation, tutorial answers, quizzes, written assignments and the term project, indicating a clear grasp of key concepts, dedicated efforts spent on readings and assignments, seriousness of purpose, intellectual curiosity and a desire to try out new ideas.
A-	Generally outstanding performance on all (or almost all) learning outcomes, as reflected in excellent performance in class participation, tutorial answers, quizzes, written assignments and the term project, indicating a clear grasp of key concepts, dedicated efforts spent on readings and assignments, and seriousness of purpose.
B	Overall substantial performance on learning outcomes, as reflected in good performance in class participation, tutorial answers, quizzes, written assignments and the term project, indicating an adequate grasp of key concepts, serious efforts devoted to readings and assignments, and a general interest in academic study.
C	Satisfactory performance on the majority of learning outcomes, as reflected in an average performance in class participation, tutorial answers, quizzes, written assignments and the term project, indicating a basic grasp of key concepts and basic efforts in completing required readings and assignments.
D	Barely satisfactory performance on a number of learning outcomes, as reflected in low level of class participation, a small amount of effort in returning tutorial answers, poor performance on quizzes, written assignments and the term project, indicating a poor grasp of key concepts, and lack of application in readings and assignments.
F	Unsatisfactory performance on many learning outcomes, as reflected in low level of class participation, little effort in returning tutorial answers, poor performance on quizzes, written assignments and the term project, indicating a failure to understand key concepts, and no evidence for genuine effort in completing readings and assignments.

Recommended learning resources

A. Textbook

Becker, Misha, and Kamil Ud Deen. 2020. *Language Acquisition and Development: A Generative Introduction*. Cambridge, Massachusetts: The MIT Press.

[eBook](#) [Hardcopy on UL reserve: P118 .B423 2020]

B. Supplementary texts

Blume, María, and Barbara Lust. 2017. *Research Methods in Language Acquisition: Principles, Procedures, and Practices*. Washington, DC; Boston: American Psychological Association and Walter de Gruyter.

[eBook](#) [Hardcopy on UL reserve: P118.15 .B58 2017]

Guasti, Maria Teresa. 2016. *Language Acquisition: The Growth of Grammar*. Second ed. Cambridge, MA: The MIT Press.

[eBook](#) [Hardcopy on UL reserve: P118 .G83 2016]

Lightbown, Patsy M., and Mina Spada. 2021. *How Languages are Learned*. Fifth ed. Oxford: Oxford University Press.

[Hardcopy on UL reserve: P118 .L53 2021]

O'Grady, William D. 2005. *How Children Learn Language*. Cambridge, UK; New York: Cambridge University Press.

[eBook](#) [Hardcopy on UL reserve: P118 .O268 2005]

C. Other recommended texts on first and second language acquisition

Clark, Eve V. 2016. *First Language Acquisition*. Third ed. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press.

[eBook](#) [Hardcopy on UL reserve: P118 .C547 2016]

Clark, Eve V. 2017. *Language in Children*. Milton Park, Abingdon, Oxon: Routledge.

[eBook](#) [Hardcopy on UL reserve: P118.3 .C53 2017]

De Houwer, Annick. 2009. *Bilingual First Language Acquisition*. UK: Multilingual Matters.

[eBook](#) [Hardcopy on UL reserve: P118 .D373 2009]

Gass, Susan M., Jennifer Behney and Luke Plonsky. 2020. *Second Language Acquisition: An Introductory Course*. Fifth ed. Taylor & Francis Group.

[eBook](#) [Hardcopy on UL reserve: P118.2 .G37 2020]

Hoff, Erika. 2014. *Language Development*. Fifth ed. Belmont, CA: Wadsworth, Cengage Learning.

[eBook](#) [Hardcopy on UL reserve: P118 .H64 2014]

Ionin, Tania. 2023. *Second Language Acquisition: Introducing Intervention Research*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press.

[eBook](#)

Lust, Barbara. 2006. *Child Language: Acquisition and Growth*. Cambridge; New York: Cambridge University Press.

[eBook](#) [Hardcopy on UL reserve: P118 .L87 2006]

Paradis, Johanne, Fred Genesee, and Martha B. Crago. 2021. *Dual Language Development and Disorders: A Handbook on Bilingualism and Second Language Learning*. Third ed. Baltimore; London; Sydney: Paul H. Brookes Publishing.

[eBook](#) [Hardcopy on UL reserve: P115.2 .G458 2021]

Saville-Troike, Muriel, and Karen Barto. 2017. *Introducing Second Language Acquisition*. Third ed. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press.

[eBook](#) [Hardcopy on UL reserve: P118.2 .S28 2017]

Saxton, Matthew. 2017. *Child Language: Acquisition and Development*. Second ed. London; Los Angeles: SAGE Publications.

[eBook](#) [Hardcopy on UL reserve: P118 .S38 2017]

Pence Turnbull, L. Khara, and Laura M. Justice. 2017. *Language Development from Theory to Practice*. Third ed. Upper Saddle River, N.J.: Pearson.

[eBook](#) [Hardcopy on UL reserve: P118 .P396 2017]

Yip, Virginia, and Stephen Matthews. 2007. *The Bilingual Child: Early Development and Language Contact*. Cambridge, UK; New York: Cambridge University Press.

[eBook](#) [Hardcopy on UL reserve: P115.2 .Y55 2007]

D. Handbooks and encyclopedias on language and language acquisition

Bavin, Edith Laura, and Letitia R. Naigles. 2015. *The Cambridge Handbook of Child Language*. Second ed. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press.

[eBook](#) [Hardcopy on UL reserve: P118 .C36 2015]

Brooks, Patricia J., Vera Kempe, Patricia J. Brooks, and Vera Kempe. 2014. *Encyclopedia of Language Development*. Edited by Patricia Brooks and Vera Kempe. California: SAGE Publications.

[eBook](#) [Hardcopy on UL reference: P118 .E533 2014]

Crystal, David. 2010. *The Cambridge Encyclopedia of Language*. 3rd ed. Cambridge; New York: Cambridge University Press.

[Hardcopy on UL reserve: P29 .C72 2010]

de Villiers, Jill G., and Thomas Roeper. 2011. *Handbook of Generative Approaches to Language Acquisition*. Dordrecht; New York: Springer.

[eBook](#) [Hardcopy on UL reserve: P118 .H3486 2011]

Doughty, Catherine, and Michael H. Long. 2005. *The Handbook of Second Language Acquisition*. Malden, MA: Blackwell Publishing.

[eBook](#) [Hardcopy on UL reserve: P118.2 .H363 2003]

Herschensohn, Julia, and Martha Young-Scholten. 2013. *The Cambridge Handbook of Second Language Acquisition*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press.

[eBook](#) [Hardcopy on UL reserve: P118.2 .C356 2013]

Hoff, Erika, and Marilyn Shatz. 2007. *Blackwell Handbook of Language Development*. Malden, MA; Oxford: Blackwell Publishing.

[eBook](#) [Hardcopy on UL reserve: P118 .B583 2007]

- Lidz, Jeffrey, William Snyder, and Joe Pater. 2016. *The Oxford Handbook of Developmental Linguistics*. Oxford: Oxford University Press.
 eBook [Hardcopy on UL reserve: P118 .O84 2016]
- Schwartz, Richard G. 2017. *Handbook of Child Language Disorders*. Second ed. New York: Routledge.
 eBook [Hardcopy on UL reserve: WL340.2 .H25 2017]
- Sybesma, Rint. ed. 2015. *Encyclopedia of Chinese Language and Linguistics [Electronic Resource]*. Leiden: Brill.
 eBook [Hardcopy on New Asia College Ch'ien Mu Library NA reference: PL1031 .E53 2017]

E. References on methods in language acquisition research

- Blom, Elma, and Sharon Unsworth. 2010. *Experimental Methods in Language Acquisition Research*. Philadelphia; Amsterdam: John Benjamins Publishing.
 eBook [Hardcopy on UL reserve: P118 .E87 2010]
- Crain, Stephen, and Rosalind Thornton. 1998. *Investigations in Universal Grammar: A Guide to Experiments on the Acquisition of Syntax and Semantics*. Cambridge, MA: MIT Press.
 eBook [Hardcopy on UL reserve: P118.15 .C73 1998]
- Hoff, Erika, ed. 2012. *Research Methods in Child Language: A Practical Guide*. Malden, MA; Chichester, West Sussex: Wiley-Blackwell.
 eBook [Hardcopy on UL reserve: P118.3 .R47 2012]
- Mackey, Alison, and Susan M. Gass. 2012. *Research Methods in Second Language Acquisition: A Practical Guide*. Chichester, West Sussex, UK; Malden, MA: Wiley-Blackwell.
 eBook [Hardcopy on UL reserve: P118.2 .R473 2012]
- Menn, Lise, and Nan Bernstein Ratner. 2000. *Methods for Studying Language Production*. Mahwah, N.J.; London: Lawrence Erlbaum Associates.
 eBook [Hardcopy on UL reserve: P118 .M47 2000]
- McDaniel, Dana, Cecile McKee, and Helen Smith Cairns, eds. 1996. *Methods for Assessing Children's Syntax*. Cambridge, MA: MIT Press.
 eBook [Hardcopy on UL reserve: P118.15 .M48 1996]

F. Journals on language acquisition

<i>Bilingualism, Language and Cognition</i>	<i>Journal of Psycholinguistic Research</i>
<i>Child Development</i>	<i>Journal of Second Language Studies</i>
<i>Cognition</i>	<i>Language Acquisition</i>
<i>Developmental Psychology</i>	<i>Language Learning</i>
<i>First Language</i>	<i>Language Learning and Development</i>
<i>Frontiers in Psychology</i>	<i>Linguistic Approaches to Bilingualism</i>
<i>Journal of Child Language</i>	<i>Second Language Research</i>

G. Corpora on child language

Child Language Data Exchange System (CHILDES)

<https://childes.talkbank.org>

The Hong Kong Cantonese Child Language Corpus (CANCORP)

<http://www.arts.cuhk.edu.hk/~lal/corpora.html#CANCORP>

Feedback for evaluation

A mid-term course evaluation and an end-of-term course evaluation will be conducted. Students are welcome to give feedback to the course teacher at any time in person or through emails.

Course schedule

Week	Date	Topic	Readings
Module 1: Fundamental concepts of language acquisition			
1	Sept 3 (Wed)	[1A] Introduction to language acquisition [1B] The biological foundations of language acquisition	[Textbook] Becker, Misha and Kamil Ud Deen. 2020. Chapter 1 “Introduction: What is Language Acquisition?” (p. 3-13), Chapter 8 “Language Acquisition under Nontypical Circumstances” (Section 8.1, p. 225-232), and Chapter 9 (Sections 9.1-9.3) “Acquisition of More Than One Language” (p.265-277). [Supplementary text] Lightbown, Patsy M., and Nina Spada. 2013. Chapter 1 “Language Learning in Early Childhood” (Section 1.2: First Language Acquisition & Section 1.5: Childhood Bilingualism) (p. 5-14 & 31-35).
*2	Sept 10 (Wed)		No class
3	Sept 17 (Wed)	[1C] The nature and role of linguistic experience in language acquisition	[Supplementary text] O’Grady, William. 2005. Chapter 7 (Sections 7.1-7.3) “How Do They Do It?” (p. 164-179). [Extended reading] Yang, Charles. 2013. Who’s Afraid of George Kingsley Zipf? Or: Do Children and Chimps Have Language? <i>Significance</i> 10(6): 29-34.
Module 2: Major milestones in child language acquisition & Module 3: Methods of studying language acquisition			
*3	Sept 20 (Sat, 2:30-5:30pm; <u>LSB LT3</u>)	[3A] Methods for analyzing naturalistic speech I	[Textbook] Becker, Misha and Kamil Ud Deen. 2020. Appendix B – Module 1 “Naturalistic Data” (p. 293-296). [Supplementary text] Blume, María, and Barbara Lust. 2017. Chapter 4 - “Studying Language Acquisition Through Collecting Speech” (p. 71-84).

4	Sept 24 (Wed)	[2A] Phonetic and phonological development [3B] Methods for examining early linguistic competence	[Textbook] Becker, Misha and Kamil Ud Deen. 2020. Chapter 3 “Early Speech Perception” (p. 55-78) and Chapter 4 “Speech Production and Phonological Development” (p. 79-102). [Supplementary text] Blume, María, and Barbara Lust. 2017. Chapter 13 - “Introduction to Infant Testing Methods in Language Acquisition Research” (p. 247-257).
*4	Sept 27 (Sat, 2:30-4:30pm, <u>YIA LT2</u>)	Quiz #1	[Extended reading] De Houwer, Annick. 2009. Chapter 5 – “Sounds in Bilingual First Language Acquisition” (p. 151-190).
5	Oct 1 (Wed)	No class (Public holiday – National Day)	
6	Oct 8 (Wed)	[2B] Lexical and semantic development I [3A] Methods for analyzing naturalistic speech II	[Textbook] Becker, Misha and Kamil Ud Deen. 2020. Chapter 5 (Section 5.1) “Word Learning” (p. 105-111). [Extended reading] De Houwer, Annick. 2009. Chapter 6 – “Words in Bilingual First Language Acquisition” (p. 191-249).
7	Oct 15 (Wed)	[2B] Lexical and semantic development II [3A] Methods for analyzing naturalistic speech III	[Textbook] Becker, Misha and Kamil Ud Deen. 2020. Chapter 5 (Sections 5.2-5.3) “Word Learning” (p. 111-120). [Supplementary text] Guasti, Maria Teresa. 2016. Chapter 3.4 “Why Acquiring The Meaning of Words is a Problem” (p. 101-123).
8	Oct 22 (Wed)	[2C] Syntactic development I [3C] Methods for examining language comprehension I	[Textbook] Becker, Misha and Kamil Ud Deen. 2020. Chapter 7 (Sections 7.1-7.2 “Syntactic Development” (p. 167-189). [Textbook] Becker, Misha and Kamil Ud Deen. 2020. Appendix B – Module 3 “Comprehension Data” (p. 300-310).
9	Oct 29 (Wed)	No class (Public holiday – Chung Yeung Festival)	
*10	Nov 5 (Wed, 6:30-8:30pm, <u>LSK LT5</u>)	Quiz #2	[Supplementary text] Guasti, Maria Teresa. 2016. Chapter 4.1 “Children’s Abstract Knowledge of Word Order” (p. 136-140).

11	Nov 12 (Wed)	[2C] Syntactic development II [3C] Methods for examining language comprehension II	[Textbook] Becker, Misha and Kamil Ud Deen. 2020. Chapter 7 (Sections 7.3-7.8) “Syntactic Development” (p. 190-222). [Supplementary text] Blume, María, and Barbara Lust. 2017. Chapter 7 - “Experimental Tasks for Generating Language Comprehension Data” (p. 137-154). [Extended reading] De Houwer, Annick. 2009. Chapter 7 – “Sentences in Bilingual First Language Acquisition” (p. 251-301).
12	Nov 19 (Wed)	[2D] Morphological development I [3D] Methods for examining language production I	[Textbook] Becker, Misha and Kamil Ud Deen. 2020. Chapter 6 (Sections 6.1-6.2) “The Acquisition of Morphology” (p. 135-145). [Textbook] Becker, Misha and Kamil Ud Deen. 2020. Appendix B – Module 2 “Production Data” (p. 296-300).
13	Nov 26 (Wed)	[2D] Morphological development II [3D] Methods for examining language production II	[Textbook] Becker, Misha and Kamil Ud Deen. 2020. Chapter 6 (Sections 6.3-6.8) “The Acquisition of Morphology” (p. 145-163). [Supplementary text] Blume, María, and Barbara Lust. 2017. Chapter 6 - “Experimental Tasks for Generating Language Production Data” (p. 119-136). [Extended reading] Paradis, Johanne. 2010. Bilingual Children’s Acquisition of English Verb Morphology: Effects of Language Exposure, Structure Complexity, and Task Type. <i>Language Learning</i> 60(3): 651-680.
*14	Dec 3 (Wed)	Final Examination (Time: 6:30-9:00pm; Venue: <u>YIA LT1</u>)	

Contact details for instructor and TA

Instructor

Name: Dr. Margaret Lei
Office location: Rm G29, Leung Kau Kui Building, CUHK
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Email: margaret@cuhk.edu.hk
Office hours: By appointment

Teaching Assistant

Name: Ms. Zhuoqun Wang; Mr. Zhan Liu
Office location: Rm G28, Leung Kau Kui Building, CUHK;
Rm G16, Leung Kau Kui Building, CUHK
Telephone: 3943-0672
Email: zhuoqunwang@cuhk.edu.hk; jamesliu@cuhk.edu.hk
Office hours: By appointment

Details of course website

LING 5103A on Blackboard
<https://blackboard.cuhk.edu.hk/>

Use of Generative Artificial Intelligence (AI) Tools by Students in Learning Activities and Assessments

Approach 1 - All use of AI tools is prohibited in assignments and assessment tasks

Students are not allowed to use any AI tools in any kind of learning activity or assessment that will be counted towards students' final grade of the course, or used for evaluating students' attainment of the desired learning outcomes. Students are expected to produce their own work independently without any collaboration or use of AI tools.

Academic honesty and plagiarism

Attention is drawn to University policy and regulations on honesty in academic work, and to the disciplinary guidelines and procedures applicable to breaches of such policy and regulations. Details may be found at <http://www.cuhk.edu.hk/policy/academichonesty/>.

With each assignment, students will be required to submit a signed declaration that they are aware of these policies, regulations, guidelines and procedures.

- In the case of group projects, all members of the group should be asked to sign the declaration, each of whom is responsible and liable to disciplinary actions, irrespective of whether he/she has signed the declaration and whether he/she has contributed, directly or indirectly, to the problematic contents.
- For assignments in the form of a computer-generated document that is principally text-based and submitted via VeriGuide, the statement, in the form of a receipt, will be issued by the system upon students' uploading of the soft copy of the assignment.
- Students are fully aware that their work may be investigated by AI content detection software to determine originality.
- Students are fully aware of the AI approach(es) adopted in the course. In the case where some AI tools are allowed, students have made proper acknowledgment and citations as suggested by the course teacher.

Assignments without a properly signed declaration will not be graded by teachers.

Only the final version of the assignment should be submitted via VeriGuide.

The submission of a piece of work, or a part of a piece of work, for more than one purpose (e.g. to satisfy the requirements in two different courses) without declaration to this effect shall be regarded as having committed undeclared multiple submissions. It is common and acceptable to reuse a turn of phrase or a sentence or two from one's own work; but wholesale reuse is problematic. In any case, agreement from the course teacher(s) concerned should be obtained prior to the submission of the piece of work.

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