How do children develop their ability to use the sounds of English?

As part of your revision of CLA, you will be making a series of notes to explore children’s phonological development, using the following headings:

- **stages** - the ways in which children develop their own uses of sounds as time goes by
- **understanding** - the ways in which children comprehend sounds around them/ spoken to them
- **processes** - the main patterns of sound, ‘mistakes’ children make and why they make them
- **theories** - consider how CLA theories could be used to explain children’s phonetic acquisition

### Stages

Look at the earliest sounds children make and the common stages they go through:

- crying → cooing → babbling (reduplicated/ variegated) → proto-words → full words

**Task 1:**

Create a timeline, and find examples of the kinds of sounds made at each stage and a brief explanation of the term.

**Example: Proto-words**

*Children at the age of 12 months are usually starting to form their first proto-words, which are usually in the form of CVCV babbling sounds such as dada or mama, and these are applied fairly consistently to things and people around them.*

Remember to look at how children use stress and emphasis at the holophrastic and two word stage as a means of expressing the ideas they can’t say with words e.g. ‘**JUICE!**’ with emphasis to show frustration at dropping cup, or ‘**MY** car’ to emphasise ownership of the toy car when another child is trying to play with it.

Ideas like **phonemic expansion** and **phonemic contraction** are worth looking at too, so you can get an overview of the patterns over the first few years of a child’s life.

### Understanding

**Task 2:**

Make notes on the **comprehension versus production** argument (i.e. that children know and understand much more than they can physically produce). This can be done with the classic ‘**fis / fish**’ study, or other examples.

Research by the linguist Neil Smith in his book *The Twitter Machine* looks at the ways in which children perceive adult speech, process it and then produce their own versions of it. He raises the possibility that it’s not just a **physical** process of being able to say something but a **mental** process of creating a representation of what has been said. More can be found in Jean Peccei’s *Child Language: a resource book for students* (pp. 119-225). You could also consider the ‘wugs’ study.
Processes

Task 3:
Now make notes on the range of processes children use to continue to communicate despite encountering difficult phonological sounds. For each of the terms below, define it and try to give a useful example:

- deletion
- substitution
- addition (to create CVCV structures)
- consonant cluster reduction
- deletion of unstressed syllables
- assimilation
- simplification.

Theories

It can be difficult to see a link between phonological development and Chomsky’s nativist or Piaget’s cognitive approach, but here are a few pointers:

- Chomsky’s arguments are essentially about languages being universal and children being ‘born universal’; this therefore links to all children being able to speak any language until phonemic contraction occurs and they tune in specifically to their own mother tongue/s. If they simply copied the language around them, children wouldn’t make all the weird and wonderful sounds they do when they practise vocal play in the early stages.

- Bruner’s interactionist CDS/LASS approach (and, to some extent, Skinner’s imitation theory) specifically refers to parental input in terms of how they help to simplify sounds for children and emphasise key sounds and syllables, while offering models for children through their own language. Skinner’s imitation theory could also be seen as relevant, as children adopt regional accents, suggesting they tune in to the language around them and pick it up as they get older.

- Children’s ‘mistakes’ are in fact very regular in their patterns, and being able to look at systematic variations is an important skill to have. Remember that children’s comprehension of sounds far outstrips their production of it - i.e. a child can understand a three or four word utterance at 18 months but may only be able to produce one or two words. And they resist correction early on ...

Task 4

Using your own examples, as well as ideas from your text book and class notes, create a bullet point set of notes to explore how phonological development and CLA theories relate to each other.