Why should we examine learning in language development?

The bulk of research in the area of developmental language disorders has focused on perceptual impairments, or issues with specific components of language such as syntax or phonology. Here, I highlight evidence for the view that the language difficulties experienced by these children are not by-products of some other primary deficit; instead, they implicate impairment or immaturity of learning mechanisms that allow the extraction of sequential structure from a rich and varying language environment. I will start by discussing why this view is gaining some traction, in addition to highlighting gaps in our behavioural and neurobiological knowledge that need to be filled. I will also highlight how our knowledge of learning systems might allow us to try different methods in intervention, using spoken word learning as my exemplar system. In the first study, I will discuss whether we find differences in word learning in adults when they try different methods to learn (retrieval, reproduction, and restudy). In our second study, I show how we plan to probe whether right/wrong feedback is effective when adults try to learn new phonological forms or semantic associations. I will end by discussing some future directions, in terms of both investigating the neurobiological basis of developmental language disorders, and how we might optimise language learning.