

Stages of language learning

As teachers of children who are learning an additional language, it is important that you understand the stages of language learning that children go through. Knowing this will not only allow you to help your students with their learning, but it will also give you a clear picture of where your students are regarding their language development.

The first stage is “pre-production” or the silent stage. In this time the child is listening carefully to the language they hear but are not yet ready to start speaking. Depending on the child’s personality and other factors, this stage may last 1 day or 6 months or more. It is important not to be concerned if this stage seems to be taking a long time. The child can learn a great deal without saying a word. The child is able to understand and respond to verbal instructions.

The next stage is “early production”. In this stage, the child speaks, but only with one or two words and can answer yes/no questions with little difficulty. The child might mix languages; this is normal and to be expected.

The third stage is speech emergence. The child is trying to acquire control of the English grammar system. Some researchers have found that there seems to be a fixed order in which certain aspects of the system are learned, and this cannot be influenced very much by direct teaching. Part of this stage is the “backslide”. This means that students have periods when they get wrong what they seem to have already learned, and they do this in exactly the same way as a child learning English as her first language. Taking English verbs as an example, it is common that children seem to have learned some irregular past tense forms. They hear their parents saying sentences like *I went to the shop*, or *I saw a big cow*, and they use these correct forms themselves. A little later, however, they start to say sentences like *He goed to the shop* or *I seed a big cow*. What has happened is that they have started to unconsciously work out the rules of English grammar. They realize that the past tense in English is formed by adding **-ed** to the verb, but they overgeneralize this rule to include all verbs. It takes a little more time before they further refine the rule to include both regular and irregular endings. So this apparent backward step is in fact a sign of progress in learning the language! Another aspect of this stage is acquiring “playground” language. The child can communicate her needs on the playground or in informal situations, but continues to struggle with academic English.

The fourth stage is intermediate fluency, where the child can communicate informally with very little problem, but has difficulty with the language needed for academic tasks. It is this Cognitive Academic Language Proficiency (CALP) that the child will need the most support and help with, possibly for several years.

It is important to make the distinction between the kinds of language needed in everyday conversation, and the language needed to do well in schoolwork. Most students, particularly those with language backgrounds similar to English, learn the skills of listening and speaking very quickly upon joining school. It is not uncommon for some to be completely fluent in conversational English by the end of their second year. At this point both they and their parents might feel that they have now learned English - after all if they can understand everything they hear and say what they want to say, what more can they have to learn? The answer is: they have a great deal more to learn to catch up with the native speakers in their classes. In the areas of vocabulary and understanding of academic language they are still a long way behind. It is one thing to talk with friends; it is quite another thing to complete a project for a Unit of Inquiry.

Finally, it is worth remembering that language learning does not follow a straight line getting higher and higher. For all learners there will be times when progress is slow and everything seems a struggle. At other times, however, lots of progress seems to be made in a short period.