

Five Stages of Second Language Acquisition

By LCF Teaching Languages



During childhood, the brain is more receptive to language learning than at any other time in a person's life and starting foreign or second language learning early sets the stage for a child to develop advanced levels of proficiency in one or more languages. It is also increasingly being seen as a necessary 21st century skill set. Apart from the extensively researched and recognized cognitive benefits from learning one or more languages, doing so as a young child dramatically improves the development of a near-native pronunciation and language intonation.

More and more parents are accepting that knowledge of a language other than English (LOTE) can also enrich their child's understanding and acceptance of other cultures, and the attendant future job opportunities it can bring in a world being brought ever closer together by increasing globalization. So it's no surprise that they are choosing to raise their child/ren as bilingual and/or give them the opportunity to learn a foreign language.

However, as we all know, young children can sometimes be notoriously difficult to "read" and so – to ensure the best chance of success to achieve their bilingual goals for their child - it's helpful for the parents of these 'little linguists' to understand their child's language learning progression and the stages associated with second language acquisition. The current theories of second language acquisition are based on much research in a variety of language related fields such as linguistics and neurolinguistics, psychology, sociology and anthropology. Anyone who has been around children who are

learning to talk knows that the process happens in stages—first understanding, then one-word utterances, then two-word phrases, and so on. Similarly, children learning a second language move through a number of predictable stages:

Stage 1: Preproduction or the Silent period

Seen at the start of exposure to a new language, this stage is characterized by minimal comprehension with little to no verbal production and may last from a couple of days to several months. Students may not speak but can respond using a number of different strategies including pointing, performing an act, gesturing or nodding or responding with a monosyllabic answer such as yes or no. It's worth noting that children who listen but don't often verbalize in the new target language are often making as much (and often more) progress in second language development than their more talkative classmates.

Stage 2: Early Production

Defined by limited comprehension and one/two word responses and may last up to 6 months. Students have developed an active vocabulary of around 1000 words which they are able to understand and use in short phrases or small snippets of the language that have been memorized. However, these will often not be accurate or be used in the right way.

Stage 3. Speech emergence

Identified by increased comprehension, an accumulated vocabulary of about 3000 words and the use of longer but simple sentences, which may or may not be grammatically correct. Students will also understand easy stories with the help of pictures and are able to answer simple questions. This stage can last up to another year.

Stage 4. Intermediate Proficiency

The Intermediate proficiency of this stage is characterized by good comprehension, more complex sentences and fewer errors in speech and make take up to another year after the speech emergence stage. Student vocabulary has typically increased to about 6000 words and they are able to use more complex sentences when reading and writing. They are also more willing to state their opinions and share their thoughts in the target language and will also, at this stage, use strategies from their native language to learn content in the new target language. This is the stage at which a child will reach basic interpersonal communication skills and conversational fluency (usually within 2-5 years).

Stage 5. Advanced fluency

Advanced proficiency in a second language can typically take from 5-7 years by which time students have developed specialized vocabulary and can participate fully in classroom activities with occasional extra support. Students at this stage are likely to have near-native ability in the target language and have achieved what is known as "cognitive academic language proficiency".