

Second Language Development

Stages of Language Development

Language development follows predictable and sequential stages ranging from no knowledge of a language, to proficiency similar to that of a native speaker.

The time it takes a language learner to progress through the stages varies based on numerous factors.

There are five stages of language development:

Stage 1: The Silent/Receptive or Preproductive Stage

Stage 2: The Early Production Stage

Stage 3: The Speech Emergence Stage

Stage 4: The Intermediate Language Proficiency Stage

Stage 5: The Advanced Language Proficiency Stage

Stage 1: The Silent/Receptive or Preproductive Stage

Stage 1 begins when a child is first exposed to a new language. It can last up to six months. During this stage, a child will acquire up to 500 receptive words (words a child understands but may not be comfortable using yet). The child will be able to understand new words made comprehensible. This stage also involves the “silent period” where children only respond nonverbally. During this stage teachers should create a comfortable environment where the child is not forced to speak. During this stage children respond differently. A child may choose to take a break from the stress of thinking in a second language and work alone. At other times a child may choose to quietly join friends, as they take in the language around them.

Stage 2: The Early Production Stage

This stage can last six months beyond Stage 1. During this stage the child will acquire approximately 1,000 receptive and active words (words a child is able to understand and use). During this stage the child speaks in short phrases. Children can show comprehension in this stage by answering simple who, what, where, yes, and no questions.

In this classroom we see a teacher using song with Stage 2 English Language Learners, as she encourages them to speak in sentences.

Video Clip:

Teacher leads as students sings:

Mother duck says quack, quack, quack, but only one little duck came back.

Stage 3: The Speech Emergence Stage

This stage can last up to another year in which children acquire up to 3,000 receptive and active words. During this stage children use phrases and short sentences to express themselves. They can ask and answer simple questions and may produce longer sentences with grammatical errors. As these students are ready to move from Stage 2 to Stage 3, the teacher encourages them to use complete sentences and corrects their grammatical errors.

Video Clip:

Teacher & students: ...and only two
Teacher: two...
Student: and only two duck came back
Teacher: two ducks (annunciating the word ducks)
Teacher: Oh no, how does Mama Duck feel?
Student: mumbles
Teacher: Let's make a whole sentence Mother ..
Student: is sad
Teacher: What is she doing William?
Student: cry
Teacher: Say, she is crying.
Student: She is crying.

Stage 4: The Intermediate Language Proficiency Stage

This stage may take yet up to another year where children acquire up to 6,000 receptive and active words. During this stage children are beginning to feel comfortable using complex sentences and asking questions. They are also able to share their ideas and speak with more confidence.

- Video Clip:
- Student 1: Hector and I went to the beach and I was playing with him, right? And then I got lost
- Teacher: *Oh, goodness.*
- Student 1: I got lost, and um where's my mom and I was just crying and crying and someone finally helped me and I saw my aunt.
- Teacher: *Ok, now what did we find out about the setting? We had the farm.*
- Student 2: Wait, wait, how did they make the tortillas in the fridge, setting?
- Teacher: *That's right, that's right.*

Stage 5: The Advanced Language Proficiency Stage

The final stage of language development is the Advanced Language Proficiency Stage. This stage takes an average of 5 to 7 years. During this stage children acquire receptive and active academic content area vocabulary, which allows them to participate in grade-level activities with some support. In this final stage grammar and vocabulary are approaching that of a native speaker.

- Video Clip:
- Student: Capital resources, capital resources are something that man made.
- Teacher: That are man made. Go around this room, do you see one capital resource that is man made?
- Student: Uhhh, toys, pictures, flag....
- Teacher: *You got it!*

The key to guiding students through the stages of language development is to remember Krashen's ***i+1 Comprehensible Input*** hypothesis. A teacher should target his/her interaction with an English Language Learner, at a level just beyond where the child is currently communicating comfortably.