

Stages of English Language Learners

The stages are grouped into three phases that outline the initial steps to learning a new language.

These stages provide an example of how students acquire a new language. It is important to keep in mind that different children may enter school at different stages, and that all children may not pass through all stages at the same rate or even in the same sequence. Your continued support and encouragement will help him or her with the task of learning a new language.

Phase I: Observation and imitation

- Silent stage: the child is taking in the new situation and listening to the language to begin to make sense of what does on around him/her.
- Child will imitate what other children do in the class. In a sense, s/he is pretending that s/he understands.
- A very outgoing child may use a lot of body gestures, or actually grab other kids in order to make him/herself understood. This may be misinterpreted as physical aggression by other children or by the teacher.

Phase II: Single word and phrase use

- Child begins to use words or phrases that are important for his/her survival in the classroom. Example: "Stop it!"; "I'm next."; "Me too!"
- Child begins to use the language but is still not sure of what constitutes a separate word in English. Example:
"I like it" which s/he hears over and over is used as if it were two words:
"I like it play ball." "I like it little trucks."
Eventually the "it" part of the phrase is released and the child will say: "I like little trucks."

Phase III: Initial understanding of grammatical rules

- Early on in his/her use of English, the child may leave out plurals or past tense markers. This does not mean that the child does not understand the concept of "more than one" or "past events." S/he may be using these forms quite comfortably in his/her first language.

One of the rules in the acquisition of a second language is: "Concentrate on big things first. Leave the details for later." If you can grasp the basic meaning of what your student is saying then ignore the grammatical errors.

- The child's comprehension exceeds his/her ability to produce language. Often we place more emphasis on what the child is producing than what he/she is comprehending. The child may use the appropriate content words, but not in the appropriate form. For example, a child may be observing an experiment with ice in a freezer and say: "water frozen."

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- Child's language may use grammatical forms that are literal translations from his/her first language. A child for whom Spanish is the first language and who is used to the fact that in his/her language most objects have a gender assigned to them, may say: "Where is my pencil? I put him there."
- Child tries to make the most of the vocabulary s/he has learned. For example: "My sleeves are big", instead of "long". Here, the child is generalizing the meaning of "big" to include anything that goes beyond a particular dimension.

Other things to keep in mind when working with ELL students:

- Because children can acquire native-like pronunciation in a second language, it is easy to assume that they know a lot more of that language than they do. Be sure the child understands what you are saying to them. Provide a model such as a gesture, signal, picture, or word for the child to use to tell you that they do not understand you or something is not clear. In this way he or she will know how to ask for help.
- Children will experiment more with a new language when with peers than when with adults. Observe the child interacting with peers. This will give you information about the extent of his or her vocabulary and fluency in an informal setting.

Taken from <http://www.bankstreet.edu/literacyguide/ellstages.html>