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Language Acquisition: An Overview

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"One generation plants the trees; another gets the shade."

— Chinese Proverb

When I read *The Hitchhikers Guide to the Galaxy* by Douglas Adams, I remember being fascinated by the "babel fish." These were fish, who when dropped in a person's ear, would provide immediate translation of any language, thriving on sound waves and converting them into comprehensible language. Wouldn't it be just great if learning a new language were that easy (despite the "yuck" factor)? While we do have some technology that provides translation into a variety of languages, it often fails to translate accurately due to the complexity of language. Effective communication requires so much more than just being able to translate vocabulary words — it requires knowledge of intonation, dialect, and intent, and a nuanced understanding of word use, expression, and a language's cultural context. For example, one online translation application I tried translated "Fall Events" as "fall down events" in Spanish because it didn't know that I was referring to events in autumn.

So, without a babel fish or perfect technology, we are left with the old-fashioned way of learning a new language, which requires time, effort, and patience. How much time, effort, and patience depends a lot on the individual who is learning, as well as the learning environment and situation, but language researchers have developed a general outline of language acquisition that helps explain the process that language learners go through to develop skills in a foreign language. In this article, I will provide an overview to the stages of language acquisition, and offer strategies designed to support ELL instruction at different stages of language acquisition.

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Stages of Language Acquisition

Researchers define language acquisition into two categories: first-language acquisition and second-language acquisition. First-language acquisition is a universal process regardless of home language. Babies listen to the sounds around them, begin to imitate them, and eventually start producing words. Second-language acquisition assumes knowledge in a first language and encompasses the process an individual goes through as he or she learns the elements of a new language, such as vocabulary, phonological components, grammatical structures, and writing systems.

The Six Stages of Second-Language Acquisition

Pre-production	This is also called "the silent period," when the student takes in the new language but does not speak it. This period often lasts six weeks or longer, depending on the individual.
Early production	The individual begins to speak using short words and sentences, but the emphasis is still on listening and absorbing the new language. There will be many errors in the early production stage.
Speech Emergent	Speech becomes more frequent, words and sentences are longer, but the individual still relies heavily on context clues and familiar topics. Vocabulary continues to increase and errors begin to decrease, especially in common or repeated interactions.
Beginning Fluency	Speech is fairly fluent in social situations with minimal errors. New contexts and academic language are challenging and the individual will struggle to express themselves due to gaps in vocabulary and appropriate phrases.
Intermediate Fluency	Communicating in the second language is fluent, especially in social language situations. The individual is able to speak almost fluently in new situations or in academic areas, but there will be gaps in vocabulary knowledge and some

Advanced Fluency

unknown expressions. There are very few errors, and the individual is able to demonstrate higher order thinking skills in the second language such as offering an opinion or analyzing a problem.

The individual communicates fluently in all contexts and can maneuver successfully in new contexts and when exposed to new academic information. At this stage, the individual may still have an accent and use idiomatic expressions incorrectly at times, but the individual is essentially fluent and comfortable communicating in the second language.

How long does it take for a language learner to go through these stages? Just as in any other learning situation, it depends on the individual. One of the major contributors to accelerated second language learning is the strength of first language skills. Language researchers such as Jim Cummins, Catherine Snow, Lily Wong Fillmore and Stephen Krashen have studied this topic in a variety of ways for many years. The general consensus is that it takes between five to seven years for an individual to achieve advanced fluency. This generally applies to individuals who have strong first language and literacy skills. If an individual has not fully developed first language and literacy skills, it may take between seven to ten years to reach advanced fluency. It is very important to note that every ELL student comes with his or her own unique language and education background, and this will have an impact on their English learning process.

It is also important to keep in mind that the understood goal for American ELL students is Advanced Fluency, which includes fluency in academic contexts as well as social contexts. Teachers often get frustrated when ELL students appear to be fluent because they have strong social English skills, but then they do not participate well in academic projects and discussions. Teachers who are aware of ELL students' need to develop academic language fluency in English will be much better prepared to assist those students in becoming academically successful. (Learn more about academic language in Colorín Colorado's [academic language resource section \(/academic-language/\)](#).)

Instructional Strategies

If you have ELL students in your classroom, it is more than likely there will be students at a variety of stages in the language acquisition process. What can teachers do to differentiate instruction according to language level? Here are some suggestions for appropriate instructional strategies according to stages of language acquisition.

Language Stage	Strategies
Pre-production	• Emphasize listening comprehension by using read-alouds and music. • Use visuals and have students point to pictures or act out vocabulary. • Speak slowly and use shorter words, but use correct English phrasing. • Model "survival" language by saying and showing the meaning. For example, say, "Open your book," and then open a book while the student observes. • Gesture, point and show as much as possible. • More advanced classmates who speak the same language can support new learning through interpretation. • Avoid excessive error correction. Reinforce learning by modeling correct language usage when students make mistakes.
Early Production	• Continue the strategies listed above, but add opportunities for students to produce simple language. • Ask students to point to pictures and say the new word. • Ask yes/no and either/or questions. • Have students work in pairs or small groups to discuss a problem. Have literate students write short sentences or words in graphic organizers. • Model a phrase and have the student repeat it and add modifications. Teacher says, "This book is very interesting." The student repeats it and says, "This book is very boring." Continue with as many modifications as possible. • Avoid excessive error correction. Reinforce learning by modeling correct usage.

Speech Emergent

- Introduce more academic language and skills by using the same techniques listed above, but beginning to use more academic vocabulary.
- Introduce new academic vocabulary and model how to use it in a sentence.
 - Provide visuals and make connections with student's background knowledge as much as possible.
- Ask questions that require a short answer and are fairly literal.
 - Introduce charts and graphs by using easily understood information such as a class survey of food preferences.
- Have students re-tell stories or experiences and have another student write them down. The ELL student can bring these narratives home to read and reinforce learning.
- In writing activities, provide the student with a fill-in-the blank version of the assignment with the necessary vocabulary listed on the page.
- Provide minimal error correction. Focus only on correction that directly interferes with meaning. Reinforce learning by modeling the correct usage.
- Have students work in pairs and groups to discuss content.
- During instruction, have students do a **"Think, pair, share"** ([/article/13346](http://www.colorincolorado.org/article/13346)) to give the student an opportunity to process the new language and concept.
- Ask questions that require a full response with explanation. If you do not understand the student's explanation, ask for clarification by paraphrasing and asking the student if you heard them correctly.
- Ask questions that require inference and justification of the answer.
- Ask students if they agree or disagree with a statement and why.
- Model more advanced academic language structures such as, "I think," "In my opinion," and "When you compare." Have students repeat the phrases in context.

Beginning Fluency

- Re-phrase incorrect statements in correct English, or ask the student if they know another way to say it.
- Introduce nuances of language such as when to use more formal English and how to interact in conversations.
- Have students make short presentations, providing them with the phrases and language used in presentations ("Today I will be talking about") and giving them opportunities to practice the presentation with partners before getting in front of the class.
 - Continue to provide visual support and vocabulary development.
- Correct errors that interfere with meaning, and pre-identify errors that will be corrected in student writing, such as verb-tense agreement. Only correct the errors agreed upon.
- You may want to assist in improving pronunciation by asking a student to repeat key vocabulary and discussing how different languages have different sounds.

Intermediate Fluency

- Identify key academic vocabulary and phrases and model them. Ask students to produce the language in class activities.
- Use graphic organizers and thinking maps and check to make sure the student is filling them in with details. Challenge the student to add more.
- Help the student make connections with new vocabulary by instructing him or her in the etymology of words or word families such as, "important, importance, importantly."
- Create assessments that give students an opportunity to present in English after they have an opportunity to practice in pairs or small groups.
- Introduce more academic skills, such as brainstorming, prioritizing, categorization, summarizing and compare and contrast.

Advanced Fluency

- Ask students to identify vocabulary by symbols that show whether the student "knows it really well, kind of knows it, or doesn't know it at all." Help students focus on strategies to get the meaning of new words.
- Have a "guessing time" during silent reading where they circle words they don't know and write down their guess of the meaning. Check the results as a class.
 - Introduce idioms and give examples of how to use them appropriately. For example, "Let's wind up our work." What's another way you could use the phrase "wind up?"
- Starting at this level, students need more correction/feedback, even on errors that do not directly affect meaning. They should be developing a more advanced command of syntax, pragmatics, pronunciation, and other elements that do not necessarily affect meaning but do contribute to oral fluency.
 - It may also be helpful to discuss language goals with the student so you can assist in providing modeling and correction in specified areas.
- Students at this level are close to native language fluency and can interact well in a variety of situations. Continue to develop language skills as gaps arise by using the strategies listed above. Although the student may seem completely fluent, he or she still benefit from visual support, building on background knowledge, pre-teaching vocabulary and making connections between content areas.
- Offer challenge activities to expand the student's vocabulary knowledge such as identifying antonyms, synonyms and the use of a thesaurus and dictionary.
- Demonstrate effective note-taking and provide a template.
- Offer error correction on academic work and on oral language. Because students at this stage have achieved near-native fluency, they benefit from support in fine-tuning their oral and written language skills.

Recommendations

Scaffold instruction so students receive comprehensible input and are able to successfully complete tasks at their level. Instructional scaffolding works just like the scaffolding used in building. It holds you at the level needed until you are ready to take it down. Scaffolding includes asking students questions in formats that give them support in answering, such as yes/no questions, one-word identifications, or short answers. It also means providing the context for learning by having visuals or other hands-on items available to support content learning. Also, when practicing a new academic skill such as skimming, scaffolding involves using well-known material so the students aren't struggling with the information while they are trying to learn a new skill. Scaffolding includes whatever it takes to make the instruction meaningful for the student in order to provide a successful learning experience.

Use cognates to help Spanish speakers learn English and derive meaning from content. The Colorín Colorado website has a helpful [list of common cognates \(/educators/background/cognates\)](#) in Spanish for teachers to reference. Teachers can explicitly point out cognates for Spanish speaking students so they begin to realize that this is a useful way for them to increase their English vocabulary.

Explicit vocabulary instruction is very important in accelerating ELL students' English language development. Textbooks include [lists of new vocabulary words \(/educators/teaching/vocabulary\)](#) based on grade-level content, but ELL students need further vocabulary instruction. There are many words in a text that may affect the ELL student's comprehension of the text that a teacher may assume he or she knows. It is important for teachers to develop ways to help students identify the words they don't know, as well as strategies for getting their meaning. Of course it is also beneficial if teachers reinforce the language structures or common associations of vocabulary. For example, "squeak" is a sound that often goes with "mouse" or "door" and it may be stated as, "squeak, squeaky, squeaks, or squeaked."

Error correction should be done very intentionally and appropriately according to student language ability, as noted earlier in the article. Students who are just beginning to speak English are already nervous about using their new language skills and constant correction will not improve their ability; it will just make them want to withdraw. I inform students in advance of the type of errors I will correct, such as "missing articles" and "third person agreement," and then those are the only errors I check. In my class, I do not correct the errors; I circle the mistakes and return the paper to the student. They are responsible for correcting the errors and returning the paper to receive more points. Most of the

time the students can make the corrections themselves when they see the area I've circled, but if they have difficulty, I guide them as they make the correction. In this way, I feel there is a manageable amount of correction information to work with and the student will actually learn from doing the correction.

Learning another language. If you learn the language(s) your students speak, they will be thrilled to hear you try it with them. I learned how to say "good morning" in Somali and had to practice for an hour before I felt comfortable saying it. When I did I was rewarded with the big grins of students as they entered the room. They were excited to teach me other phrases as well, and we discussed how much English they had learned since they arrived in the country. They were very proud to think of how much progress they'd made.

Seek the experts in your building or district who can offer you guidance on effective instructional strategies for your ELL students. There are many teachers who have taught ELL students in your content area, have taught a certain population of students, or are trained ESL or bilingual teachers who have a lot of advice and support to offer. Don't hesitate to look for support when you are challenged to reach students who are learning English. This can be especially true when you have a "pre-production" or "beginning level" student and you are responsible for grade level content instruction.

Visit the hotlinks section for this article for more information on specific research regarding language acquisition and recommended instructional strategies. You can also search the Colorín Colorado educator information for useful information and resources to assist you in meeting ELL student needs.

ELL teachers encounter students with a variety of backgrounds and abilities, and until the babel fish comes into existence, they will need to have flexibility, creativity and skill in order to help ELL students make meaning from the new language and content they are learning. An understanding of the language acquisition process and levels will help teachers tailor instruction to meet the needs of a diverse group of learners. Students will benefit from everything teachers do to support the development of their language skills while teaching them grade level content. Together teachers and students develop their understanding of each other, the world around them, and the language that connects us all.

Hot links

[The Stages of Second Language Acquisition](http://www.ascd.org/publications/books/108052/chapters/The_Stages_of_Second_Language_Acquisition.aspx)

(http://www.ascd.org/publications/books/108052/chapters/The_Stages_of_Second_Language_Acquisition.aspx)

This chapter from *Classroom Instruction That Works with English Language Learners Facilitator's Guide*, by Jane D. Hill and Cynthia L. Björk, offers information on the second language acquisition process and effective ELL instruction. It includes a simplified chart of language acquisition levels and the kinds of language teachers can use to help students at each level.

[Everything ESL: Stages of Language Acquisition](http://www.everythingsl.net/in-services/language_stages.php)

(http://www.everythingsl.net/in-services/language_stages.php)

Simple description of the stages of language acquisition and recommendations for instructional strategies according to level.

[Overview of Second Language Acquisition and Strategies](http://educationnorthwest.org/sites/default/files/ell.pdf)

(<http://educationnorthwest.org/sites/default/files/ell.pdf>)

Downloadable booklet from the Northwest Regional Education Laboratory, "Strategies and Resources for Mainstream Teachers of English Language Learners." Includes useful information on language levels, acquisition and 10 things teachers can do today to help ELL students.

[Understanding the "Silent Period" with English Language Learners](https://www.choiceliteracy.com/articles-detail-view.php?id=47)

(<https://www.choiceliteracy.com/articles-detail-view.php?id=47>)

This article describes some strategies used by two kindergarten teachers to communicate verbally and nonverbally.

[CAL: What Teachers Need to Know About Language](http://www.cal.org/resource-center/publications/what-teachers-need) (<http://www.cal.org/resource-center/publications/what-teachers-need>)

This digest from the Center for Applied Linguistics summarizes a paper by Lily Wong Fillmore and Catherine Snow, "What Teachers Need to Know About Language." Discusses areas such as language acquisition, why English is difficult to learn, and error correction for ELLs.

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