

The early stages of learning English: research

This outline of the development of young children's learning of English as an additional language draws on research findings. There will be variations in the rate of development according to environmental, personal and social factors.

Many bilingual children who are at an early stage in their learning of English go through a **'silent period'** when they first enter an unfamiliar setting. This can last for up to six months or longer. This is not a 'passive' stage. During this time, children will be watching, actively listening, and exploring their environment to understand new experiences and to develop new meanings. They will be trying to relate previous knowledge to new contexts. It is important that children should not feel pressurised to speak until they feel confident enough to do so. However, it is essential that adults continue to talk to the children, to pick up their non-verbal responses, to support the child's understanding of meaning, and to involve them in activities; these strategies will help children to internalise the language they hear and to develop a sense of the patterns, meanings and range of language functions in their new, unfamiliar environment.

During this time, children may begin to use **non-verbal gestures** as a response to a question or to indicate a need. Understanding is in advance of spoken language.

Many children may begin to **'echo'** single words and some short phrases used by adults and peers. All attempts at speech should be encouraged and praised.

There will be a development of **'formulaic' language** ('chunks' of social speech) e.g. "Mummy come soon." "My turn." Children may begin to join in with story refrains and repetitions and songs.

'Chunking' will continue, but children will increasingly begin to use **one word utterances** (frequently nouns) which will perform a range of language functions indicated by tone of voice (e.g. questioning, responding, naming).

Children will then begin to generate their own **'telegraphic' sentences**, using two or three word utterances. Function words are likely to be omitted, the main concern being the communication of meaning. Non-verbal gestures will often accompany speech. 'Chunking' will continue during this stage.

Children will begin to use **extended phrases or simple sentences** which contain surface developmental errors in the use of plurals, tenses, personal pronouns, function words and articles. Again the emphasis is on the communication of meaning.

Increasingly children will develop more control in their use of functional language. However surface errors in the use of tenses, word endings and plurals will continue for some time until children understand the use of different grammatical structures in the target language, which may be very different from the home language.