

English Language Development

The term “English learners” refers to children whose first language is not English and encompasses children learning English for the first time in the School setting as well as children who have developed various levels of English proficiency. The development of language and literacy skills in a child’s first language is important for the development of skills in a second language and therefore should be considered the first step in the range of expectations of children learning English.

Recent research suggests that the development of two languages benefits the brain through the increase in density of brain tissue in areas related to language memory and attention (Mechelli and others 2004). The following information is condensed from the California Department of Education on Preschool Learning Foundations.

Children entering a preschool program with little or no knowledge of English typically move through several stages on their journey in acquiring a second language. The **first stage** for young English learners occurs when they attempt to use their home language to communicate with teachers and peers. Children gradually realize they are not being understood and must adapt to their new language environment.

During the **second stage** children over time, (some days and some months), a shift occurs and the child begins to actively attend to, observe and silently process the features the English language. This observation period is normal in second-language learners. They are not shutting down but attending to the language interactions going on around them. Typically the child will attempt to communicate nonverbally, using gestures and facial expressions.

The **third stage** occurs when the child is ready to “go public” with the new language. The child masters the rhythm, intonation and some key phrases of formulaic speech to communicate. Formulaic speech refers to children’s use of memorized chunks or phrases of language without completely understanding. For example, “I want ...”

In the **fourth stage** the child is introduced to new vocabulary words and moves into the productive language stage by being able to express himself/herself by using their own words. The child demonstrates a general understanding of the rules of English and is able to apply them more accurately. This does not mean that the child is a native speaker of the language. The child may mispronounce words, as well as, make errors in vocabulary choice and grammar. Such errors are typical in the process of language learning.

Movement through the four stages may take anywhere from six months to two years. English language learner’s capabilities cover a wide range based on English exposure outside the classroom, the individual child’s motivation to learn English and the quality of the child’s language environment in the home.

The developmental markers used to describe language learning are “beginning,” “middle,” and “later”.

The **Beginning level** is when typically developing children will have acquired age-appropriate language skills in their home language and, once introduced to English will begin to develop receptive English abilities. Children may speak little during this stage.

The **Middle level** marks early speech production. Children repeat familiar phrases and it is expected that as vocabulary use increases they will combine words and phrases in English. Comprehension continues to develop though the child may use words from their home language in English language utterances. This is known as code-switching and is a normal part of second language acquisition.

Children at the **Later level** in the continuum will have much stronger comprehension skills. Their age-appropriate English grammar improves. It should not be assumed that they have complete age-appropriate mastery of English.

Developmental progress for English preschool learners falls in four general categories: listening, speaking, reading and writing. Children’s language development is based on active **listening**. Their receptive control precedes their production of language. Children’s listening

strategies in their home language will be applied to their learning English. Overall, the development of early literacy foundations is built on the development of active listening, the social uses of language and non-verbal communication.

When **speaking** learning to ask questions, respond to complex grammatical patterns, and making commentaries are indicators of later development. Research has found that narrative skills developed in the first language transfer to the second language.

Reading is learned on the basis of need, purpose and function. Child come to know the complexity of the act of reading by being read to, by reading to others, and by reading themselves. Parents can assist their children on the path to competency in reading by reading to their children in their home language as well as by providing appropriate reading experiences in English.

Children developing **writing** skills pass through several stages. First they will distinguish drawing from writing. Next they will make imitations of letter shapes and eventually use the symbols to represent meaning. Then they will begin to use letters to represent meaning.

Charts containing examples of each of these areas are located in the adult resources of the preschool and may be checked out for your use.