Stages of Second Language Acquisition

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All new learners of English progress through the same stages to acquire language. However, the length of time each student spends at a particular stage may vary greatly.

Stage I: Pre-production

This is the silent period. English language learners may have up to 500 words in their receptive vocabulary but they are not yet speaking. Some students will, however, repeat everything you say. They are not really producing language but are parroting.

These new learners of English will listen attentively and they may even be able to copy words from the board. They will be able to respond to pictures and other visuals. They can understand and duplicate gestures and movements to show comprehension. Total Physical Response methods will work well with them. Teachers should focus attention on listening comprehension activities and on building a receptive vocabulary.

English language learners at this stage will need much repetition of English. They will benefit from a “buddy” who speaks their language. Remember that the school day is exhausting for these newcomers as they are overwhelmed with listening to English language all day long.

Stage II: Early production

This stage may last up to six months and students will develop a receptive and active vocabulary of about 1000 words. During this stage, students can usually speak in one- or two-word phrases. They can use short language chunks that have been memorized although these chunks may not always be used correctly.

Here are some suggestions for working with students in this stage of English language learning:

- Ask yes/no and either/or questions.
- Accept one or two word responses.
- Give students the opportunity to participate in some of the whole class activities.
- Use pictures and realia to support questions.
- Modify content information to the language level of ELLs.
- Build vocabulary using pictures.
- Provide listening activities.
- Simplify the content materials to be used. Focus on key vocabulary and concepts.
- When teaching elementary age ELLs, use simple books with predictable text.
- Support learning with graphic organizers, charts and graphs. Begin to foster writing in English through labeling and short sentences. Use a frame to scaffold writing.
Stage III: Speech emergence

Students have developed a vocabulary of about 3,000 words and can communicate with simple phrases and sentences. They will ask simple questions, that may or may not be grammatically correct, such as “May I go to the bathroom?” ELLs will also initiate short conversations with classmates. They will understand easy stories read in class with the support of pictures. They will also be able to do some content work with teacher support. Here are some simple tasks they can complete:

- Sound out stories phonetically.
- Read short, modified texts in content area subjects.
- Complete graphic organizers with word banks.
- Understand and answer questions about charts and graphs.
- Match vocabulary words to definitions.
- Study flashcards with content area vocabulary.
- Participate in duet, pair and choral reading activities.
- Write and illustrate riddles.
- Understand teacher explanations and two-step directions.
- Compose brief stories based on personal experience.
- Write in dialogue journals.

Dialogue journals are a conversation between the teacher and the student. They are especially helpful with English language learners. Students can write about topics that interest them and proceed at their own level and pace. They have a place to express their thoughts and ideas.

Stage IV: Intermediate fluency

English language learners at the intermediate fluency stage have a vocabulary of 6000 active words. They are beginning to use more complex sentences when speaking and writing and are willing to express opinions and share their thoughts. They will ask questions to clarify what they are learning in class. These English language learners will be able to work in grade level math and science classes with some teacher support. Comprehension of English literature and social studies content is increasing. At this stage, students will use strategies from their native language to learn content in English.

Student writing at this stage will have many errors as ELLs try to master the complexity of English grammar and sentence structure. Many students may be translating written assignments from native language. They should be expected to synthesize what they have learned and to make inferences from that learning. This is the time for teachers to focus on learning strategies. Students in this stage will also be able to understand more complex concepts.

Stage V: Advanced Fluency

It takes students from 4-10 years to achieve cognitive academic language proficiency in a second language. Student at this stage will be near-native in their ability to perform in content area learning. Most ELLs at this stage have been exited from ESL and other support programs. At the beginning of this stage, however, they will need continued support from classroom teachers especially in content areas such as history/social studies and in writing.

http://www.everythingesl.net/inservices/language_stages.php