

English as an additional language (EAL) in practice

by Alice Bevan

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Chapter Two How children learn languages

The way children learn to understand and use language is a fascinating process. In just a few short years, many parents go from eagerly anticipating their child's first words to wondering when they'll next get peace and quiet. This chapter explores how children learn languages, firstly by looking at first language acquisition and outlining key developmental milestones.

Routes to bilingualism are then explored. The chapter outlines how children who are exposed to more than one language simultaneously as a baby or young toddler learn these languages.

It then looks at sequential learners, highlighting steps that children usually go through when exposed to a new language after learning a first. Factors that can impact on additional language learning are discussed.

The term **receptive language skills** refers to a child's ability to understand the words that they hear and to understand the meaning of what people are saying to them.

'Receptive language is indeed at the heart of all other aspects of learning language, whether it is your first language or a subsequent language acquisition. It is essential that a child is able to recognise sounds and differentiate words, to follow instructions, and to learn sentences, rhymes and songs.' (Hayes, 2016)

The term **expressive language skills** refers to a child's ability to use words to communicate. Being able to name people, objects and actions as well as making requests and asking questions all require expressive language. Developing expressive language skills is more complex than simply learning words. Children need to learn how to put words together which requires them to learn the rules of the language.



First language acquisition

During their first days and weeks of life, babies begin to 'tune-in' to the voices of their main carers and distinguish between different voice tones, such as soothing sounds, singing and more playful conversation sounds. There is an incredible rate of development in all areas during the early years, and receptive language development is a major area of growth. Within the first year, babies will start to develop an understanding of the meaning of a number of words that they hear regularly in meaningful situations.

As well as developing an awareness of the noises and sounds that their main carers are making, babies soon begin to experiment with their own voice as they coo and babble. Many babies attempt to say their first word somewhere between 10 and 15 months old. They will continue to develop skills in both receptive language (understanding language) and expressive language (using words) throughout their childhood. Children usually understand far more than they can say, as most children's receptive language skills are ahead of their expressive language skills.

What does the EYFS say?

By the end of the EYFS, it is expected that children are able to do the following:

Understanding: 'children follow instructions involving several ideas or actions. They answer 'how' and 'why' questions about their experiences and in response to stories and events.' (EYFS, 2017)

Speaking: 'children express themselves effectively, showing awareness of listeners' needs. They use past, present and future forms accurately when talking about events that have happened or are to happen in the future. They develop their own narratives and explanations by connecting ideas or events.' (EYFS, 2017)

There are of course many steps and milestones that children must reach in order to achieve these early learning goals. These will be explored next.



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The table below looks at the receptive language skills (understanding) and the expressive language skills (talking) of children from birth to the end of the EYFS age range. The

information in the table below applies to children who are exposed to just one language from birth; these milestones are based on children learning English as a mother tongue.

First Language Acquisition Developmental Milestones

Age	Receptive language skills (understanding)	Expressive language skills (talking)
By 6 months	<p>During the first six months of life, babies tune in and listen to the sounds that they hear.</p> <p>They may have some understanding of words such as 'no', 'bye bye', 'all gone' and 'more' when these words are accompanied with gesture and used in context.</p>	<p>They typically make a range of different noises and experiment with their voices through babbling and other sounds.</p>
By 12-18 months	<p>By this point, toddlers typically show some understanding of words that refer to familiar items and familiar people (e.g. mummy, daddy, teddy, car, dog, juice).</p> <p>They are able to point to a range of people and items when asked (e.g. 'where's teddy?').</p>	<p>Most children say their first words at around 12 months. Of course, it may be a little before or after this age.</p> <p>First they tend to learn the words for familiar items, familiar people and social words (e.g. daddy, juice, bye). Verbs (e.g. jump, sleep, eat) come a little later than nouns.</p>
By 18 months-2 years	<p>Children are usually able to follow simple instructions, when they choose to of course. They can typically follow instructions that contain 1-2 key words (e.g. 'where's daddy?' or 'where's the big teddy?').</p>	<p>Toddlers typically start to join words at around this stage.</p> <p>For example, they might say phrases such as: 'no mummy', 'daddy gone', 'more juice', 'juice all gone'.</p>
By 2-3 years	<p>Children typically understand instructions that contain 2-3 key words (e.g. 'where's the big red ball?')</p>	<p>Children typically attempt to make longer utterances by this point, however they can continue to struggle to get their message across to others at times and will rely on non-verbal communication when necessary.</p>
By 3-4 years	<p>Children are able to understand more lengthy instructions and can understand some 'wh' questions such as 'who' questions and 'where' questions.</p> <p>Their understanding of prepositions (e.g. in, on, under, behind) will typically have developed or will be developing.</p>	<p>Expressive language skills are much more advanced by this stage, however children will continue to generalise grammatical rules resulting in errors such as '...two mouses' and 'I goed to the park'.</p>
By 4-5 years	<p>Children are typically able to follow a string of 2-3 instructions.</p> <p>They will have a good understanding of a wider range of linguistic concepts including: sequences (first, next), textures (smooth, rough), characteristics (old, new), emotional states (happy, sad, scared), quantities (many, few, some), spatial relationships (top, bottom, behind, above).</p>	<p>By the end of the EYFS, children are typically able to engage in conversations with adults.</p> <p>They are able to explain something that has happened and talk in the past and future tense.</p> <p>They will typically ask familiar people a high number of questions.</p>

(Adapted from the following sources: Bowen, 1998; Sheridan, 2008)

Children following this common progress in their communication and language development are likely to meet the expected requirements (the early learning goals) by the end of the EYFS.

How does first language acquisition vary between languages?

Languages vary in many ways. As well as having different vocabularies, languages vary in terms of the sounds used in the language, the sentence structures and the grammatical rules. Therefore there may be some differences in the stages of language acquisition for children learning a language other than English.

Babies of all languages experiment with their voices within the first weeks and months of life, however the sounds they use in vocal play and babbling actually reflect the sounds of the language(s) they hear. For example, babies who are spoken to in French will use different sounds in their babble to babies who have been exposed to English. (Maguire-Fong, 2015)

Similarly, by around 12 months, children tend to begin to say their first attempts at words regardless of language. However, some difference in the expressive language milestones can be seen from this point onwards, due to differences between languages. For example, in English, children tend to start naming nouns before they use verbs; however this is not true of all language. In Korean for example, children tend to learn verbs before nouns. (Tomasello, 2014)

In general though, regardless of the language they are exposed to, typical language acquisition follows the main developmental milestones shown in the table on page 22, with the usual variation from child to child.

Learning two languages simultaneously

In many ways, the stages that simultaneous language learners go through mirror the way monolingual children learn language. Babies exposed to two or more languages will coo and babble in the same way as monolingual children, however they may use a wider range of sounds when babbling, reflecting the languages that they hear (Maguire-Fong, 2015).

They will then start to use single words in one or both languages at around the 12 month stage, before then joining words in the months that follow. The amount of exposure that each child has to each language will vary, as will many other factors, such as the quality of the language models that they are hearing, therefore it is almost inevitable that children have different abilities in each of their languages. Typically though, children will understand more than they can say in each language that they are exposed to.

A child's early vocabulary in each language is often smaller than a monolingual child's vocabulary. However when the number of words that they know in both languages are combined, the figure is usually much the same as a monolingual child's vocabulary (Cote and Bornstein, 2015). Simultaneous learners develop two separate but connected language systems. They will at some point notice that there are two words for the same thing and develop an awareness of the two languages.



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As well as being exposed to more than one vocabulary, simultaneous language learners are also exposed to 'a more diverse set of linguistic structures than monolingual children.' (MacLeod, et al, 2013) In attempts to express themselves, it is common that these children attempt to apply the rules of one language to the other language. Similarly, when they speak, it is typical for them to continue to use words from both languages within one sentence. This is referred to as code switching.

The research shows that, before reaching school age, many sequential language learners 'develop linguistic systems that are comparable to monolingual peers at least in one language or in both languages.' (MacLeod, et al, 2013)

Case Study: Maria

Age: 2 years, 9 months

Languages: Polish and English

Maria was born in the West Midlands in the UK to her Polish parents.

Maria's parents have spoken to her in Polish since she was born and she has been looked after by a childminder from 8am-1pm on weekdays since the age of 5 months. Maria's childminder only speaks English.

Maria said her first words in Polish at 13 months. By 16 months she had started using single words in both Polish and English to request her favourite things, including juice, ball and her favourite soft toys. She then started joining words by 20 months in English.

Maria will now create short phrases, containing 3-4 words in both languages and her childminder and parents are hearing her say new words every single day.

How do children learn an additional language?

This section looks at how sequential learners (aged 3 years and above) go about learning an additional

language. Sequential learners are those who are exposed to a new language after gaining some language ability in their first language(s).

The way sequential learners acquire a new language is different to how they learnt their first language. This is because they are able to draw on the knowledge that they already have about how languages work. An EAL learner with no prior experience of English may already understand that '...words refer to objects and events, that words can be combined to form phrases and sentences, and that application of grammatical rules can change the tense of an utterance' (Madhani, 1994 cited in Buckley, 2003). They will use this knowledge to try and figure out which of the rules and patterns from their first language apply to English and which rules and patterns don't apply or work in this new language. This is a strategy that children who are just learning one language are not able to use.

Franson (2011) explains that 'first language knowledge will be helpful in the acquisition of the second language. The extent of this help will be dependent upon their proficiency in their first language, their age and other factors.'

Sequential learners of English will make some of the same errors as monolingual children. For example, they will overgeneralise grammatical rules, such as adding an 's' to all nouns to make them plural (e.g. saying 'mouses' instead of 'mice' and saying 'mans' instead of 'men'). However they will also make other errors that monolingual children wouldn't make, as they attempt to apply a rule from one of their languages to another language.

On average, children take up to two years to become proficient at conversational level in a new language (Murphy, 2011). During this time they have to learn not only new words, but also all of the rules of their new language.

Stages of additional language acquisition

As already discussed, all EAL learners are different. The learning of an additional language varies from child to child, however children who already have good skills in their first language (i.e. sequential learners aged 3+) typically go through many of the stages below when put into a new language environment: