

ABC dragons



**LANGUAGE IS NOT A SUBJECT IN SCHOOL.
YOU DO NOT STUDY LANGUAGE.
YOU ACQUIRE IT.**



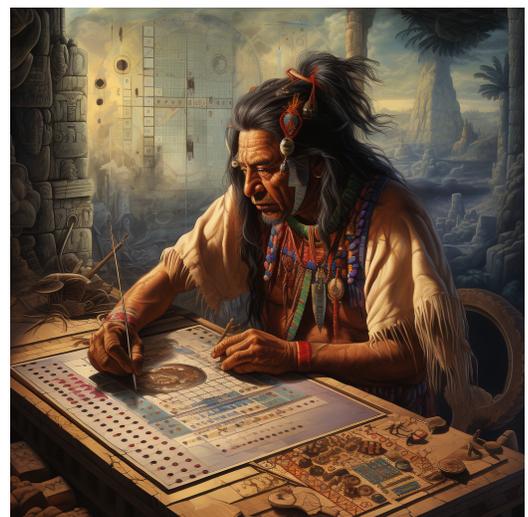
During the initial year of a child's life, parents are unfazed when their offspring remains silent or doesn't start walking. They recognize these as natural developmental milestones that demand time.



Yet, paradoxically, after just a day in an English language school, the same parents might be baffled as to why their child hasn't started speaking English fluently. The crux of the challenge in second language acquisition doesn't lie with the student but rather with the parents' skewed expectations. Many parents fail to grasp that mastering a second language is a journey, mirroring the natural progression seen when a child learns their mother tongue. This pervasive impatience and misconception often pressurize schools into adopting methods that might yield rapid, but superficial, results. It's akin to an athlete resorting to steroids for quick muscle gain; it's unnatural and riddled with long-term repercussions.

Here, at our school, we prioritize a science-based approach in our teaching methods to ensure authentic and lasting results. To draw a parallel from history, consider the ancient Mayan civilization. The Mayans were exceptional astronomers. They meticulously observed the heavens, documented celestial patterns, and based their calendars and agricultural practices on scientific observations. Their approach was rooted in observation, study, and application, not mere whims or guesses. Their civilization flourished because they respected the value of systematic knowledge.

Similarly, when it comes to language acquisition, we can either base our methods on untested beliefs or choose a structured, scientific path. Now, let's delve into the science behind it.



FIRST AND SECOND LANGUAGE ACQUISITION STAGES OF DEVELOPMENT

The foundational stage of both first and second language acquisition is listening. This stage is critical because it lays the groundwork for language production. During this 'silent period,' learners are absorbing the sounds, structures, and rhythms of the language, an internal process that eludes direct measurement as it takes place within the neural architecture of the brain. Although we cannot easily quantify this stage due to the intricate nature of brain development—a field still in its infancy—it is undeniably essential. We will explore this silent period in greater depth subsequently.

Moving to the more observable stages, we can analyze the production of language, which offers tangible evidence of linguistic development. For native language acquisition and for those who have immersed themselves in an environment where their second language is predominantly spoken, the progress is evident and can be categorized as follows.

FIRST LANGUAGE ACQUISITION

Children typically follow a predictable pattern in their language development, though it's important to note significant individual variation in the timing of each developmental milestone. Language acquisition is a gradual process; for instance, the mastery of English verb inflection spans over a year or more. Initially, children may omit verb inflections entirely, progressing to a stage where they use them almost flawlessly.

Moreover, the developmental sequence can be described in various ways. From the perspective of production, one approach is to delineate the stages with an emphasis on the evolution of lexical and syntactic knowledge:

Stage	Typical age	Description
Babbling	6-8 months	Repetitive CV patterns
One-word stage (better one-morpheme or one-unit) or holophrastic stage	9-18 months	Single open-class words or word stems
Two-word stage	18-24 months	"mini-sentences" with simple semantic relations
Telegraphic stage or early multiword stage (better multi-morpheme)	24-30 months	"Telegraphic" sentence structures of lexical rather than functional or grammatical morphemes
Later multiword stage	30+ months	Grammatical or functional structures emerge

SECOND LANGUAGE ACQUISITION

Similar to acquiring your mother tongue, the initial and crucial stage in learning a second language is listening. This stage lays the foundation for all subsequent language skills. While second language acquisition often follows the blueprint of first language development, there are distinct differences. Notably, the process tends to be more prolonged, and the outcomes may not always reach the level of native-like fluency.

It's also important to consider the context in which English is being learned. For individuals living in an English-speaking country, the stages of acquisition are immersed in daily life, which typically leads to more rapid advancement. In contrast, for learners in a non-English speaking country, like Mexico, these stages may extend over a longer period. The exposure to the language is limited, and the journey to fluency is often more challenging, with the likelihood of achieving complete fluency being considerably lower.

The Six Stages of Second-Language Acquisition

Stage	Description
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.

DURATION OF LANGUAGE ACQUISITION STAGES

The timeline for traversing the stages of language learning varies greatly among individuals. A pivotal factor hastening second language acquisition is the robustness of a learner's first language abilities. Esteemed language researchers, including Jim Cummins, Catherine Snow, Lily Wong Fillmore, and Stephen Krashen, have explored this phenomenon extensively. They collectively recognize that, typically, it takes about five to seven years for an individual with solid first language literacy skills to achieve advanced fluency in a second language.

For learners who have not fully developed literacy skills in their primary language, the journey to advanced fluency might extend to seven to ten years. It's crucial to acknowledge the diversity in each English Language Learner's (ELL) linguistic and educational history, which profoundly influences their English learning trajectory.

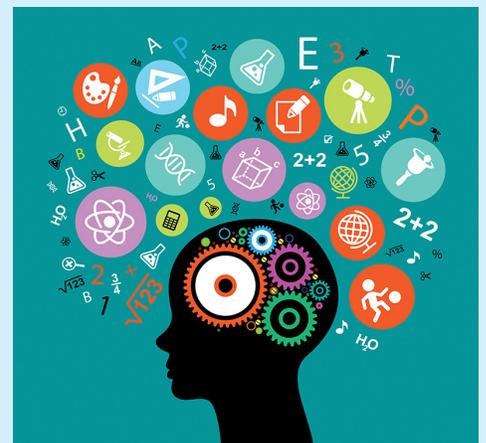
SECOND LANGUAGE ACQUISITION IN A MOTHER COUNTRY

In nations such as Mexico, where learners attempt to master a second language without the support of an immersive linguistic environment, the traditional stages of language acquisition become blurred. This is not a focus of extensive research as the variables are too numerous, introducing a high degree of unpredictability into the process. The extent of second language exposure in non-immersive environments—be it within the household, through international schools, or private ESL instruction—varies widely, from virtually non-existent to somewhat mirroring the structured stages previously outlined, albeit over much longer periods.

The key obstacle in such contexts is what is known as "language interference." This phenomenon occurs when the dominant mother tongue intrusively impacts the learning of a second language, resulting in difficulties with both comprehension and production. A robust first language system can hinder the acquisition of a second, often leading to the alteration of grammatical patterns to align with those of the first language, or even to "fossilization," where progress in learning the second language stalls completely. The roots of language interference lie deep within the cognitive functions of the brain.

THE PREDICTIVE BRAIN

Predictive Coding is a fascinating theory in neuroscience that posits our brains as proactive prediction machines. According to this concept, the brain constantly constructs and refines a mental model of its environment. This model is used to predict sensory input, forming expectations about incoming data. When the actual sensory information deviates from these predictions, the brain adapts its model to reconcile the differences.



At its core, our neurons incessantly gather clues from our surroundings, aiding us in interpreting and engaging with the world. This process is pivotal in shaping how we

develop mental frameworks that both independently and collectively influence our perception and understanding of reality.

Consider the act of catching a ball thrown by a friend. Though seemingly simple, it's a complex task for young children. For an adult, a multitude of factors come into play: the sound of an arm moving, the color of the ball, the trust that the friend won't cause harm, and a repository of knowledge that calculates the ball's trajectory based on speed, distance, and release angle, among other variables. This predictive model, honed through hours, days, and years of practice and continual updates, facilitates the effortless catching of the ball by an adult. Conversely, a child, lacking such a developed model, might merely watch as the ball hits them, unable to anticipate or react due to the absence of a pre-existing hypothesis about the potential outcome.

These models are integral to all aspects of our lives, encompassing skills such as seeing, hearing, touching, walking, eating, and even tying shoes. Each skill, seemingly simple to us now, would have required extensive practice and model refinement to master. This principle is especially true for our language systems

THE CRITICAL ROLE OF LISTENING IN LANGUAGE DEVELOPMENT



Listening forms the bedrock of language systems, both first and second. For someone fluent in a language, comprehending a sentence like "What are you doing?" is effortless, akin to an adult catching a ball. However, for a non-English speaker, such as a Mexican adult with no English proficiency, understanding this question from an English speaker might be as challenging as a child attempting to catch a ball for the first time; the words, like the ball, are likely to miss their mark.

For infants, who are yet to develop their cognitive systems, every new sensory experience is a challenge, comparable to the ball hitting them in the face. Although their vision and hearing function, they require time to refine these senses. Skills like walking and basic hand-eye coordination must wait until these fundamental systems are fine-tuned. The auditory system, however, is fairly developed at birth and plays a crucial role in constructing brain systems. Research even suggests that listening begins in the womb, enabling newborns to recognize their mother's voice immediately after birth. This early auditory experience is foundational for developing a robust language comprehension system.

It's imperative to emphasize that without this auditory foundation, the development of a legitimate language system cannot occur. Although the specific neurological processes are still under investigation, we understand that sound waves travel to the ear, then along the cochlear nerve into the brain, initiating a complex and nearly instantaneous process.

In the case of newborns, their initial encounters with words and sentences are overwhelming, akin to the ball-catching analogy. This confusion is a necessary part of developing their auditory system. The early connection with the mother's voice is crucial for this development.

By around 9 months, infants start to grasp simple words. Interestingly, this is also when they become less receptive to languages other than their native tongue. The initial predictive model they've built makes other languages seem like irrelevant noise, not crucial for further language development. This early brush with language interference illustrates why natural, immersive language experiences become increasingly important for second language acquisition.

As children grow, the use of their listening system in conjunction with predictive coding aids in the expansion of grammatical structures and vocabulary. Once the brain establishes a robust phonetic map and a network for storing words phonetically (like t - o - p) with associated meanings, children start learning words at an impressive rate—initially one word per day, accelerating to up to seven words per day around 18 months to 2 years. This acceleration is likely due to the brain's enhanced ability to use more sophisticated language models for comparison with heard sentences.



A key skill in this process is contextualization, which allows understanding of a word based on its usage in a sentence and its social context. Consider the word

“top,” which has multiple meanings depending on the context:

- Children like to play with a top. (a toy)
- I like to wear a red top on Sundays. (a piece of clothing)
- We walked to the top of the mountain. (the highest point of a location)
- His marks were near the top of the class. (a high ranking)

Without predictive coding and contextualization, differentiating these meanings would be impossible. Yet, by ages 5-6, children can effortlessly interpret these variations without explicit instruction in word lists or grammar.

For optimal language development in your child, following this natural progression is critical. Straying from this path risks encountering significant challenges like language interference.

OVERCOMING LANGUAGE INTERFERENCE IN LANGUAGE LEARNING

Language interference is a significant hurdle in language education, characterized by the brain's resistance to embracing a new language, leading to what is known as the “silent period.” For learners in a country where the target language is spoken, environmental factors often provide sufficient pressure to initiate some degree of natural language development. However, for students in their native country, without

the influence of a foreign language environment, the journey is often marked by frustration and limited success.

This reality explains why many learners, especially in non-immersive environments, struggle to acquire substantial language skills. Adults attempting to learn a second language frequently encounter minimal progress and become discouraged. When it comes to children learning a language, parents often respond to slow progress by transferring them to different schools, but this change rarely resolves the underlying issue, leading to minimal improvement.

Nevertheless, there are key factors that can significantly enhance the likelihood of successful language acquisition:

1. Early Start: The process of learning a second language is more effective when begun at a young age. The ideal time to start is as early as possible—even during pregnancy. Expectant mothers can begin learning English, continuing with the baby after birth. Utilizing videos and apps can be effective, as the sound of the language, particularly in the mother's voice, is crucial. It is important that the mother speaks exclusively in English during these learning sessions.



2. Skilled Instruction: Employing a foreign teacher proficient in the communicative approach can create an environment conducive to natural language development. Language is a socio-cultural tool and is more readily acquired when perceived as practical and useful. Communication is a vital aspect of life; hence, its usage in a communicative setting can accelerate learning. Engaging the learner with materials, activities, and games that are enjoyable and interactive is crucial. Active listening is a prerequisite for effective language acquisition.

NO GUARANTEE

While there is no absolute guarantee that adherence to these strategies will lead to fluency, following them closely and maintaining patience can significantly enhance the likelihood of successful language acquisition. For students and parents committed to this journey, the results, though they may not always reach perfect fluency, are often substantial.

A well-executed approach to language learning, grounded in these principles, can open numerous doors for learners. The proficiency gained through this process can be instrumental in enabling students to study abroad, secure employment in international companies, or attain positions with higher salaries. These outcomes, while contingent on various factors, can be confidently anticipated as a return on the investment in language education.