

Stages of Bilingualism

It is important for professionals to understand what can be expected for children who are learning English as an additional language (EAL) to help to understand whether a child needs any additional support whilst they are learning the language. Some studies suggest that whilst there are lots of differences in the way that children acquire an additional language, there may be a developmental sequence which is seen across most children as follows:

1. Continued use of the home language

Children use their home language with everyone in the hope that they will be understood.

2. Silent period

Children may experience a silent period of up to 6 months when they are first introduced to another language (e.g. when starting nursery or school). Children may still communicate non-verbally i.e. with gestures and pointing. They will still be learning language. Your child needs time to adjust to their new setting and to tune into the sounds of English.

During this time, adults should talk to the child even when they do not respond, accept any non-verbal responses, praise the efforts of the child and include lots of small groups with other children to build confidence.

3. Repetition of routines and single words

Children begin to use single words or phrases during the early stages of learning English. These tend to be phrases they hear very often E.g. 'wash your hands' or quotes from familiar stories or songs.

4. Becoming more confident

When children become better at using their new language they may stop using their mother tongue for a period of time, sometimes preferring to use their newly learned language. E.g. a child with mother tongue of Punjabi learns English. His grandmother speaks only Punjabi, but the child may now respond to her in English. It is important to continue using your home language during this time.



Interference

A child may use the rules of their first language when speaking English. Eg: putting the verb at the end of the sentence. This is typical while the child is learning the 'rules' of the new language.

Language Proficiency

It can take 5-7 years of exposure, for a second language to fully develop in school aged children, (according to research by Jim Cummins of Canada.) A child who hears English for the first time when attending nursery at age 3 may not become fully proficient until age 8-10. This is not a language disorder, however extra support for English as an Additional Language (EAL) will be beneficial.