Stages of Second Language Development

English language learners, like anyone learning a new language, go through different stages of language development.

Understanding these different stages helps teachers select materials and provide instruction that matches children's levels of English proficiency.

Children’s literacy knowledge in their native languages also impacts their literacy development in English.

Mainstream teachers can collaborate with ESL teachers to plan appropriate ESL activities.

Pre-Production

Children may:

• Communicate using their native languages, even with people who do not speak or understand the language.

• Remain silent.

Suggested Instructional Practices:

• Use normal pronunciations and speech patterns.

• Actively involve children in classroom activities. Even though they may be silent, they are observing and learning.

• Restate children’s responses to ensure understanding. Clarify requests, teach routine classroom vocabulary, and simplify sentence structure. Use gestures.

• In small groups, play interactive games that build vocabulary.

• Use photos and artifacts to stimulate discussion and facilitate comprehension.

• Read aloud books that have a close match between the text and the illustrations.

• If possible, pair children with language buddies to practice skills and concepts.

• Accept non-verbal responses such as drawing, gestures, and hand signals.
### Stages of Second Language Development (cont.)

#### Early Production

**Children may:**

- Use simple words or phrases related to everyday events.
- Use telegraphic speech in which one- or two-word phrases communicate much longer ideas. For example, “ball” may mean “Please give me the ball.”
- Understand more English than they are able to produce.

**Suggested Instructional Practices:**

- Actively involve children in classroom activities.
- Allow sufficient wait time when you ask a child to respond.
- Post printed labels and word lists around the classroom.
- Pose yes/no and either/or questions.
- Use brainstorming and webbing activities to activate background knowledge.
- Focus on the meaning of a child’s response, not the pronunciation or syntax.
- Explain new vocabulary words and model their use in sentences.
Stages of Second Language Development (cont.)

Speech Emergence

Children may:

- Use new vocabulary.
- Communicate using sentences.
- Ask simple questions related to classroom activities; for example, “Can I go to the restroom?”
- Understand spoken English with the support of pictures, actions, and objects.
- Understand more English than they are able to produce.

Suggested Instructional Practices:

- Actively involve children in classroom activities.
- Focus on meaning, not pronunciation.
- Continue to build English vocabulary by using synonyms, webbing, and semantic mapping.
- Provide opportunities for children to communicate in meaningful ways.
- When formal reading instruction begins in English, use texts with illustrations that connect to the story and to children’s background knowledge.
- Plan extension activities by structuring opportunities for children to discuss content of stories with English-speaking peers.
Stages of Second Language Development (cont.)

Intermediate and Advanced Fluency

Children may:

• Express thoughts and feelings more effectively.

• Ask and respond to higher-level questions (what if, how, and why).

• Incorporate new vocabulary into speech.

• Speak English using grammar and vocabulary comparable to same-age native speakers.

Suggested Instructional Practices:

• Actively involve children in classroom activities.

• Continue oral language development through structured interactions with English-speaking peers.

• Explain idiomatic and slang expressions.

• Provide many opportunities for children to write in a variety of forms.

• Help children transfer their knowledge of reading in their native language to reading in English.