

# Understanding the stages of learning for children with English as an Additional Language

Guidance compiled by EMAS



Brighton & Hove  
City Council

# Introduction

Practitioners who are new to working with children and families who speak English as an Additional Language (EAL), are often concerned about how to best meet their needs.

## Here are some of the comments practitioners have made...

“He doesn’t have any language”

“She doesn’t speak”

“I don’t understand him”

### Children learning English as an Additional Language may:

- Be silent
- Mix words from both languages
- Make many grammatical errors

These features are normal when acquiring a new language and do not necessarily indicate a language delay.

This guidance outlines the stages that children go through when acquiring an additional language and gives suggestions about how practitioners can support them in this journey within an inclusive environment.

It is recommended that it is used to monitor English language acquisition for individual children and that practitioners use the “what can we do to help” section to consider their levels of support for the children with EAL.

It is important to remember that the process of learning an additional language can take several years and is different for each bilingual child. For children entering a setting where a different language is spoken, it can take three months for them to begin to understand. It may take two years before they can hold a conversation and up to seven years to have full cognitive understanding of the new language.

**This guidance is referring to children who have age appropriate development in their mother tongue and are new to English.**



## Stage one: New to English

Stage one can be subdivided into three mini stages

What a child may do	What can we do to help?
<p><b>Early – silent, non verbal</b></p> <p>NB: This can be quite a lengthy time for some children but can be shorter depending on child's confidence &amp; support from adults, other children &amp; the environment.</p>	
<p>Use home language with adults or children who do not speak the same language.</p>	<p>Do not put pressure on child to speak until confident and ready but involve them in circle games, turn taking games, outdoor play etc where they can feel included and are under less pressure to perform and can rely on clues from peers.</p>
<p>Go through a silent or non verbal stage but they are still active in their language learning – watching, listening and exploring (internalising). The child will be 'tuning in' to all the new language heard.</p>	<p>Continue to talk to the child eg use a running commentary as you play alongside the child-using short simple sentences.</p>
<p>Understand more than they can speak, ie child may understand a question but only shake their head in response.</p>	<p>Use language in context; eg talk about the sand, water or bricks while playing with them as talk out of context can be confusing.</p> <p>Use visual cues whenever possible eg photos, pictures, real objects, facial expressions, gestures.</p> <p>Reinforce phrases from routines, eg 'wash your hands'.</p> <p>Pick up on non verbal responses. Children may use them to indicate a need or as a response to a question.</p> <p>Children may need extra support with sharing etc until they develop the appropriate language.</p> <p>Access bilingual support in mother tongue (if possible) so that the child can access learning alongside others.</p>

## Stage one cont.

What a child may do	What can we do to help?
<b>Middle – using simple words, concentrate through a story</b>	
Begin to practise the vocabulary learnt by echoing phrases associated with routines, eg 'tidy up time'.	Respond positively to all attempts at speaking English eg "Yes, it is tidy up time".
Become familiar with chunks of social speech, eg 'Mummy come soon' and 'Happy birthday' and learn to apply them in order to interact with others.	Keep talking and involving the child in activities with other children and adults. Use familiar objects and family photos to encourage talk.  Give extra time for the child to respond and give encouragement and praise for any effort to communicate.
Begin to join in with repetitive phrases in stories and simple songs and rhymes.	Provide regular opportunities to use songs, rhymes and stories in their play.  Provide opportunities for repetition of a few core songs/ rhymes and stories.  Choose stories that have good visuals and a repeated refrain and good clear illustrations like Dear Zoo, Brown Bear, We're Going on a Bear Hunt, We're Going on a Lion Hunt, Goldilocks and the Three Bears.  Use story sacks, puppets and visual prompts to support children's understanding and bring the stories alive!
Increasingly use one word utterances (usually nouns) to perform many functions, eg naming something, asking or responding to a question.	Use what the child says to extend and model language, eg Child: 'Car'. Adult: 'Yes, you've got a blue car'.  Share ongoing activities with parents/carers to support concept development in mother tongue.

What a child may do	What can we do to help?
<b>Late – communicating through very short phrases, greetings, simple words</b>	
Begin to construct his / her own phrases and sentences using learnt words. Their main concern will be to get their meaning across, so function words will be missing, eg 'me bike garden'.	Accept all that the child says and remodel phrases without criticism, eg 'Yes, you can go to the garden and have a bike'.
Non verbal gestures will go alongside the speech to help clarify their meaning.	Respond positively to all attempts at speaking English.

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# Stage Two: Becoming familiar with English

What a child may do	What can we do to help?
<p>Show increased confidence in using English and begin to use simple sentences and extended phrases with more control of functional language.</p> <p><b>The emphasis will continue to be on communicating meaning so sentences/phrases won't be accurate.</b></p>	<p>Provide lots of opportunities for talk where child can practise their English skills, eg role play, puppets, circle games, in a non-threatening way.</p> <p>Monitor where child prefers to play and talk. There will be children who will choose long avoidance activities eg bikes. Plan for additional staff to support and extend their play.</p>
<p>Apply structures of their home language to English. Use English to initiate conversations, give simple instructions and convey a simple message.</p>	<p>Ensure child has good / correct language structures modelled during adult: child interactions, eg providing a commentary when playing alongside child such as 'My car is going over the bridge, where is your car going?' (Use body language and facial expressions to clarify meaning.)</p> <p>Model conventions of politeness in English eg there may be more "pleases and thank yous" than in the mother tongue eg "please can I have .... " rather than "I want..."</p>
<p>Begin to develop more control in the use of functional language (people or objects) and start to ask functional questions, eg 'What shall I do now?'</p> <p>Begin to combine or extend certain simple sentences in order to communicate new ideas of their own.</p> <p>Begin to use descriptive language, eg 'big', 'blue', 'lots and lots'.</p>	<p>Respond positively to all attempts at speaking English.</p>

### What a child may do

Memorise and retell familiar stories with the use of props and use song and rhyme forms.

### What can we do to help?

Emphasise descriptive language in conversations, play, stories etc.

Ensure child has access to a range of simple story books with some repetitive text. Make and share photo books with familiar pictures eg family, home, local environment etc.

Plan for song and rhyme time – use props / song / rhyme bags wherever possible. Leave props in the environment for children to revisit and reinforce language.

### Other good practice ideas for this stage

Maximise opportunities for social language eg snack/lunch time.

Use circle time to reinforce language structures eg “I like to play with....” or “I like to eat....” or “Today I feel....because....” For all such activities ensure the child with EAL has a later turn so they can observe good role models.

Look for opportunities to use the same word in different contexts eg big and little in different play activities, at lunch times etc.

Provide opportunities for children to record and listen to their own talk eg tapes, videos.

Provide opportunities for children who speak the same language to play and talk together.

Think of which language structures can be reinforced through certain practical activities eg cooking process: first..., next..., last... for explaining a sequence.



## Stage Three: Becoming confident as a user of English

What a child may do	What can we do to help?
<p>Show growing competence in using English and talk using larger, grammatically correct sentences.</p> <p>Understand most verbal instructions and no longer need visual clues.</p> <p>Begin to give explanations of how things happen and begin to ask heuristic questions (how/why? etc).</p> <p>Be able to convey meaning effectively.</p>	<p>Provide lots of opportunities for talk where child can practice their English skills, eg role play, puppets, circle games, in a non-threatening way.</p> <p>Monitor where child prefers to play and talk. There will be children who will choose long avoidance activities eg bikes. Plan for additional staff to support and extend their play.</p>

## Stage Four: Fluent in most situations

What a child may do	What can we do to help?
<p>Use English fluently in most situations.</p> <p>Spoken English and understanding are comparable to that of monolingual English speakers.</p>	<p>Ensure children encounter more detailed and correct vocabulary in a comprehensible context eg roses and tulips instead of flowers.</p> <p>Continue to plan and use more complex tense structures eg "What would happen if....".</p> <p>Use open ended questions.</p>

# A note about home language

Young children learning one language at home and another at the setting/school need to use their home language as much as possible. Parents should be encouraged to speak their home language with their child. This builds a firm foundation for the second language. Without this foundation, both first and second language can be delayed or disrupted.



# Ten Top Tips for supporting children with EAL

Don't worry if the child does not talk for some months. Involve him/her in all activities, continue to talk and use smiles, gestures and eye contact. Give opportunities for speaking but do not put pressure on the child to talk.

Help the child to understand simple classroom phrases... "Can I have..?", "Wash your hands," "Sit on the carpet," "Hang up your coat," "Put on an apron."

Involve the child in a variety of hands-on activities with other children so he/she can learn the new language in context.

Use visual aids to support stories, songs and talk, eg pictures, objects, photographs and puppets.

Use every activity as a basis for your communication with the child in meaningful contexts.

Talk through what you are doing so the child can hear plenty of structured language in context with visual support.

Keep language direct, simple and consistent. Try to avoid idioms and sayings, eg "It's raining cats and dogs!"

Make sure resources show positive images of the child's home culture, eg books, dolls, toys, games, role-play. Use dual language texts and signs.

Provide taped stories and songs in English, and in the home language, if possible.

Help all the children to learn a few simple words in the home languages represented in your setting, eg hello, thank you, 1, 2, 3, 4, 5 (if possible, use the parents/carers help for this).



# EAL reading and websites

**DCSF Publication:** "Supporting children learning English as an additional language" Guidance for practitioners in the Early Years Foundation Stage (2007) Publication can be downloadable from: <http://nso.archive.teachfind.com/node/84861>

**Washbourne, A. (2011) EAL Pocketbook:** Tools and techniques to create inclusive learning and environments and lessons for students with English as an additional language (Teachers' Pocketbooks)

**Excellence and Enjoyment:** learning and teaching for bilingual children in the primary years (2006) (DfES, Ref: 0013-2006-PCK EN)

**New Arrivals Excellence Programme (2007)** (DCSF Publications)

**Gibbons, P. (2002) Scaffolding Language, Scaffolding Learning:** Teaching Second Language learners in the Mainstream Classroom (Heinemann)

**Gibbons, P. (1998) Learning to Learn in a Second Language (PETA)**

**Bolton, B. (ed.) (2004) Home from home:** a guidance and resource pack for the welcome and inclusion of refugee children and families in school (Save the Children)

**Gravelle, M. (1996) Supporting Bilingual Learners in Schools** (Trentham Books)

**Baker, C. and Prys Jones, S. (1998) Encyclopaedia of Bilingualism and Bilingual Education** (Clevedon: Multilingual Matters)

**Siraj-Blatchford, I. (1994) The Early Years:** laying the foundations for racial equality (Trentham Books)

**www.naldic.org.uk** (National Association for the Development of Language in the Curriculum) Information on all aspects of the teaching of English as an additional language

**www.emaonline.org.uk**  
A wide range of information and resources

**www.emas4success.org**  
Guidance and resources

**www.collaborative.org**  
Resources for collaborative teaching across the curriculum

**www.irespect.net**  
Race equality and diversity resources

**www.teachers.tv**  
Online lectures, classroom practice

# Contact us

## **Ethnic Minority Achievement Service (EMAS)**

at Fairlight School, Pevensey Road, Brighton BN2 3AJ

EMAS provide advice and support on all aspects of supporting children with EAL. Contact Sarah Berliner, Christine Booth or Meeta Johnson on (01273) 292165

