

Vision Post October 2021

Very Young English Language Learners

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The focus of language learning in the kindergarten years is on oral language development, or listening and speaking. Literacy skills (reading and writing) are also introduced in these grades, but oral language proficiency is the key at this time and it is the foundation for literacy skill development in future grades.

The 4 components of language include listening, speaking, reading and writing. These components work in pairs. When you're reading or listening, you are *consuming* a language. When you are speaking or writing, you are *producing* a language. Listening and speaking are the first skills to develop in a new language and reading and writing come next. In order to be considered fluent it is necessary to develop native like proficiency in all 4 components.

Learning an additional language is hard work at any age, but very young language learners face unique challenges. The youngest learners have not yet developed literacy skills in their first language and therefore they cannot apply an understanding of reading and writing strategies to additional languages - they must learn to listen, speak, read and write in several languages at the same time. There are, however, some benefits to learning an additional language at a young age:

- Young children are still using language learning strategies to acquire their native language and these can be applied to learning an additional language.
- Multiple languages can be learned at the same time.
- Young children's brains are tuned to learning the sounds of a language and this can include different sounds in a language other than their home language.
- Young children are usually willing to give something a try even if they don't understand it. They will use context, facial expressions and body language in an effort to understand. They will attempt to speak using approximations. They are often not too bothered about not understanding or making an error.
- Young learners are more likely to develop native-like pronunciation than those who learn another language after age 6.

At TIS we are an "*English Foreign Language*" (EFL) School; we are teaching in a language that is not an official language in Macau and is therefore not commonly used in the environment (on signage, in taxis or grocery stores, etc). Many children do not hear or speak English outside of school hours and no English is used in their homes or by their family members. This slows down their acquisition rate. Similarly those students who speak English or other home

languages and are new to Mandarin have the advantage of hearing and seeing the language in the community, but they do not typically hear it in their homes so this slows down their Mandarin acquisition rate.

It is important for parents and teachers of young learners to understand the early stages of first language acquisition and how this differs from additional language (AL) acquisition, as well as the techniques for supporting language development at every stage.

(continued from Vision Post)

TYPICAL DEVELOPMENTAL STAGES OF FIRST LANGUAGE ACQUISITION

All native language speakers follow a predictable pattern of acquisition, regardless of the language being learned. It is important to understand the stages of first language acquisition and how they differ from additional language acquisition, as well as the techniques for teaching language at every step.

Pre-Talking

0 - 6 months old; beginning to understand short words and phrases that are central to their needs and interests.

Babbling

6-8 months old; making noises and syllables that are not words. Often includes expression and intonation.

Holophrastic

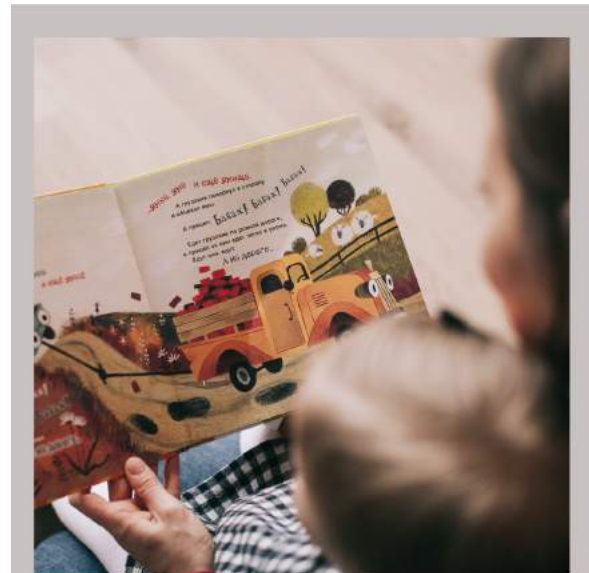
9-18 months old; saying single words strongly centered around basic needs and interests as well as names or identifiers like “mama”.

Telegraphic

18 - 36 months old; using 2 word phrases and eventually short sentences & beginning to use lexical morphemes (single units of meaning) to make words fit sentences such as saying boy(s) rather than boy when referring to a group.

Typical 18 - 23 month old:

- Vocabulary of 50 words; pronunciation is often still unclear
- Asks for common and favourite foods by name
- Makes animal sounds such as “Moo”
- Starting to combine words into chunks



such as “more milk”

- Begins to use pronouns such as “mine”

Typical 2 - 3 year old:

- Vocabulary of 50 - 250 words, many with unclear pronunciation
- Knows some spatial concepts such as “in” or “on”
- Knows some pronouns such as “you”, “me” or “he”
- Knows simple descriptive words such as “big” or “happy”
- Uses 3 word sentences and is able to repeat words and word-chunks such as “ice-cream” or “want it”
- Speech is becoming more accurate, but may still leave off ending sounds. Strangers may not be able to understand all of what’s being said.
- Answers simple questions
- Begins to use more pronouns such as “you” or “I”
- Uses question inflection to ask for something such as “my ball?”
- Begins to use regular plurals such as “shoes” or “socks” and regular past tense verbs such as “jumped”

Multiword

36 months old and onward; learning to use functional morphemes to change the meaning of words they use such as but, in, the, that. Note: this is the age at which many of our students are beginning their initial exposure to English (L2), so they will be in the beginning stages of L2 acquisition while they are still learning L1 (their first language).

Typical 3 - 4 year old:

- Already knows up to 1500 L1 words
- Has a usable vocabulary of 250 - 500 words, with mostly clear pronunciation
Conceptually labels groups of objects such as food or clothes
- Identifies most colors
- Uses most speech sounds but may distort or substitute some of the more difficult sounds such as /l/, /r/, /sh/, /ch/, /y/, /v/, /z/, /th/. These sounds may not be fully mastered until age 7.
- Uses consonants in the beginning, middle and ends of words. Some of the more difficult consonants may be distorted, but attempts to say them.
- Strangers are able to understand most of what’s said
- Able to describe the functions of objects such as “fork is for eating” or “car is for driving”
Has fun with language; enjoys poems and recognizes language absurdities such as “Is that an elephant on your head?”
- Expresses ideas and feelings rather than just describing things
- Uses verbs that end in “ing” such as “walking” or “jumping”
- Answer simple questions such as “What do you do when you are feeling hungry?”
Uses 3-5 word sentences and is able to repeat full sentences

Typical 5 year old:

- Has a vocabulary of 10,000 words in their first language, including some academic

words. Says most speech sounds correctly and is easy to understand

- Asks questions using who, what, where and why
- Uses present, future and simple past tenses correctly
- Can retell a story by naming the characters and describing what happened
- Uses different types of words like action (*kick*) and descriptive words (*yellow*)
- Follows 2 step directions understands many concepts such as colors, location words, numbers
- Understands most adult conversation including sayings like “*time to hit the sack*”
Likes to listen to rhymes and make up their own rhymes

Typical 6 year old:

- Has a vocabulary of 20,000 words in their first language, including some academic words; says most speech sounds correctly and is easy to understand
- Speaks in 6-7 words long sentences and tells you what to do with something in full sentences, such as *you need sneakers to go for a run.*
- Uses words like *then*, *so* and *but* in their sentences and can break words into parts like *snowman into snow and man*
- Tells how to do simple things and understands how everyday things go together, like cow and milk
- Understands and uses words like *right*, *left*, *first*, *second*, *third*
- Beginning to enjoy riddles and jokes

STAGES OF ADDITIONAL LANGUAGE ACQUISITION

As in first language acquisition, there are general time periods associated with each of the 4 stages of additional language acquisition. Keep in mind that these do not typically align with age as all additional language learners start at the pre-production level regardless of age. **NOTE:** *Don't expect young learners to perform in a second language what they are not yet developmentally able to do in their first language.*

1. Pre-Production (or silent period)

Usually lasts for 0-6 months after the additional language exposure begins (can be shorter or longer); language exposure period with minimal comprehension or listening skills; often use gestures such as nodding, pointing and maybe drawing to express themselves. Emphasis on listening and absorbing. A common time for temper tantrum



behavior in very young learners due to the frustration of not being able to communicate.

2. Early Production

Lasts for 6-12 months after L2 exposure begins (can be shorter or longer); using 1-2 word phrases; have already absorbed thousands of words and gained limited comprehension of the key words they hear most often and/or are their most important words; are beginning to speak more and will use present tense nouns almost exclusively. Rely heavily on context cues and familiar topics and routines. Spoken language includes many production errors.

3. Speech Emergence

Lasts up to 3 years after L2 exposure begins; have significant comprehension and can read, write and understand simple sentences; still making grammar and punctuation errors and struggling with homophones, jokes, slang and sarcasm in conversation. Still relying heavily on context cues and familiar topics.

4. Intermediate and Advanced Fluency

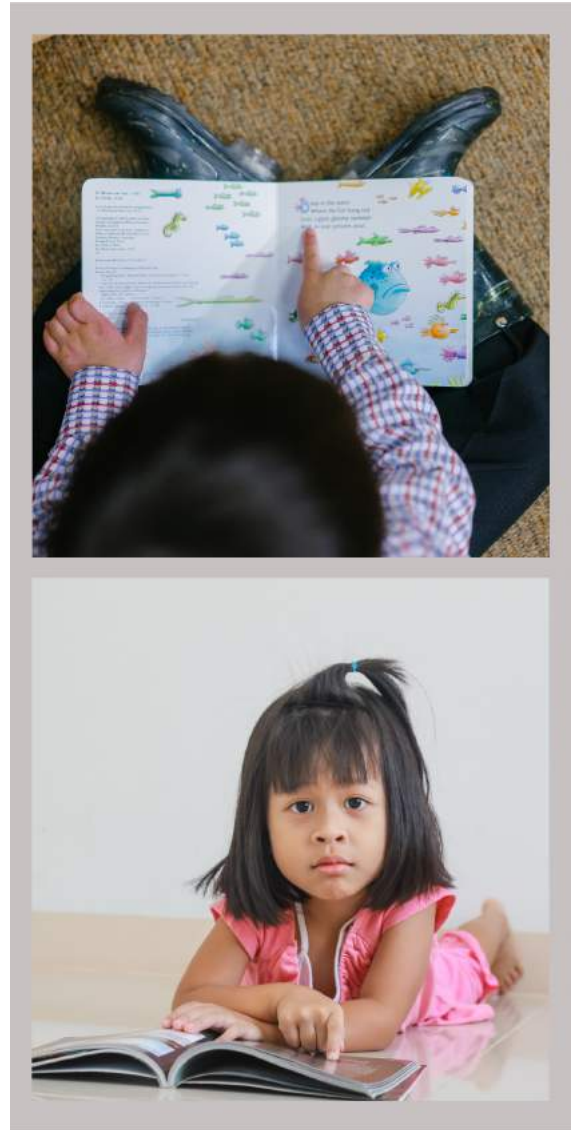
Occurs from 3-10 years after L2 exposure begins; have excellent comprehension, speech and writing skills; may still struggle with some pronunciation (which does not equate with language comprehension) and may have an accent. Speech is fairly fluent in social situations with minimal errors. New contexts and academic language are challenging with some gaps in vocabulary knowledge and unknown expressions. Can demonstrate higher order thinking skills in L2 such as offering an opinion or analyzing a problem.

Parents can:

- Continue to use and build your child's first language at home. The best indicator of proficiency in an additional language is the continued development and level of proficiency in the first language. Your child is intellectually and emotionally developed beyond what he or she can express in English. Your child will eventually catch up in English. In the meantime, he or she will be less frustrated if allowed to use your first language. Using multiple languages links and improves the development of both languages.
- Focus on repetition to build new vocabulary and concepts.
- Praise all communication attempts, right or wrong, to avoid discouraging verbal communication attempts.
- Avoid excessive error correction and model correct language usage without requesting repetition by the child.
- Incorporate music and rhythms into all routine tasks.
- Emphasize listening comprehension using read-alouds and music. Ask children to repeat back instructions you have just given to improve listening skills.
- Read to your child in any language every day for a minimum of 20-30 minutes. Read anything—stories, articles, poems. Children learn new words by listening to books being read aloud, by talking about these new words with an adult, and by using them in everyday activities. Have them tell you how things are different and how they are the same, tell you the middle sound in a short word (*cat has the 'a' sound in the middle*), tell you the sounds in a short word (*dog has these sounds: 'd---o---g'*), play with words by

taking away one sound (*If I take away the d in dog, it says 'og'*).

- Help your child acquire English through planned activities; e.g., trips to the park, movies, a neighbourhood sports event or other activities. New words and structures can be learned and reinforced in different contexts.
- Share stories: Share common fairy tales and stories with your child in your first language and in English, either by talking, reading together or watching videos. Share your family stories and history with your child. Teach your child about your culture and homeland. Children love to listen to stories about you when you were growing up.
- Listen to your child read: Discuss what your child is doing in English. Accept that errors are fine when learning a language. It is more important in the early stages that your child expresses himself or herself.
- Talk about what you do with different objects in your home. Talk about what groups they belong to. For example, ask your child what he needs to sweep the floor (a broom) and what group it belongs to (things that clean).
- Talk about what your child did each day. Help him include the important details and organize his thoughts by asking questions that use the 5Ws (who, what, where, when, why) and how. For example, ask questions like *"What did you do in art today? How did you make a paper mâché dinosaur? Where did you get the newspaper?"*



Age is a huge factor in how fast children learn an additional language and at what point they reach fluency. Young learners are still forming brain connections and can often learn more quickly, but older learners have the advantage of understanding grammatical structures and how language works. They learn grammar and pronunciation more efficiently, but often struggle with retention and vocabulary acquisition.

Be patient: recognize that, even in an immersion situation in which most of their school classes are taught in English, it will take five to seven years from the time English was first introduced for your child to develop their English skills to the same proficiency level as their first language.

Mary-Anne Jasinski is the Primary Principal at TIS, currently in her 10th year at our school. Before coming to Macau she was a classroom teacher in Canada for fifteen years teaching grades K-5. She went on to hold a number of administrative positions in a large Alberta public school board for the following seven years where she developed and supported programming for Early Childhood, Elementary and Middle School students with a focus on language development and student growth and success.