

Stages of learning a new language for young children

Silent Period

Many bilingual children go through a silent period when they first enter an unfamiliar setting. This can last for up to six months or longer. It is not a 'passive' stage. Children will be watching, actively listening, and exploring their environment, trying to understand new experiences and to develop new meanings. **It is important that children should not feel pressurised to speak until they feel confident enough to do so.**

Echoing

Many children may begin to 'echo' single words and some short phrases used by adults and peers. All attempts at speech should be encouraged and praised. If you offer a biscuit and say 'would you like to take a biscuit?' the child may echo the question with 'biscuit' or 'take a biscuit.'

'Formulaic' language

Formulaic language may come next. This is 'chunks' of meaningful social speech e.g. 'Mummy come soon', 'My turn'. This can be supported by encouragement and reaffirming, 'Yes, Mummy will come back soon'.

Joining in with refrains

Children may begin to join in with story refrains and repetitions in songs. Learnt by copying others. Support this by planning for these opportunities.

Using Questioning words

For the purpose of making sense of their surroundings e.g. 'Me play?'

Independent phrases and longer sentences

Children will then begin to generate their own 'telegraphic' sentences, using two or three word utterances. Function words are likely to be omitted, the main concern being the communication of meaning. Non-verbal gestures will often accompany speech. Holistic phrases (a development of 'chunking') will continue during this stage.

Longer sentences

Children will begin to use extended phrases or simple sentences; these may contain errors for some time until children understand the use of different grammatical structures in English, which may be very different from their home language.