

The Stages and Importance of Learning Languages at an Early Age

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[Abstract] In the globalized world, learning more than one language is mostly required. As we are well aware of learning a second language, people start learning a language in a later age but studies have shown that it is beneficial and effective to learn at an early age. There are development stages to when children first learn a language and there are 5 stages in learning a second language. Studies have state that age and acquisition of second language is related. However studies have also shown that it is possible for adults to also learn language in a faster speed like the children.

[Keyword] Second language, Development stage, Early age, Critical period, Bilingual, Cognitive Benefits

[Introduction]

We are living in a globalized world where we interact with countless number of people every day. In the past when technology was not as developed as today and interaction with foreigners was only for those highly educated. However, most encounter a foreign language everyday and we feel the need to learn them. However, most people start learning a second language at a later age in secondary school or even later. Studies have been conducted for a long time and have shown that there is a certain age in learning a language best and the process of learning a language is indeed precise and complicated.

[FIGURE 1] Stages of First Language Development

Before getting into depth of learning a foreign language, it is important to know the relationship between language and age. Research has shown that through the phonological development, lexical development, and morpho-syntactic development stages, language mechanism is build up. All these stages are part of the early ages and they divide up to sound, words, and grammar.

[Phonological Development]

The phonological development is the first stage which involves the ability to hear and distinguish the language being used. An infant would first start with cries and noises then would start babbling words at 6 to 10 months of age. They begin by making same sounds and when they are 18 months old, they have gained the mental ability to produce sounds as they wish.

STAGES OF FIRST LANGUAGE DEVELOPMENT

Age	Accomplishment	Examples
0-2 months	Crying (express hunger and discomfort)	
2-4 months	Cooing (express satisfaction or pleasure)	aaa, ooo
4-9 months	Babbling, gurgling, changing to echolalic babbling	gagaga, mamamama
9-18 months	One-word utterances; refer to people and objects in baby's life	juice; mama
18 months—2 ½ years	Two-word utterances; the beginning of syntax, expanding to three-word utterances; allows for more communicative functions (commenting, negating, requesting, & questioning)	more juice juice fall down Daddy go?
2 ½ years—4 years	Telegraphic Stage (S-V-O): Expanded syntax and vocabulary; omit key grammatical markers and function words	I eated bread

[Lexical Development]

In the lexical development stage when the child starts to understand words and be able to produce them. An infant can start understanding the first words from earliest 5 months of age and will be able to produce them from 10 to 15 months of age. When he/she is 18 months old, the child will be able to produce approximately 50 words. After 20, 21 months of age, the child will rapidly pick up the pace of learning the vocabulary.

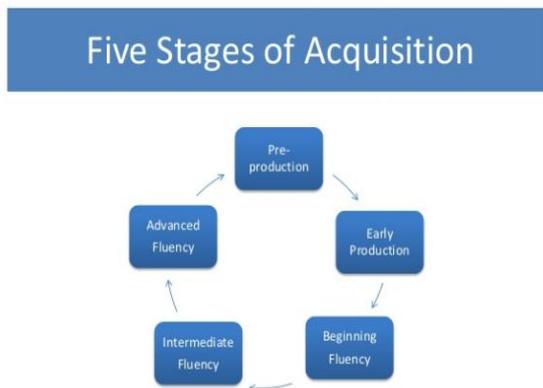
[Morpho-syntactic Development]

Then follows the morpho-syntactic development stage where the child begins to combine words. This stage occurs at around the age of two. The combined words are used to make sentences but it is not complete sentences. Grammar is usually completed at the age of four.

[Acquisition of Second Language]

With the understanding that the basic is the most important, research states that children learn languages best before the age of ten. Additionally, according to an article, Harvard University confirmed through studies that learning more languages are actually helping in increasing critical thinking skills, creativity, and flexibility.

In learning a second language, there are five stages to it starting: Pre-production (Silent Period), Early Production, Speech Emergence, Intermediate Fluency, and Advanced Fluency.



[FIGURE 2] Five stages of acquisition of second language.

[Pre-production]

This is the first stage of 0 to 6 months when a person is exposed to a new language. In this stage, a person could be able to listen to few words but rarely be able to speak up and only point or nod.

Pre-production: 0-6 Months

<u>Characteristics</u>	<u>Teacher Prompts</u>
> minimal comprehension	> Show me...
> non-verbal	> Circle the...
> nods head yes or no	> Where is...
> draws and points	> Who has....

[Early Production]

This is the second stage when it is in the 6 – 12 months since starting a new language. The student would pick up vocabulary and would make phrases and use present-tense verbs which are simple to use.

Early Pre-production: 6 Months to 1 Year

<u>Characteristics</u>	<u>Teacher Prompts</u>
> limited comprehension	> Yes/No questions
> one or two word responses	> Either/or questions
> uses key words	> Lists & labels
> present-tense verb usage	> One or two word answers

Intermediate Fluency: 3 to 5 Years

<u>Characteristics</u>	<u>Teacher Prompts</u>
> excellent comprehension	> What would happen if...
> few grammatical errors	> Why do you think...

[Speech Emergence]

Then the next stage between 1 to 3 years of learning would be the speech emergence stage where he/she would have learned approximately 3,000 words and make simple sentences still with grammatical mistakes. The student would at this stage have good comprehension skills as well.

Speech Emergence: 1 to 3 Years

<u>Characteristics</u>	<u>Teacher Prompts</u>
> good comprehension	> Why...?
> simple sentences	> How...?
> grammar and pronunciation errors	> Explain...
> misunderstands jokes/idioms	> Short phrase answers

[Intermediate Fluency]

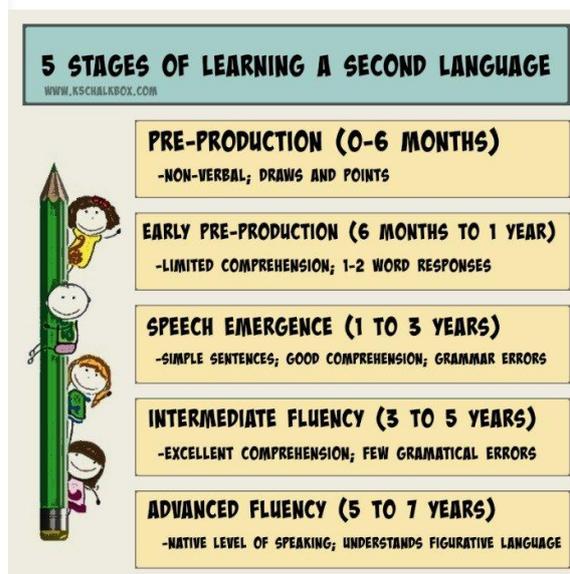
Between 3 – 5 years of starting a language, he/she will enter the intermediate fluency stage where he/she has excellent comprehension skills and make very few grammatical mistakes. The student would be able to make complicated sentences from the 6,000 words learned. He/she will be able to express himself/herself well through speech or even through writing.

[Advanced Fluency]

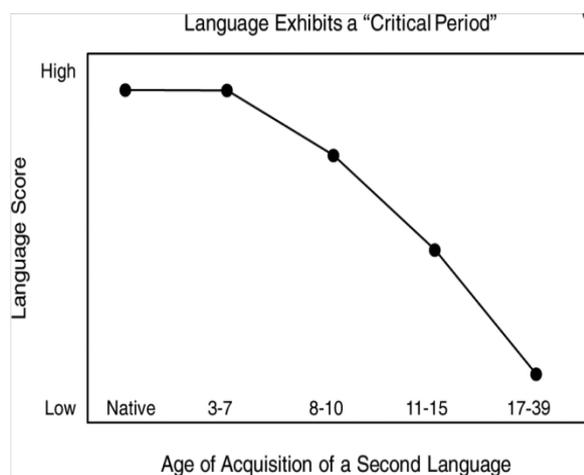
The last stage of advanced fluency could take 5 to 7 years where the student would be able to use the second language fluently.

Advanced Fluency: 5 to 7 Years

<u>Characteristics</u>	<u>Teacher Prompts</u>
> near native level of speaking	> Decide if...
> no discernable grammatical or usage errors	> Retell...
> understands and uses figurative language	> Analyze...
	> Support and defend...



[FIGURE 3] Five stages of acquisition of second language.



[FIGURE 4] Diagram showing the relationship between age acquisition of a second language and language skill.

There also have been suggestions that there are benefits to learning a second language at a young age. Academies have given several reasons and in common, they suggest that it helps the child gain better linguistic skills, have cognitive benefits, have higher academic achievements, cultural enrichment, and also have societal contributions.

As mentioned previously, being exposed to a language from an early age as even three would be easier for the child to learn than later in life. The ability to hear and reproduce new sounds and to take in new vocabulary slows down. Additionally, by studying more than one language, it helps the child gain better skills in problem solving, critical thinking, become more creative and flexible, have better memory, improve multi-tasking abilities, and also develop the concept of 'object permanence.' Children who are bilingual also have shown that they have better critical thinking, problem solving skills and greater mental flexibility such as in math and standardized test including the SAT.

People say, that in order to fully understand the culture of another country, it is only possible you one knows the language well. It is the same for children because foreign language opens

doors to other cultures and they are able to have access to various environment, resource, people, culture, and locations.

Why Learn other Languages earlier in Life?

One theory is that there is a "Critical Period" which allows for the easiest second language learning. Even if not, some research shows that there are quite a few legitimate reasons for starting early.



- Denser gray matter in the brain
- More confidence in a second language
- Academic benefits
- Career benefits later in life
- And a host of others...



[FIGURE 5] Benefits of learning a second language at an early age

According to a research, children who are bilingual and monolingual are different in a way of vocabulary capacity where bilinguals tend to have a smaller capacity. However, bilinguals' metalinguistic awareness which is their understanding of the linguistic structure is similar to monolinguals or sometimes even better. Also, when children learn two languages that share similar writing system such as English and French as suggested in the research, they showed accelerated progress compared to learning languages with different writing system.

Real life cases and stories have shown that children in general pick up a language faster than adults do. Children who study multi languages in school are able to speak more languages than those who learn in their later age.

Also parents who speak multi language with their children from young age and exposed to

various languages continuous through listening, reading, and practicing showed stronger academic skills and acquire a language even more quickly.

However, there have been statements that adults can too learn a language quickly. It is because adults already have pre-existing knowledge of languages and the process is learning a language is different for children and adults.

When adults first learn a new language, they already have basic understand of how a language works and already has a strong base in one language on its grammar and vocabulary.

[Conclusion]

By learning a language at an early age, the child will not only quickly pick up a language, but also help the child gain cognitive benefits. Being able to acquire more than one language will not only improve the child's academic skill but will also help him/her become more optimistic and open-minded. The child being able to speak more than one language will help the child absorb various cultures and eventually play an important role in the society that requires someone who can speak various languages. In the future, it will also help the child gain a job he/she desires and contribute to the society as well.

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