

Stages of early bilingual learning

When children who are in the early stages of learning English, enter a setting, it is important for student teachers to understand what progression may be expected in their development of English. Second language acquisition studies have established recognisable early stages for second/additional language development and have drawn particular attention to the silent period. The value of recognising the stages of learning English as an additional language is that they provide a framework against which student teachers' can exercise their judgement about an individual child's progress, and provide appropriate learning opportunities. Although there are individual differences in the way children acquire an additional or second language, some researchers suggest that there is a consistent developmental sequence. An overview of this process is described by American researcher Patton Tabors;

1. There may be a period of time when children continue to use their home languages in the second-language situation.
2. When they discover that their home language does not work in this situation, children enter a non-verbal period as they collect information about the new language and perhaps spend some time in sound experimentation.
3. Children begin to go public, using individual words and phrases in the new language.
4. Children begin to develop productive use of the second language.

(Tabors, 1997 p.39)

These stages of early language learning are set out in greater detail below

1. Continued use of the home language

When children enter an environment where the language they use to communicate at home is not understood, they may continue to use their home language in the expectation that they will be understood. Depending on the messages the children receive about the use of languages other than English in the setting, this stage is likely to be relatively brief.

2. The Silent or Non Verbal Period

Many children when they enter an unfamiliar early years setting go through a period which has been observed by a number of researchers as the 'silent' or 'mute' period. Some researchers refer to this as the 'non-verbal period' to emphasise that children may continue to interact non-verbally. During the Silent or Non-verbal period, children need time to acclimatise to the new context and to begin to tune in to the sounds of English in the setting and to begin to know what is expected. During this time children may begin to 'rehearse' the language silently to themselves and in time begin to practise the utterances in 'private speech' until they have the confidence to try out the language for communicative purposes or 'go public'. They require reassurance and encouragement at this time so that they feel they are accepted members of the group.

The following is a snapshot of one bilingual child's early experience of an afternoon at nursery.

Nazma enters nursery

Nazma enters nursery holding her sister's hand. Her sister, Yasmin (aged four and a half), moves over to the large carpet where the children sit with the nursery teacher at the beginning of every session. Nazma follows her, chewing her dress, staying close to her sister and watching everything. She had stopped crying during the fifth week at nursery and she now comes every afternoon. The children listen to the teacher talking about caterpillars and many join in the discussion in English. Nazma is silent. Mussarat, the Bilingual Classroom Assistant, enters the nursery. She gathers a small group of Pahari speaking children together to share a book. This activity had been planned with the nursery teacher and linked to the current topic. The children switch into Pahari (their mother tongue) for this activity. Nazma listens and points to a picture of a dog (kutha) and cat (billee) in an Urdu alphabet picture book, but does not speak. They go outside to play. Nazma stands on the outside watching the other children and holds Mussarat's hand. She has learnt the climbing frame routine and repeats the climbing and sliding activity several times. The children go inside and choose from a range of play activities. Nazma watches. She stays at an activity for one minute and moves on. This is repeated several times. Then she wanders around the room sucking her fingers. It is now story time on the carpet. The children sit and listen to the story of 'The Very Hungry Caterpillar'. Nazma sits close to her sister and watches. Their mother appears at the door and they go home.

(Drury, 2007 p.31)

When Nazma first entered nursery she met an abrupt change of both language and cultural expectations. In an English only environment, she was in effect dispossessed of her ability to communicate and the impact of this on a three or four year old can be profoundly disturbing. During her early days in the nursery, none of the monolingual nursery staff engaged with Nazma except for classroom management purposes, and there was little verbal interaction between her and other children in the nursery. Nazma is experiencing the non-verbal or silent period.

Strategies for the Non-verbal or Silent Period

Priscilla Clarke (1992) suggests ten strategies to support children's language development during this stage:

1. Continued talking even when children do not respond.
2. Persistent inclusion in small groups with other children;
3. Use of varied questions;
4. Inclusion of other children as the focus in the conversation;
5. Use of the first language;
6. Acceptance of non-verbal responses;
7. Praising of minimal effort;
8. Expectations to respond with repeated words and/or counting;
9. Structuring of programme to encourage child to child interaction;
10. Provide activities which reinforce language practice through role play.

(Clarke, 1992 p.17-18)

3. Repetition and language play, use of formulae, routines and single words

Children begin to use single words or formulaic phrases and repetition during the early stages of learning English. They use formulae and chunks of language as ready made phrases in routine situations. This enables the learners to interact with others. These chunks of language may include memorised sequences in singing rhymes and stories, routine language used at specific times in the setting, for example 'happy birthday', answering the register, asking to go to the toilet.

The following is a snapshot of four year old Samia during one session in her first term at nursery.

Samia enters nursery

Samia enters Lucca Harris nursery holding her mother's hand. She finds her 'giraffe' picture and places it on the 'planning board'. She has planned her worktime in the art and craft area and she stands watching a nursery nurse organising a hand painting activity at the painting table. The children are each making hand printed cards for mother's day. She takes a turn at the activity in silence, except for the correct one word response to questions about the colour of the paint and the card- 'What's that colour?' 'Yellow'. Samia then moves onto the carpet where children are playing with a wooden train set, solid shapes and small construction materials. She is silent while she plays on her own. After a few minutes, another child takes one of her shapes and she protests 'No, mine, not yours. Look.' There is no response and she continues playing. Talk is going on around her, but it is not addressed to Samia. The nursery teacher walks past the carpet and Samia attracts her attention, 'Mrs Ashley, look.' The teacher walks away and it is tidy up time. Samia sits with the teacher in a group of seven children for small group time. The focus is the song 'Heads, shoulders, knees and toes' and playing a game to teach the parts of the body. She joins in the refrain of the song 'Knees and toes', listens, watches attentively and participates mainly non-verbally during the game. Then the teacher directs the children: 'It's time to go out in the garden'. She finds Samia sitting on her own singing to herself 'knees and toes, knees and toes', before she goes out to play.

(Drury, 2007 p. 37)

This observation of Samia during a nursery session provides one view of her learning; in the nursery context during her first term of formal schooling. There are approximately 30 children in the morning session of the nursery which Samia attends for two and a half hours a day. Nearly half of the children are bilingual and the majority of these are Pahari speakers. The monolingual nursery teacher works with two monolingual nursery nurses and a part-time bilingual classroom assistant. The structure and routines of the nursery are particularly significant as it follows a High/Scope approach to the curriculum. This encourages the children to 'plan' their activities using a planning board when they first arrive in the morning, to 'do' the activity during 'work time' and then to 'review' or 'recall' their learning with their key adult in a small group. We have seen elements of this in [Samia's 'school game'](#) at home when she refers to 'group time' in her play.

During her first term at nursery, Samia had to learn a wide range of rules and routines to do with how time and space was organised in the nursery and with the behaviour that was expected. And at the end of her first term she had gone beyond the initial stage of insecurity in a new environment. She had the confidence to attract the teacher's attention when necessary and to object when shapes she was playing with were taken by other children - 'No, mine. Not

yours'. Nevertheless, her still limited understanding of English meant that her acculturation in the setting precipitated times of stress and difficulty. The process of adaptation involved a new shaping of her identity as Samia discovered and internalised what was acceptable in the socio-cultural environment. Willett (1995) pointed out that learners acquire more than linguistic rules through interactional routines: 'they also appropriate identities, social relations and ideologies' (Willett, 1995: 477).

4. More complex English or productive language use

Children begin to develop productive use of the additional language which means they can build on and extend the use of single words and chunks of English to produce more complex language. They may combine some of the chunks they have acquired and begin to produce longer and more complex sentences which approximate more closely to the intended meaning.

In reality, these stages may well overlap, depending on the context and expectations. For example, [Samia's 'school game'](#) reveals how she was confidently producing more complex English in the home/play setting than in the nursery. In her 'school game', her use of English, her facility for code-switching, her ability to engage, sustain and direct her younger brother's involvement, her manipulation of school knowledge (for example, colours) demonstrate her developing bilingualism. It is interesting to note that the private, very safe, play context at home provided her opportunities to rehearse these skills before she 'went public' in the nursery setting. Similarly, young children's language use may well vary within the context of the setting. Student teachers should therefore be alert to these differences.

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