

## Stages of Language Acquisition

Researchers define language acquisition into two categories: first-language acquisition and second-language acquisition. First-language acquisition is a universal process regardless of home language. Babies listen to the sounds around them, begin to imitate them, and eventually start producing words. Second-language acquisition assumes knowledge in a first language and encompasses the process an individual goes through as he or she learns the elements of a new language, such as vocabulary, phonological components, grammatical structures, and writing systems.

### The Six Stages of Second-Language Acquisition

<b>Pre-production</b>	This is also called "the silent period," when the student takes in the new language but does not speak it. This period often lasts six weeks or longer, depending on the individual.
<b>Early production</b>	The individual begins to speak using short words and sentences, but the emphasis is still on listening and absorbing the new language. There will be many errors in the early production stage.
<b>Speech Emergent</b>	Speech becomes more frequent, words and sentences are longer, but the individual still relies heavily on context clues and familiar topics. Vocabulary continues to increase and errors begin to decrease, especially in common or repeated interactions.
<b>Beginning Fluency</b>	Speech is fairly fluent in social situations with minimal errors. New contexts and academic language are challenging and the individual will struggle to express themselves due to gaps in vocabulary and appropriate phrases.

<b>Intermediate Fluency</b>	<p>Communicating in the second language is fluent, especially in social language situations. The individual is able to speak almost fluently in new situations or in academic areas, but there will be gaps in vocabulary knowledge and some unknown expressions. There are very few errors, and the individual is able to demonstrate higher order thinking skills in the second language such as offering an opinion or analyzing a problem.</p>
<b>Advanced Fluency</b>	<p>The individual communicates fluently in all contexts and can maneuver successfully in new contexts and when exposed to new academic information. At this stage, the individual may still have an accent and use idiomatic expressions incorrectly at times, but the individual is essentially fluent and comfortable communicating in the second language.</p>

How long does it take for a language learner to go through these stages? Just as in any other learning situation, it depends on the individual. One of the major contributors to accelerated second language learning is the strength of first language skills. Language researchers such as Jim Cummins, Catherine Snow, Lily Wong Fillmore and Stephen Krashen have studied this topic in a variety of ways for many years. The general consensus is that it takes between five to seven years for an individual to achieve advanced fluency. This generally applies to individuals who have strong first language and literacy skills. If an individual has not fully developed first language and literacy skills, it may take between seven to ten years to reach advanced fluency. It is very important to note that every ELL student comes with his or her own unique language and education background, and this will have an impact on their English learning process.

It is also important to keep in mind that the understood goal for American ELL students is Advanced Fluency, which includes fluency in academic contexts as well as social contexts. Teachers often get frustrated when ELL students appear to be fluent because they have strong social English skills, but then they do not participate well in academic projects and discussions. Teachers who are aware of ELL students' need to develop academic language fluency in English will be much better prepared to assist those students in becoming academically successful. (Learn more about academic language in Colorín Colorado's [academic language resource section](#).)