

Collins



# Introducing English to Young Children: **Spoken Language**

Opal Dunn

English Language Teaching Essentials

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## About the Author



Award-winning author Opal Dunn has many years of experience in teaching children aged up to 8 years, and has trained teachers all over the world. She has also authored picture books for nursery and young primary children, organised Bunko (mini-libraries) for bilingual and plurilingual children, and has written information books and articles for parents.

## About this book

Together with its sequel, *Introducing English to Young Children – Reading and Writing*, this book is an overview of what I have observed and experienced during many years of teaching, training teachers, organising *bunko* (mini-home-libraries) and helping parents of young children. My experience has been in the Far East, Europe, North Africa, South America and also England, where many young children are coming to school with no English. Every English learning situation is different; every child, and his or her home situation, is unique. What I have written aims to help teachers and carers understand better how each child's holistic development is embedded in and entwined with learning language.

Introducing English cannot be thought of only in terms of linguistic attainments. Educationalists including Froebel, [Montessori](#), Isaacs, Steiner, [Vygotsky](#), Bruner, Bruce, Sylva, Malaguzzi ([Reggio Emilia](#)) and Whitehead, explain that children acquire and find out about language 'through doing', experimenting and imitating. Children are born natural language acquirers and users; most can acquire English if supportive adults provide them with sufficient language-based 'doing' activities – activities that are right for their developmental level and in which they feel confident to use their personal language-learning strategies. For very young and young children, English is another way of talking about and communicating their needs and interests to sympathetic listeners. It is important for young learners that English should be like learning to talk with their mother – a living and useful skill – rather than being an abstract, taught subject.

More than half the world's young children speak two or more languages outside school and many millions are now learning English in schools. Some teachers tend to underestimate very young and young children's innate drive and potential to pick up English as another language. Each child is an individual and in order for children to acquire English in school situations and make and enjoy the progress of which they appear capable, adults have to 'tune into' their thinking, language, expectations and society, seeing things 'through their eyes'.

Learning English should be a fun experience for everyone; the child, the teacher and the family all need to 'feel good' about it if the child is to develop the positive lifelong attitudes that are known to be formed before the age of 8 or 9 years. Since many school activities include culture, young children naturally pick up the English language together with the accompanying culture that the adult mediates. The teacher

is probably the young child's most important 'window on the English speaking wider-world' – a big responsibility.

These two books are written for teachers and carers working with children of preschool age to 8 years. Oral English needs to be well developed before young beginners are taught to read and write English. *Introducing English to Young Children: Spoken English* discusses holistic development and oral acquisition suggesting useful oral activities, mini-projects, picture books and games. *Introducing English to Young Children: Reading and Writing* introduces reading, handwriting and creative writing skills with suggestions for linked meaningful activities, and more advanced verbal play, games, picture books and projects.

An earlier version of this book was awarded the English Speaking Union Duke of Edinburgh award in 1985 as part of the English Language Teaching Series published by Macmillan Publishers Ltd.

***The child is truly a miraculous being, and this should be felt by the educator.***

(Montessori 1967)

### **Terminology used in this book**

**EFL** English as a foreign language

**ESL** English as a second language (United States)

**L1/HL** first or home language (sometimes called mother tongue MT)

**SL** school language (which may be different from L1)

**bilingual** two languages in the home

**plurilingual** three or more languages in the home

**L2** where English is the second new language

**L3** where English is the third new language

**L4** where English is the fourth new language

**VYL** very young learner (nursery school age)

**YL** young learner (primary school age up to 8 or 9 years)

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## Very young and young children and language learning

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### 1.1 Children's and parents' expectations

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*We become interested in what we are good at*, to quote Bruner (Donaldson 1978). This simple truth about attitudes also applies to learning English. How often adults say, 'I like English. I was good at it', or conversely when excusing their poor English add, 'I was never any good at it at school'.

*At no other time in life does the human being display such enthusiasm for learning, for living, for finding out* (Pluckrose 1979). Very young and young children normally have an inner drive to learn. They are natural language acquirers; they are self-motivated to pick up language without conscious learning, unlike many adolescents and adults. They have their own language learning skills and strategies, which develop as their brain develops and they grow physically (their skull making an effective sound box and their vocal chords and mouth forming the shapes necessary to make sounds). In the womb they hear and are listening to voices. From their first cries, children respond to their mother's soothing words in what is to become their mother tongue.

Young children seem to be 'tuned in' to listen to language, absorb it and then use it through social interaction with supportive others to find out about the world. Their energy to ask, enquire and make sense of their world is remarkable. Parents often feel exhausted by their child's continual drive to find out: *Why? What's this? What for? How?*

Learning is both social and conceptual for a young child. In making sense of every new experience, young children have to make sense of what the other person is saying

and doing, confirming the known, whilst stretching and adjusting their own internal categories and theories to take in the new. They become skilled in understanding other people's language and abstracting meaning from it. Young children are quick to decode facial language and can rapidly sense when an adult is not pleased with them.

Language and learning are social and interdependent. Thinking cannot take place without language. [Vygotsky \(1978\)](#) explained that ***Language is the tool of thought. External speech is the process of turning thoughts into words.***

We know from observing very young children that even very little language enables participation in a social world and the sharing of meaning: *Gone. Stopit. Myturn.* Through natural, 'tuned-in' supportive dialogue with an adult or more skilled older person, grammar and vocabulary is absorbed and conceptual progress may take place without any planned instruction or conscious teaching by the older person.

Babies learn much through observing carefully and then imitating the role model: the adult or older child. Steiner's work emphasises the great importance of imitation and the quality of the role model. Sometimes young children pick up inappropriate language from other children, which, although it might be annoying, is a measure of their ability to learn through imitation.

From an early age young children have an innate ability to imitate pronunciation and work out the rules of language for themselves. By the age of 6 years, many are capable of adjusting their accent in English to match the local dialect of their playmates, speaking two Englishes, classroom English and playground English, they rarely confuse when to use which type of English, so teachers and parents are often unaware that they also speak playground English. Some young children can speak a little of four or five languages and enjoy opportunities to boast about their language tally. *'I can speak Czech, and I can speak French and I can speak English'* a 5-year-old boasted to other children in the playground. Any idea that learning to talk in English is difficult does not occur to them unless suggested by adults, who themselves may have struggled to learn English 'academically' through grammar-based textbooks at secondary school level. Many adults, who picked up English young, say they cannot remember how, or sometimes, even when, they learned it. 'We just played, said rhymes like "Humpty Dumpty sat on a wall" and sang songs.'

It is now generally accepted that lifelong attitudes are formed in early childhood and usually before the age of 8 or 9 years. If teachers can engage young children and capture and keep their enthusiasm by presenting well-planned language experiences, right for their needs and development level, children usually make progress and feel they are 'good at English'. ***The best motivation to learn a language is not an abstract liking of its beauty or utility, but a liking for the person who speaks it*** ([Taeschner 2005](#)). It is in these early stages of learning English that the foundations for what may be a lifelong interest in English language, literacy and culture are laid down.

### 1.1.1 Children's expectations

Children come to English sessions or lessons with expectations about what they are going to do and achieve. These expectations are influenced by what their family, friends and society in general expect and what the learners have heard from other

children. Today's children may already have heard English spoken on screens and even visited English-speaking countries and seen or spoken to English-speaking children. Technology now brings different languages into the home through TV, DVD, websites, YouTube, Skype, and handheld devices, so children may have many different ideas about English and global English-based cultures. Children like to be entertained and are skilled in picking up audio-visual language and cultural information from the screen. Culture accompanies most English language activities, providing they are not word-for-word direct translations, and young children are especially skilled at picking up information from visual images (see 7.5).

Young children have an inner drive to achieve and when they independently achieve something to what they know to be a high standard it provides an inner, deep self-satisfaction that is important in character development, emotional well-being and in forming lifelong positive attitudes. In today's fast moving lifestyle, many children may not have achieved any one task well enough to feel this inner glow of satisfaction. However, through English [oral play](#) and repeated chanting of English oral play, [rhymes](#) and [tongue-twisters](#) in pleasurable situations, many appear to feel the satisfaction that comes through achievement (see [Chapter 6](#)).

### 1.1.2 Home languages

[Monolingual](#) and [monocultural](#) children (those who only know one language and culture) appear to find learning English a different challenge from children from binational families, where parents speak their own language to their child at home and their children grow up speaking two languages (bilingual), one of which is usually dominant, as it is the most used. Children who have learned two languages consecutively (L2 introduced after L1) already know how to acquire and communicate in a second language before they go to school. Some of these children may learn English as L4 as they speak two languages at home: school language (SL) is L3 and English L4. Normal young children can cope with acquiring four oral languages if the learning situations are activity-based, right for the child, and within the family's expectations. Amazingly, children who learn English as L3 or L4 generally learn more easily than monolingual children for whom English is L2, as these children have already worked out how to use their own personal language learning skills and strategies to acquire another new language.

It seems that to acquire L2 non-consecutively after L1 (home language or mother tongue) – that is after a gap – is the most difficult way, as a young child has to work out their own language acquisition strategies and skills in order to pick up the new language (although this might also depend on the age at which L2 is learned).

Most children who learn English as L2 at about 7 or 8 years already know to use the main structures of their L1, although they are still using limited language learning skills and strategies to learn vocabulary. Starting to learn a new language, English as L2, means that these children have to work out which of their personal language acquisition skills they can reuse to pick up English successfully. Once they have reused their learning strategies and skills to acquire L2, it seems that L3, and any other subsequent languages, can be learned in the same way, albeit more easily. This is, of

course, a generalisation, because learning language depends on the ‘feel-good’ factor. If the relationship between the adult, who is the mediator of the new language, and the child is not good, learning can be difficult and even frustrating. People who acquire a second language or languages before puberty appear to retain the skill to pick up languages orally throughout their life. In fact some teenagers, who have learned L2 young, complain about using language textbooks at secondary school, saying that they need to hear a language spoken before they can learn grammar rules.

### 1.1.3 Immediate results

***Children are creatures of the moment. They work best and most successfully when the objectives are clear, comprehensible, immediate*** (Pluckrose 1979). Objectives and language are clearer where activities and the accompanying language are structured to fit them. This enables children to focus more easily on a task without having to sift through all the content in order to find the information and language to be learned. This is an economy in learning energy and time, as young children’s concentration span is short.

Young children want to please; they care about what others think about them, especially their loved ones and their teacher with whom they generally have a special, emotional, family-like relationship, sometimes referred to as ‘professional love’. ***In the Nursery School more than at any other stage of education, a great emphasis is placed on the teacher-child relationship and thereby on good communication – a communicative/emotional relationship between adult and child*** (Taeschner 2005).

Children long to ‘show off’ a new English ‘talking’ (speaking) skill. From an early age, they work out that a new L1 verbal skill is rewarded by some form of **praise** from adult admirers! They remember how excited their parents were when they recited a complete nursery rhyme by themselves.

Children want immediate results. They expect to go home after the first lesson able to speak some English, even if it is just a rhyme or counting in English, so they can ‘show off’ and win praise from their extended family and friends. Success motivates; any praise given by parents and other adults, whose approval and love children seek, stimulates, especially in the first stages of learning English, when the child is still gaining confidence. Rhymes provide good ‘show off’ pieces and at the same time satisfy children’s desire ‘to talk a lot of English quickly, just like grown-ups’ they may have seen and heard on screen (see 6.2). It is through parents’ praise that children find out that they are doing the right thing and understand what is expected of them.

Children are used to communicating in L1 and, as soon as possible, they want to do the same in English. They know that it is through talk that they can communicate and exchange ideas with others. However, they expect to use English in real, meaningful experiences. If children are already reading and writing in L1, they expect to be shepherded to do the same in English. Although preschool children are happy with the same all-oral approach they have in L1, to spend months only speaking English is not ‘real school work’ to young children who can read and write in SL. *Introducing English to Young Children: Reading and Writing* (Dunn forthcoming) explains how reading and writing can be introduced through meaningful, holistic activities from the

beginning stages of acquiring oral language.

If children's expectations are not fulfilled and they do not get what they have expected from the English lessons, they can lose interest. Loss of interest sometimes occurs once the novelty of the English lesson fades and the children find they can still say very little in English. With careful planning and working together with the family, this can be avoided. Once a child has lost interest, it takes time, and focused effort and encouragement, to re-stimulate interest.

#### **1.1.4 Parents' expectations**

For children to 'feel good' and for learning to be successful, parents' expectations should, as nearly as possible, coincide with those of the teacher. Where parents become disappointed with their child's progress and critical of the teacher's methods, the child becomes confused, which reflects on their learning. It is important that before starting to learn English, parents understand how children learn and how the teacher teaches. Programmes also need to be explained and efforts made to keep families positive by asking for their co-operation in hearing rhymes and singing together and sharing picture books. Later chapters deal more fully with these issues.

Parents who learned English in adolescence sometimes relate their children's learning to the way they learned English. They are frustrated that English grammar is not taught in the way that they were taught in secondary school; this frustration often leads to criticism of the teacher amongst parents, sometimes within their children's hearing, which is damaging to the child's image of their teacher.

When asked, 'What did you do in English today?' some children reply, 'Played'. This may cause difficulties as most parents think that the opposite of play is work and associate play with effortless, home recreation, which is different from structured, cognitively complex, school play. Parents need to understand that school play is a tool for learning and acquiring English. Play in the English classroom is purposeful and socially interactive, providing meaningful opportunities for dialogue at young children's level in English. School play or activities are also closely monitored and documented by the teacher, who closely follows each child's progress and needs (see visible learning 2.5.1).

Just as parents' enthusiasm is infectious and can motivate, so their disappointment can reflect on their children, causing them to lose interest and confidence in their teacher. Many parents have not realised that young children learn differently from adolescents, and teachers need to be sure that they understand this from the outset. Teachers may find it helpful to explain to parents that young children pick up English through dialogue-based activities in which a special type of language called *teacherese* is used (see 1.2.3). Many parents, and especially mothers, may have not realised that they successfully taught their child to speak their first language and they did this intuitively by using a simpler form of language called *parentese*. It is accepted that fathers and some older siblings also use this form of speech, but not as well as mothers or female carers to whom, in many societies, it seems to be innate. For this reason it was previously termed *motherese*.

Acquiring any language at a young age cannot be thought of as learning grammar

analytically as an isolated subject matter. Acquiring language is a global activity and depends on the whole child's mental, physical, social and emotional maturity and well-being. This global activity is essential if children are to pick up the language they hear (input) and to use language (output). Research shows that language is more meaningful and more easily acquired where the child hears the language whilst being involved physically 'in doing' an activity.

The [Reggio Emilia](#) Approach explains that learning is a partnership – teacher–child, parent–child. It seems that learning another language (English) at school needs to be thought of as a triangle: parents, teacher and child, with regular interaction between all three. The parents' role is crucial as the parents, especially the mother, have already been deeply and emotionally involved in teaching their child to speak L1 and know their child's way of learning language intimately.

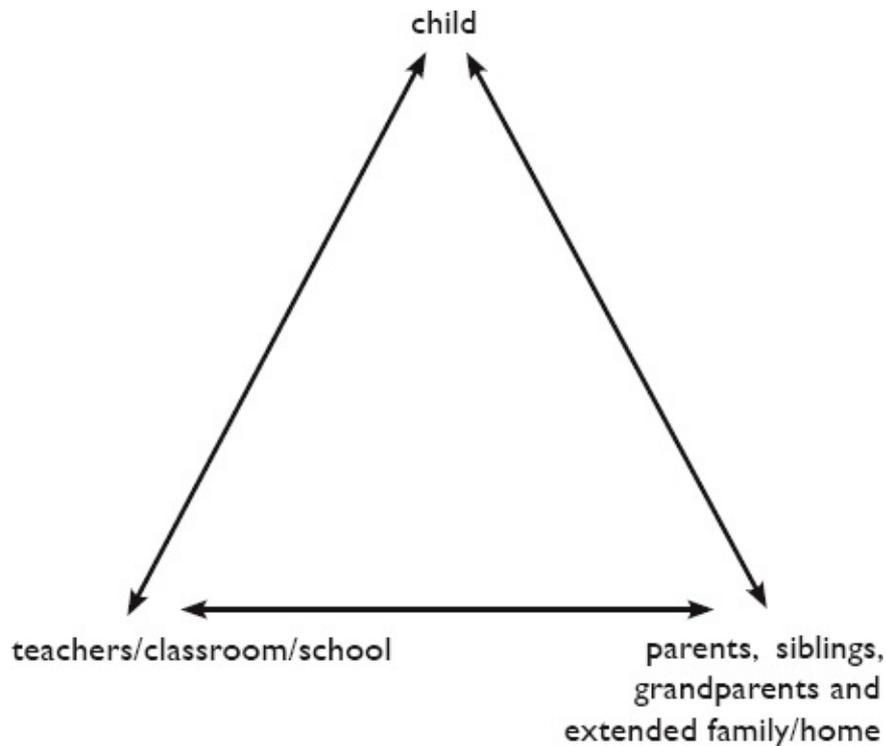
Recent research records that parents and the home are the strongest influence on a child's life. For this important reason parents, and especially mothers, need to be positively involved as their support and enthusiasm can help in much the same way as it did when their child learned L1.

Some of today's parents, who may only have learned English in secondary school, are much better informed than their parents, as they have been exposed to English experiences through technology and especially on screen. Some may have travelled or even studied abroad and know about learning English as an adult. Knowing more about the use of English world-wide, many parents are really keen for their children to learn English at a young age. Since they were their children's first language teachers, many parents are eager to be involved. They want to monitor and also enjoy their young children's successes in learning English and can, in fact, play an important role in motivating and consolidating learning language – something they innately know how to do. If the teacher/teachers guide parent participation, the child has the advantage of two different groups of supportive adults helping them acquire English.

### **1.1.5 A young child's [learning triangle](#)**

The English language learning triangle consists of the child, the parent/parents, especially the mother if she is the principal home-carer, and the teacher. Each is dependent on the other for success and for making English part of the child's life. Unless the members of the triangle all 'feel good' about each other and the methods used, progress is hampered.

**Figure 1** A young child's learning triangle



## 1.2 Starting to learn English as another language

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Although every young child is uniquely influenced by the culture, environment and differing opportunities at home, school, and in society, the stages in language acquisition seem to be similar. When a young child learns another language, he approaches it in the same way as when he learns L1, which he is still picking up; ***his awareness of what he talks about normally takes precedence over his awareness of what he talks with – the words that he uses*** (Donaldson 1978). Thus to achieve the maximum language acquisition in the classroom, young children need to be exposed to rich language dialogues in which there is natural revision of used language and new input of language from an adult/teacher who uses an adapted form of ***parentese*** language, termed ***teacherese***, (see 1.2.3) which fits more closely the holistic maturity of the young child.

### 1.2.1 Acquisition or learning

The acquisition or learning distinction suggests that adults have two independent but interrelated systems for gaining ability in another language: acquisition and learning. The view of Krashen is that ***The good language learner is an acquirer; he may or may not be a conscious learner*** (Krashen 1981). Young children are acquirers with remarkable abilities to unconsciously pick up language, or, according to Montessori, ‘absorb’ language, in situations where speakers communicate naturally using ***parentese*** language skills with very young children. In these situations, child speakers are more concerned with the use of language to convey meaning than with correct usage. They want to say something and, without thinking, communicate with the

language they know rather than analyse it in order to find out the correct way to use it ('rules of usage'). Teaching the rules of usage (grammar) is not necessary for acquirers, as in acquiring L1 they work out the rules themselves with the help of adult role models.

The other system, 'learning', takes place consciously. ***It is helped greatly by error correction and the presentation of explicit rules*** (Krashen and Seliger 1975, quoted in Krashen 1981). In short, it appears that fluency comes unconsciously from what a learner has acquired in interpersonal communication, whilst the formal knowledge of grammar rules has to be learned consciously.

Many young children are still acquiring L1 and are therefore still using their personal, well-honed skills to acquire and pick up new language (assuming that they are exposed to language-rich experiences linked to meaningful activities). In young children's desire to communicate, many activities create situations in which language can be acquired. Young children are willing to say something, as their main aim is to communicate, to talk to you, without worrying about mistakes. Some young children find it fun to experiment with sounds, as they did at a younger age in L1. They find rhyming words fascinating and easy to pick up: they enjoy repeating lists of words like *all, ball, tall, small, fall*. If they 'feel good' about English and the environment is supportive, fun and friendly, young children rarely show the inhibitions typical of adolescents and some adult English language learners.

Recent research suggests that L1 acquisition can be identified on one hand as **Gestalt** and on the other as analytic or creative. Gestalt psychology stresses the importance of learning by wholes. Gestalt language consists of prefabricated (ready-made lexical chunks) or formulaic routines or patterns (phrases), which are picked up as whole utterances: *Whatsthat? Comehere. Stopit.* (see **Figure 2**). These meaningful strings of words are memorised as wholes. ***Research suggests that these phrases are stored and processed in the brain as individual units*** (Zimmer in IHT 2010).

## **Comment**

The child's maturity and the quality of L1 and SL experience influence the child's ability to use their own acquisition skills to imitate and memorise.

By contrast, analytic or creative language develops word by word and utterances are consciously constructed by the speaker. In the initial stages of learning, prefabricated chunks of language are more used. However, in time, most children develop use of creative language, which eventually dominates. Research indicates that for many L2 learners, especially children, Gestalt speech (prefabricated language) serves as a short cut to allow social interaction and interpersonal communication with a minimum of linguistic competence. The analytic or creative mode begins to predominate as learners attempt to express specific and also individual ideas.

**Figure 2** Types of **language** in L1 acquisition

## Analytic or creative language

### Creative language

Includes labeling and identifying objects

Word-by-word development eg

*a dog, a cat*

*a brown dog, a brown cat*

*a dog and a cat*

*a brown dog and a black cat*

## Gestalt or prefabricated blocks of language

### Prefabricated language

- 1 Prefabricated routines/chunks  
Phrases, sentences more complex than a child's linguistic level eg  
*How are you?*  
*What are you doing?*  
*Can you come here?*  
Rhymes/chants/songs/tongue-twisters (see Chapter 6)  
Prefabricated patterns
- 2 Phrases, sentences  
part memorised, part creative language  
Prefabricated language constant, creative language changeable:  
*Can you come here?*  
*Can you come **into the garden?***  
*Can you come **to bed?***

### Language input

- Regular
- Consciously graded
- Clear
- Easy-to-imitate
- Authentic speech
- Very frequent repetition
- Quick 'conversational type'
- Used socially, in games and classroom management (see Chapter 3)
- Simple patterns eg *This is ...*

### Use

- In beginning lessons, less used and developed than prefabricated
- Gradual input and memorisation until balance between creative and prefabricated nearly equal
- Later language acquisition situations less predictable, creative language becomes dominant
- From first lesson
- Very frequent repetition
- As creative language develops less used in activities except for socialising, organising, managing and greetings

## Examples of prefabricated chunks of language used by the adult

Listen again. Say it again.

### Transactional language

### Socialising language

### Management language

I understand. Please stop now.

Please give me the scissors.  
Pass the paste. Stick it here.

Let's play this game.  
Are you ready?

How many cards have you got?  
Count them?

All young language learning children understand more than they can express in words. Children need to understand the language they hear if they are going to be able to acquire it. This does not mean that the child has to understand every word; he doesn't when he learns L1. It means that he has to understand what is going on and relate the meaning of the language to it. From a very young age, children have been able to decode the meaning of language not only from spoken words, but also from various clues, which include facial and body language, gesture, realia, situation and timing. This ability to understand without knowing the exact meaning of every word in an adult's utterance is referred to as *gist* understanding (see 1.2.12).

The linguistic environment of an activity based in the classroom is conducive to learning prefabricated patterns and routines whilst not yet understanding how many words and functions are included. When a parent says in L1 to a 3-year-old, 'come with me to the toilet', the 3-year-old may only understand the underlined stressed words but, helped by the outstretched hand and facial gesture, makes sense of the parent's utterance.

Where a lesson regularly follows the same framework, with familiar and new activities slotted into a programme, children have an opportunity to work out the meaning of the language used, since much of it will be familiar prefabricated management language and expanded language based on games, activities and picture books. With regular repetition of the same prefabricated language, children move from making sense of the language to being able to pick it up and then later use it.

***There is a natural order through which grammatical structures develop*** (Slobin 1973). Learning is obviously more rapid where children already have a wide range of concepts and understanding of meanings, some of which they can already express in L1. There seem to be stages, which may be overlapping, through which each child develops at their own pace depending on the frequency and quality of the language input and the mediator. Any upset or lack of confidence generally results in regression, which is usually only temporary as the child regains confidence.

### Recognised natural order of steps or stages in language acquisition

1. understanding meaning of simple explanations embedded in activities, but silent except for odd words like *goodbye, no, own name*
2. picking up language – words and some short phrases (blocks of prefabricated

language): *green, book, no, stopit, onetwothree*

3. using more and longer blocks of prefabricated language without knowing word content: *getabook, passtheball, myturn*
4. prefabricated language and prefabricated patterns plus creative language = utterance *turnitoverwhatsthat? thatsacat/thatspink*
5. combination of four above plus complete creative utterances

### 1.2.2 Teacher/parent language

How the adult uses language and what quality of language they use in dialogue with children is important for:

- acquiring the sounds of language
- learning how language works
- acquiring vocabulary
- understanding new concepts.

When they are very young, children learn language through one-to-one dialogue with a caring adult, who uses *parentese* language skills to match the child and the activity. Most very young and young L1 learners are still using some modified personal language learning skills and strategies to pick up new vocabulary and structures. It is thought that many **monolingual** English L1 children have learned most of the structures of English by the age of 6 years depending on the frequency of L1 input and the quality of the mediation by caring adults.

### 1.2.3 Motherese to teacherese language

*Motherese* or *parentese* language skills for talking to babies and toddlers are innate in many world languages. ***Motherese deploys prosody, melodic overtones of speech that transcend culture and that are much the same whether the mother speaks Mandarin Chinese, Urdu or English. Motherese always sounds friendly and playful (Goleman 2007).***

It is said that young children can successfully learn English without the help of a modified form of *motherese* or *parentese*, often termed *teacherese*. However, teachers who can intuitively use ***teacherese*** in the beginning stages provide very young children especially (and young learners generally) with a richer, more emotional and sociable holistic learning environment. This environment is one in which children can be shepherded more easily by a supportive adult to use their acquisition skills and strategies. This shared attention creates a '***feel-good***' factor that is vital if learning and enthusiasm is to be sustained at an early age.

Women appear to be innate users of *parentese*, whilst many men find it more