



# Language Development

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Our brains are wired for language. In fact, in the early weeks, months, and years of a child's life, it is estimated that they form up to one million neural connections per second (Harvard Center for the Developing Child, 2017). Many of these connections are focused on building the child's capacity to comprehend and express themselves in language. Thus, it becomes of primary importance that language input start early and children grow and develop in language-rich environments.

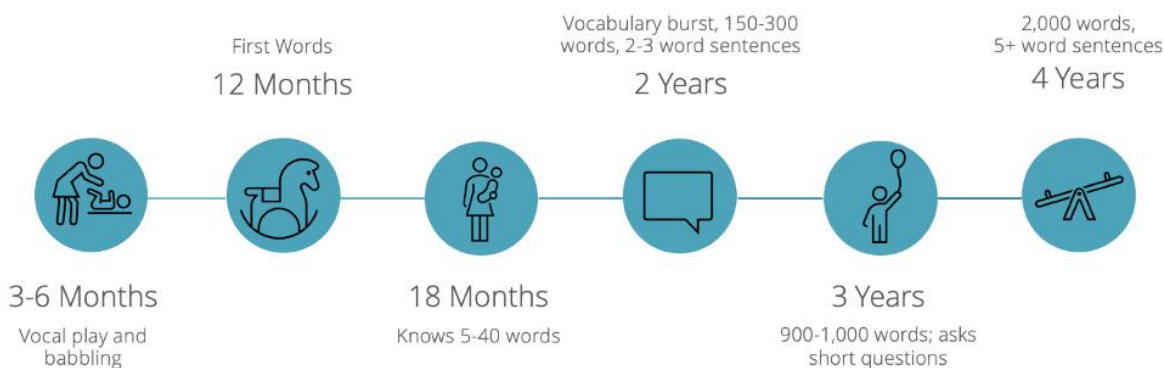


Early language development occurs on a continuum. There are individual differences between children, with some children achieving milestones more quickly than others—but skills tend to develop in a particular sequence. Figure 1 shows this sequence, which begins with early vocal play and progresses to complex sentence production.



Figure 1.

## Stages of Language Development



\*Source: Verywell. See also: Zubler, J. M., Wiggins, L. D., Macias, M. M., Whitaker, T. M., Shaw, J. S., Squires, J. K., ... & Lipkin, P. H. (2022). Evidence-informed milestones for developmental surveillance tools. *Pediatrics*, 149(3).

Recent research has highlighted the importance of language interactions in the early years, demonstrating the impact of early language interactions on later language and literacy (Gilkerson et al., 2018). Both the quantity and the quality of the language in children’s early environments matter for later language and literacy development (Anderson et al., 2021).

Receptive language (i.e., the words a child understands) often develops slightly ahead of expressive skills (i.e., those words children use to communicate). A child’s lexicon, or “bank” of words, grows as children learn from language models. When caregivers and peers see children as conversational partners, they give children opportunities to practice using newly-learned knowledge and skills. Through trial and error, observation, practice, and experience, children learn to shape their sentences to more effectively communicate their wants, needs, and ideas.



## Phonology

**Phonology** is the component of language concerned with the units of sound within words. The ability to hear and manipulate sounds in language is known as phonological awareness. Young children benefit from playing with sounds (i.e., rhyming words, identifying words with similar initial sounds, segmenting words into their constituent phonemes, or blending sounds to make words), both as a precursor to phonics instruction and while they are learning to decode and encode. It is important to note that, even within a single language, the pronunciation of speech sounds differs based on where one lives. These changes in speech patterns and pronunciation based on locality are referred to as dialect.



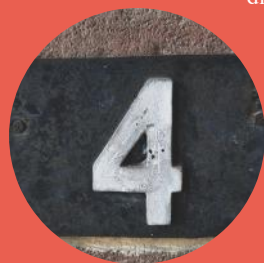
## Morphology

**Morphology** is the component of language concerned with units of meaning within individual words. Knowledge of and ability to manipulate morphemes (e.g., prefixes, suffixes, base words) to change the meaning or grammatical properties of a word indicates morphological awareness. For instance, the morpheme “s” when added to the word “car” changes the grammatical properties of the word, so that it no longer refers to a single vehicle, but rather to more than one. Other morphemes indicate ownership (e.g. Mom’s), change verb tense, provide comparative information (e.g. great-er, great-est), represent a different part of speech (e.g., kind, kind-ness), or transform the meaning of a word altogether (e.g., kind, un-kind). While children can develop morphological awareness by listening to models and reading books, some learners may require more direct instruction in the proper use of morphemes.



## Syntax

**Syntax** refers to the rules that govern how words and phrases go together to build sentences. While we rarely require students to diagram sentences anymore, knowing how verbs, adverbs, adjectives and nouns work together to create coherent messages is important in both speaking and writing. Syntactical structure varies widely across languages, so it’s important to realize non-native speakers may take time to learn the syntactical rules that govern sentence construction.



## Semantics

**Semantics** refers to the meanings of words and phrases. A child’s vocabulary grows significantly in the early years, but requires continual input through conversation, book reading and other media to continue growing. A student’s lexicon – or personal vocabulary bank – grows through exposure to and practice using unknown words. These words are most often found in text. As an individual hears a new word used in differing contexts, they refine their understanding of the word and become more comfortable adding it to their own conversation.



## Pragmatics

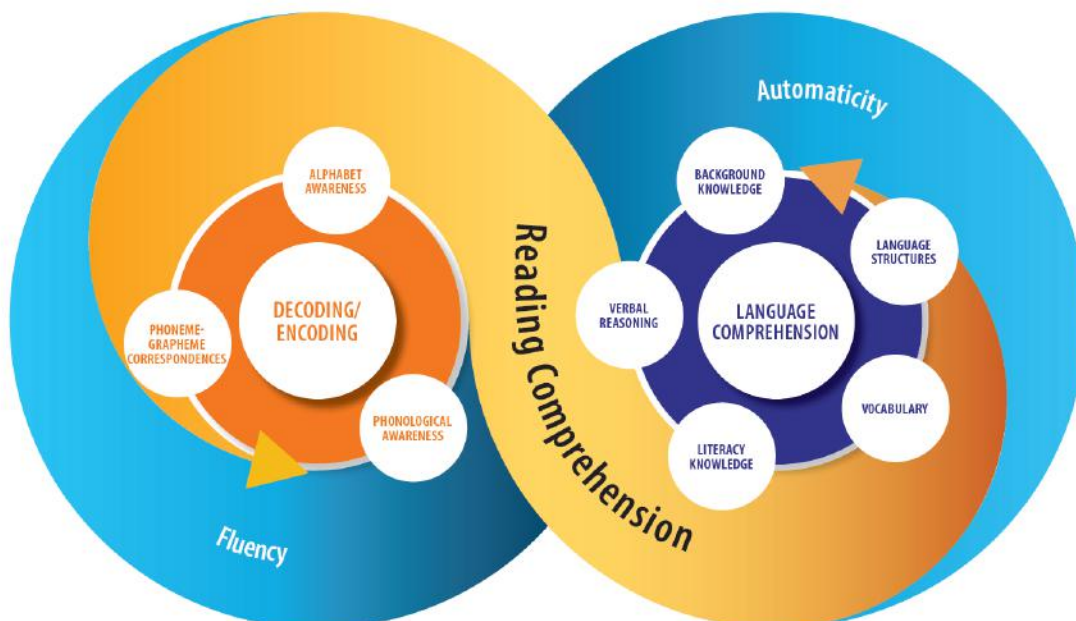
**Pragmatics** refers to the way language is used to convey meaning in varying contexts. Pragmatics is often thought of as the suprasegmental and social parts of communication, including taking turns when talking, how close one stands to their communication partner, word choices based on formality, tone, gestures, expression, and voice volume. These attributes carry a significant amount of message meaning.

Until recently, a majority of conversations around the teaching of reading have focused on decoding, encoding and the use of explicit and systematic phonics instruction. When applying the simple view of reading framework (Gough & Tunmer, 1986), language is an equally important factor in the reading comprehension equation (see Figure 2). Once a child is able to decode a word, they must then know the word's meaning and how it relates to other words in the text in order to make meaning from what they are reading. Children with language deficits and/or learning disabilities not only need explicit instruction in these areas, but also intervention and support from speech and language professionals.



Figure 2.

## Reading Comprehension Framework



Adapted from Gough, P. and Tunmer, W. (1986) and Scarborough, H. S. (2001)



## Keep Conversations Going

The best way to build language skills in the classroom is to build a language-rich environment (e.g., full of language-rich texts, materials and activities) and create an environment where sharing ideas is encouraged and supported. Promoting conversational turns with children where the adult and child each contribute equally is an evidence-based way to boost language skills (Donnelly & Kidd, 2021). Teaching adults to be conversational partners with children – giving them opportunities to engage in multiple back-and-forth conversational turns - gives them ample practice to both listen to models and practice new skills.



## Introduce and Use New Vocabulary

New vocabulary words are encountered daily in language-rich environments, especially when children have multiple opportunities, throughout the day, to engage with text. The average student learns anywhere from 6-10 words per day during early elementary years (Kamil et al., 2008). Whether those new vocabulary words are retained and later incorporated depends on the opportunities provided to a student to practice using the new words in conversation and written expression, as well as to hear and see a word used in multiple contexts. Explicit instruction (i.e., by providing a student-friendly definition, visual images, examples of the word used in context, and opportunities for students to practice identifying the word's meaning receptively and use the word in expressive language) is an important tool to build a child's vocabulary.



## Read and Retell Stories

Research shows us the best source of new vocabulary is books. Thus, younger children benefit from listening to and retelling stories. Instruction in narrative language (e.g., words that indicate temporal sequence, like “first,” “next,” or “in the beginning;” words that make causal connections like “because” or “since”) and the elements of story structure (e.g., character, setting, problem/initiating event) supports children in their story retellings. Story retelling is an evidence-based way to build both language and comprehension skills (Isbell et al., 2004). Children also benefit from listening to and sharing the most important things they learned from reading non-narrative, informational texts!



## Ask Open-Ended Questions

Instead of asking questions that require a simple “yes” or “no” answer, asking open-ended questions allows a student a chance to use language in sophisticated ways to share an argument or opinion. Making a habit of asking open-ended questions (and listening to the answer, which can inform possible follow-up questions) will enable students to practice lots of different language skills, including pragmatics.

# Conclusion



Language needn't be the focus of a specific block of instruction scheduled into the school day. All day long, teachers can build in opportunities for students to read or listen to read-alouds of language-rich text, hear adults model use of sophisticated language, and share their own voices through speaking (storytelling, discussing texts, engaging in discussions) or writing.



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