

Language Acquisition

How do students acquire language in
an international school?

Wednesday 11 February 2026
14:00-15:30 ISG Cafeteria



THE INTERNATIONAL
SCHOOL OF GENOA
SINCE 1966



Purpose of the workshop:

- **To explain how children learn languages in a multilingual environment**
- **To support parents in understanding and nurturing language development**

Language Acquisition vs. Language Learning

Language Acquisition:

- **Natural, subconscious process (like learning a first language)**
- **Happens through listening, speaking, and meaningful interaction**

Language Learning:

- **Conscious process (like learning grammar rules or vocabulary in a classroom)**

What does that look like in the brain?

Language Acquisition

Happens naturally, like how children pick up a first language or soak up a new language through immersion.

Broca's Area

Helps with speaking & forming sentences

Wernicke's Area

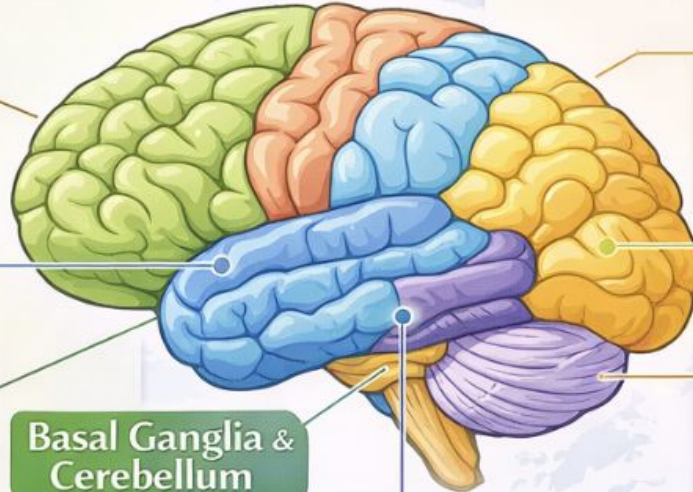
Helps with understanding language

Auditory Cortex

Processes sounds

Basal Ganglia & Cerebellum

Basal Ganglia & Cerebellum



Language Learning

Happens consciously, like studying vocabulary or grammar in a classroom.

Prefrontal Cortex

Helps with focus & problem-solving.

Hippocampus

Stores facts and new words

Parietal Lobes

Supports working memory

Factors Affecting Language Acquisition

- ***Age:*** Younger children acquire languages more easily
- ***Exposure:*** Frequency and quality of language input
- ***Motivation and interest:*** Engagement with meaningful tasks
- ***Supportive environment:*** Encouragement from teachers and peers

Children vs Adults – How Language Learning Is Different

Children

Learn language subconsciously

Acquire pronunciation more easily

Learn through play, interaction, and immersion

Do not need explicit grammar instruction

Adults

Learn language consciously

Rely more on rules, grammar explanations, and study

Often translate from their first language

May find pronunciation more challenging

Children have an advantage:

Brain plasticity is higher in early childhood

Less fear of making mistakes

Language is tied to emotion, play, and identity

Learning happens through meaningful use, not memorization

Stages of Language Development

- ***Early Stage:*** Listening, understanding, minimal speaking
- ***Emerging Stage:*** Using words and short phrases, learning vocabulary in context
- ***Developing Stage:*** Expanding vocabulary, expressing ideas with increasing complexity
- ***Proficient Stage:*** Confidently using the language across subjects

Early Stage: (0–3 years / initial exposure to a new language)

Focus: Listening and comprehension (Common when children are exposed to a new language)

❖ **Skills:**

Understands simple words and phrases

Begins to recognize routines and commands

Minimal speaking; may use gestures or single words, might even be silent

❖ **Looks Like:**

Follows simple instructions like “Come here” or “Give me the ball”

Points to objects when named

Responding with gestures or actions

Understanding routines and classroom language

❖ **Tips: Talk slowly, pair words with actions, read books with pictures and name objects**

Focus: Early Speaking (Single Words & Short Phrases)

- ❖ **Skills**
 - Use of keywords
 - Mixing languages
 - Repetition of familiar phrases and simple sentences
 - Vocabulary grows quickly, especially for familiar topics
 - Begins asking and answering basic questions
- ❖ **What you see:**
 - Can say “I want water” or “Where is my book?”
 - Uses language for simple social interactions
- ❖ **Tips: Expand sentences, encourage storytelling, read rhymes and repetitive texts**

Focus: Expanding language use, expressing ideas with complexity

❖ **Skills**

Uses longer sentences and varied vocabulary

Can describe events, express feelings, and explain ideas

Begins to read and write in the language with support

❖ **What you see:**

Can narrate past experiences: “Yesterday I went to the park and played football”

Participates in classroom discussions with some guidance

❖ **Tips: Ask open-ended questions, read slightly challenging books, encourage peer interaction**

Focus: Confident, independent use across subjects

❖ **Skills**

Uses language fluently for learning and social interaction

Understands and produces complex sentences, idioms, and academic vocabulary

Can read, write, and discuss a range of topics effectively

❖ **What you see:**

Explains concepts clearly in class discussions and can reflect on their learning and experiences

Writes essays, reports, or creative stories with few errors

Switches between languages appropriately depending on context

❖ **Tips: Introduce more challenging texts, encourage research and creative projects, discuss ideas critically**

- **Children may progress at different rates in each language depending on exposure, interest, and context.**
- **Progress is not always linear; children may show skills from multiple stages at the same time.**
- **Mixing languages or “code-switching” is normal in emerging and developing stages.**
- **Providing rich, meaningful interaction in both home and school languages accelerates development**

Does Learning Multiple Languages Confuse Children?

Short Answer: No. Research is clear.

- **Children can learn two or more languages at the same time without confusion**
- **The brain is naturally equipped to separate and manage multiple languages**
- **Bilingual and multilingual children develop language just as successfully as monolingual children**

Learning multiple languages does not confuse children — it strengthens their language system.

Children Build Separate Language Systems

- Studies show children develop distinct sound, vocabulary, and grammar systems for each language
- Languages are not “mixed” in the brain
- Even newborns can tell languages apart

 *What parents might see:*

Children know which language belongs to which person or situation.

Mixing Languages Is Normal — Not Confusion

- When children say things like “*I want acqua,*” this is called code-switching
- Research shows this is a strategic and intelligent behavior
- Adults who are fluent bilinguals do this too

 *What parents might see:*

Children borrow a word from one language when they don't yet know it in the other.

Bilingual Children Are Not More Delayed

- Large research studies show bilingual children reach language milestones on a similar timeline
- Vocabulary may look smaller in one language, but total vocabulary across languages is equal or larger

 *Important note:*

Progress may look different — not slower.

Consistent, Meaningful Exposure Matters Most

- Quality interaction matters more than “perfect” language use
- Children learn best through conversation, play, stories, and routines
- Positive attitudes toward all languages support confidence and success

♥ *What helps most:*

Encouragement, exposure, patience, and real communication — not pressure.

Multilingualism does not confuse children.

It supports cognitive flexibility, communication skills, and cultural understanding — especially in an international school environment.





Common Concerns:

- Learning a new language will be too confusing.
- My child has a learning disability (e.g., dyslexia).
- Second language learning will cause struggles.



What Research Says:



Multilingualism is **NOT** harmful — even for kids with learning disabilities.



Bilingualism can strengthen cognitive skills and flexibility.



With the right support, most students can thrive in another language!

How should you raise multilingual children?

- One Parent, One Language (OPOL)
- Minority Language at Home (ML@H)
- Time & Place Method
- Flexible / Mixed Language Use
- Heritage Language Focus
- School-Supported Bilingualism



There is no single best method — success depends on quality and quantity of exposure to both languages.

Choose the approach (or combination) that fits your family best.

Myth:

'One Parent, One Language'
is the **ONLY** way to raise
a bilingual child.

FALSE

What Research Shows:

- There is no evidence that hearing two languages early causes confusion.
- Children can successfully learn two languages even when one parent uses both.
- The OPOL approach can work, but it is not required for bilingual success.

What Families Can Do:

- Provide rich, meaningful opportunities to hear and use both languages.
- Consistency and positive language experiences matter most.

How Students Learn in an International School

- **Immersion in multiple languages:** Learning in English and additional languages
- **Integrated curriculum:** Language used as a tool to learn other subjects
- **Collaborative learning:** Peer interaction strengthens language skills
- **Differentiated instruction:** Tailored support for varying language levels...EAL, Italian B

In an international school- students hear English all day, use it socially, ALL teachers support learning through authentic communication



What Parents Can Do to Support Additional Language Acquisition



Maintain and value the home language

Strong skills in the first language support overall language development and learning.



Encourage regular exposure

Provide opportunities to hear and use the target language through books, media, playdates, or community activities.



Promote real communication

Encourage your child to use the new language in everyday situations, even if they make mistakes.



Be patient and positive

Language learning takes time. Celebrate effort and progress rather than focusing on errors.



Read together daily

Shared reading in any language builds vocabulary, comprehension, and confidence.



Partner with the school

Stay in contact with teachers and support school expectations and language routines at home.

Questions?



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