Safe to Try

6 cards for the child who isn't speaking yet

+ "TRY IT" SHEET + SOURCES



Belonging → Confidence → First words

BEFORE YOU START

Belonging is the first step. Confidence helps them take the risk.

Speaking a new language is a risk. You can make a mistake, and everyone can hear you. Many young learners understand more than they can say. They point, they watch, they whisper to a friend, but they don't answer you.

WHY BELONGING AND CONFIDENCE MATTER

We all need to belong. And many language learners are afraid that others will judge them. Belonging doesn't make a child speak, but it makes trying easier.

Stephen Krashen proposed the **affective filter**: when children feel worried, English gets in less easily; when they feel safe, it gets in more easily. Researchers still discuss how this works. But studies with thousands of language learners show that learners who feel more anxious usually learn less. It's a link, not proof. But it's a good reason to care about how children feel.

When we sense danger, we may fight, run away or **freeze**. In class, a child who freezes may simply go quiet, and even mild stress can make thinking harder for a moment. Stress is one possible reason for silence, not the only one.

Baumeister & Leary, 1995 · Horwitz, Horwitz & Cope, 1986 · Krashen, 1982 · Teimouri, Goetze & Plonsky, 2019 · Roelofs, 2017 · Arnsten, 2009

The path: from understanding to first words

Each step is a little more of a risk than the one before. It's not a fixed order for every child. Use it to see where a child is, and what the next small step could be.

1. **Understanding** — Card 1
2. **Saying it together** — Card 2
3. **With a partner** — Card 3
4. **On their own** — Cards 4 and 5

AT EVERY STEP **When they try, your response matters.** Card 6.

Start here: think of one child. Choose the card that looks like a moment you know. Do one thing. Then look again.

HOW EACH CARD WORKS

A behavior is information. It isn't the whole explanation.

It is easy to decide what a moment means: "They're shy." "They don't know." Each card helps you look a little longer before you decide, and gives you one thing to try tomorrow.

Step	Where the moment is on the path.
What you notice	A moment you know from your classroom.
First thought → Look closer	The idea that comes first, and what else might be happening.
What we know	What research or classroom practice tells us, with the source.
Try this	One clear thing to try tomorrow.
Look again	What to watch for, and what to do next.
Teacher takeaway	The idea to keep.

IF IT STILL ISN'T WORKING

After two weeks, use what you noticed to decide what to try next.

1. Try another card, or go back one step on the path.
2. Ask the family how the child communicates at home, in their own language.
3. Share what you have noticed with a colleague.
4. If you are worried about the child's language or development, talk to the right specialist.

1

STEP 1 · UNDERSTANDING · CARD 1 OF 6

The child who only points

WHAT YOU NOTICE

You ask: "Which one do you want?"

They don't say the word.

They point to the red one.



FIRST THOUGHT *"They don't know the word."*

LOOK CLOSER They answered you. Just not with words.

WHAT WE KNOW

Young children often point before they can say the word. Pointing is communication. Answer it, then give them the word.

Iverson & Goldin-Meadow, 2005 (first language)

TRY THIS

Point to it too. Then say the word.

Child: [points to the red crayon]
You: [point to it too] "Yes! The red one. **Red.**"

LOOK AGAIN

Do they look at you when you say the word? Try to say it? Say the first sound?

If yes: Keep giving the word every time they point. Then pause, so they can try.

If not yet: Keep pointing and naming. They are already communicating.

TEACHER TAKEAWAY

A child who points is already talking to you.

2

STEP 2 · SAYING IT TOGETHER · CARD 2 OF 6

The child who waits, then copies

WHAT YOU NOTICE

You ask: "What's this?" No answer.

Another child says: "It's a dog."

Then they say: "It's a dog."





FIRST THOUGHT *"They're just copying."*

LOOK CLOSER They used a full sentence after hearing a model. That's practice.

WHAT WE KNOW

Repeating what others say is one strategy children use when they learn a new language. It's practice, not just copying.

Saville-Troike, 1988

TRY THIS

Plan the practice.

Songs, chants, rhymes, little drills. **Together** first, then with a **partner**, then **alone**. Don't ask your quiet child first.

LOOK AGAIN

Do they join the group answer? Use it with a partner? Start before the others?

If yes: Give them the same sentence with a partner (card 3).

If not yet: Keep the group practice. Joining the group is already speaking.

TEACHER TAKEAWAY

Let them repeat first. Then help them say it alone.

STEP 3 · WITH A PARTNER · CARD 3 OF 6

3 The child who says it to a friend, but not to you

WHAT YOU NOTICE

In pair work, you hear them speaking English.

You walk over and ask the same question.

They go quiet.





FIRST THOUGHT *"They're shy."*

LOOK CLOSER The English was there. Only the listener changed.

WHAT WE KNOW

Children may talk more with some people than with others. Many children practice quietly first: they repeat words to themselves before they say them to others.

Saville-Troike, 1988

TRY THIS

Start with fewer people.

A partner → the pair tells you together → you → the group.

LOOK AGAIN

Where do they speak: with a partner, as a pair, or with you? Start there.

If yes: Move one step up: from a partner, to the pair, to you.

If not yet: Stay with a partner longer. Let them choose their partner.

TEACHER TAKEAWAY

If they can say it to a friend, they can say it to more people. One step at a time.

STEP 4 · ON THEIR OWN · CARD 4 OF 6

4 The child who knows the answer but doesn't say it

WHAT YOU NOTICE

You ask a question. They look at you. Nothing.

You ask again. You make it easier. You give the first word.

In the end, you answer for them.





FIRST THOUGHT *"They don't know. They need my help."*

LOOK CLOSER They were looking at you. Maybe they were thinking. And you helped three times in a few seconds.

WHAT WE KNOW

Answering takes time: children need to understand the question, find the words and start. In classroom recordings, teachers waited about 1 second. Research says: wait 3 to 5 seconds. With young children, waiting is important too.

Rowe, 1986 · IRIS Center · Wasik & Hindman, 2018

TRY THIS

Ask. Then count to five in silence.

Counting to five in your head gives them those 3 to 5 seconds. Don't repeat the question, don't make it easier, and don't ask another child.

LOOK AGAIN

Do they look up? Start a gesture? Say one word after the pause?

If yes: Use the five-second wait with every child, every day.

If not yet: Keep waiting, and go back one step: a partner first (card 3).

TEACHER TAKEAWAY

Wait before you help. Give them time to think.

5

STEP 4 · ON THEIR OWN · CARD 5 OF 6

The child who never raises their hand

WHAT YOU NOTICE

You ask: "Who wants to tell us?"

The same hands go up. Not theirs.

Again. And again.



FIRST THOUGHT *"They're not interested."*

LOOK CLOSER Maybe they don't raise their hand *for this kind of question*. That's all you know for now.

WHAT WE KNOW

Taking part is more than raising a hand. Children also take part by watching, pointing, choosing, joining the group or telling a friend. A real choice gives a child something of their own to say.

From classroom practice

TRY THIS

Give them one real choice.

"Which one would **you** choose?"
"What would you like to tell us about?"
They can answer by pointing, showing or saying.

LOOK AGAIN

Do they choose? Show? Say more when it's their topic?

If yes: Give real choices every day, not only once.

If not yet: Let them answer by pointing or showing first. Then say the words for them (card 1).

TEACHER TAKEAWAY

Raising a hand is not the only way to take part. Give them other ways.

6 The child who stops talking after you correct them

WHAT YOU NOTICE

A child tells you: "Me want red."

You say: "No. Say: *I want the red one.*"

They repeat it. Then they stop talking.



FIRST THOUGHT *"They don't like being corrected."*

LOOK CLOSER Ask yourself: what do I want right now? Conversation, or practice?

WHAT WE KNOW

If you want them to keep talking, answer what they said, using the correct words. If you want them to practice, ask them to try again. In classroom studies, asking them to try again often helped more than only saying it back.

Lyster & Saito, 2010

TRY THIS

Answer them. Say it correctly.

Child: "Me want red."

You: "You **want the red one**? Here you are!"

Want them to practice? Ask: "I want...?"

LOOK AGAIN

Do they keep talking? Try another sentence? Use some of your words later?

If yes: Keep answering this way when your goal is conversation.

If not yet: Talk about their favorite things, and make conversation the only goal.

TEACHER TAKEAWAY

First ask yourself: do I want conversation or practice? Then answer.

NOW TRY IT WITH YOUR CHILD

One child. One moment.

Child (first name or initial): _____ Date: _____

NOTICE

What happened? Write only what you saw or heard.

LOOK

What am I thinking it means?

What else could it be?

UNDERSTAND

Where is the child on the path? understanding · saying it together · with a partner · on their own

TRY

What is ONE thing I will change? Which card will I use?

LOOK AGAIN

Check the days you see a change. School days, two weeks.

1	2	3	4	5	6	7	8	9	10

What changed? What will I do next?

No change after two weeks? See "If it still isn't working" on page 3. Keep this sheet private. Use it to plan your next step, not to label the child.

ONE LAST THING

You don't need to know everything about a child to help them.

Start with one moment. Notice what really happens. Look beyond your first idea. Choose one change. Then look again.

Belonging is the first step. Confidence helps them take the risk. Then, one day, they will say their first words.

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Some studies were done with toddlers learning their first language, with older students or with adults. Card 5 and some examples come from classroom practice.

ABOUT ME

I'm Lorena Peimbert, a teacher educator and ELT author. Before ABCD Comes Love® helps teachers look beyond what they see, understand what may be getting in the way of learning, and decide what to try next.

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Science behind. Action in front.