



Speech, Language and Communication Difficulties



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Meeting the Needs of Pupils with Speech, Language and Communication Needs

Introduction

As teachers we are aware of the importance of language both as a means of communication and a medium of instruction. Well established skills enable children to establish and maintain social relationships with others, to express and to share their thoughts and feelings, to represent and to understand the world around them. Language is also intricately connected to and contributes to the pupil's cognitive development, as well as their sense of identity and belonging.

Many pupils with speech, language and communication needs (SLCN) can succeed in mainstream education, particularly where schools embrace collaborative working arrangements and teachers have access to the specialist training and resources they need.

This section provides an overview for teachers of the main types of speech and language difficulties that pupils may present with in mainstream schools along with brief examples as to how pupil needs can be met. It is of interest that the strategies suggested are not unique to pupils with speech and language difficulties. The same strategies go a long way to encouraging better classroom practice and teaching that are of benefit to all children's learning.

What are Speech, Language and Communication?

Speech refers to:	Language refers to: speaking (expressive) and understanding language (receptive)	Communication refers to: how we interact with others (pragmatic/ social)
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ○ Saying sounds accurately and in the right places in words; ○ The sounds people use to communicate words; ○ Speaking fluently, without hesitating, or prolonging or repeating words or sounds; and ○ Speaking with expression with a clear voice, using pitch, volume and intonation to support meaning. 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ○ Using words to build up sentences, sentences to build up conversations and longer stretches of spoken language; and ○ Understanding and making sense of what people say. 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ○ Using language to represent concepts and thoughts; ○ Using language in different ways; to question, clarify, describe etc.; ○ Non-verbal rules of communication; good listening, looking at people knowing how to talk to others and take turns, how to change language use to suit the situation or the person being spoken to; ○ The ability to take into account other peoples' perspectives, intentions and the wider context; and ○ Many pupils communicate successfully using non-verbal means such as signing, gestures, communication books or electronic communication equipment.

Pupils may have receptive, expressive or global language disorders. Language disorders can result in poor self-confidence and low self-esteem, which can affect personal and social relationships.

Research indicates that pupils with more complex disorders have a greater likelihood of experiencing behavioural problems. Many pupils need to be directly taught the speech, language and social communication skills that other pupils learn naturally.

Prevalence

The figures relating to the prevalence of language and communication difficulty vary. The Department of Education School Census 2009-2010 gives a total of 8,650 pupils identified with speech, language and communication difficulties. According to a report from Ireland (DES, 2005) research suggests that the figures range between 2 and 10 per cent. Accepting these figures, it may then be possible that as many as three children in a class of 30 may have difficulty in the area of language and communication.

3 Pupils in a Class of 30

Overview

Specific Speech and Language Impairment

Specific Speech and Language Impairment can be thought of in terms of pupils whose non-verbal ability is in the average band or higher and whose skill in understanding or expressing themselves through the medium of spoken language is severely impaired. (SERC, 1993)

What are Speech, Language and Communication Needs?

This is a generic term that encompasses a large spectrum of language needs including: language delay and disorder.

Delay

This refers to pupils who may following normal developmental patterns but they will not be at the stage of language expected for their chronological age.

Disorder

This is where the pupil's speech and language skills are not developing in the way they develop for most children. A pupil with a speech disorder may make errors in pronouncing words, or may stutter. Acquisition may also be patchy, e.g. more difficult concepts may be understood while other basic concepts e.g. colour, size may not.

Why is Language important?

The following points highlight why language is important:

- language enables us to make our needs, opinions and ideas known;

- language is important for cognitive development; without language we lack much of the raw material with which to reason and think;
- positive social interactions with other people are heavily dependent upon effective language and communication skills; and
- language is important for regulating our own behaviour and responses (self-talk).

(Westwood, 2003)

Language can be broken down into input (receptive) and output (expressive). A pupil with SLCN may present with difficulties in any or all of the areas of language, including morphology, syntax/grammar, semantics, pragmatics and phonology;

Language can also be thought of in terms of content, form and use.

morphology syntax semantics pragmatics phonology

- **Morphology** is the way word structures change (sleep, sleeping, slept).
- **Syntax** is the grammar system of a language – the way that words and parts of words combine in phrases and sentences.
- **Semantics** refers to the meaning of words, bits of words and phrases and sentences.
- **Pragmatics** can be thought of as how we use language in different situations and how we convey feelings.
- **Phonology** refers to the sounds that make up language.

How to support a child with Speech Difficulties?

Teachers often struggle with how to meet pupil's needs despite being able to easily identify that the pupil has speech difficulties.

Pupil's difficulties in this area may either be **Phonological** or **Articulatory**.

Phonological

This refers to a delayed or disordered sound system.

- Some pupils with speech difficulties may have problems with speech input e.g. differentiating between similar sounding words.
- Some may have imprecise or fuzzy storage of words which makes it difficult to access them e.g. word finding difficulties or to programme a clear production of them because of missing elements in the word store.

Articulatory

This refers to the mechanics of speech, for example, how speech sounds are formed. Manifestations include dyspraxia, dysarthria or cleft lip and/or palate. They may have a difficulty pronouncing speech at an articulatory output level even though they know the words involved perfectly well.

With persisting difficulties there may be involvement with all aspects of processing and there may also be language difficulties. Although not all speech and language difficulties have associated literacy difficulties, many pupils whose speech difficulties persist beyond 5 years of age are most at risk for associated difficulties in reading, spelling and sometimes maths.

Reading and writing float on a sea of talk

(Britton, 1973)

Teaching and Learning Strategies

Teachers should:

- become familiar with the pupil's sounds system and the substitutions they make;
- respond to what the pupil is saying as opposed to how clearly they speak;
- repeat the part of speech/conversation they did not understand;
- encourage the pupil to use gesture, drawing or writing to aid understanding;
- avoid asking for constant repetition of mispronounced words;
- make the pupil feel relaxed and build self-esteem and confidence;
- comment on and praise good interactions/speech;
- identify and praise pupil's other strengths;
- consider where in the 'queue' the pupil is asked to respond, somewhere near the beginning is preferable so they have been given a good model/example of an answer, avoid leaving the pupil to the end as memory skills may be affected;
- repeat what the child says correctly so that they hear the correct production;
- not ask the child to repeat again after you; and

- ask parents to use a home/school diary to give information on exciting things happening at home, this way the teacher will have context when asking the pupil questions.

Receptive, Expressive and Pragmatic use of Language

Receptive language skills

[Receptive language skills] describe the ability to understand spoken language. They can also be referred to as 'verbal comprehension skills' and are essential for accessing the entire curriculum.

(McMahon & Mulholland, 2007)

The following points are features of receptive language skills. Pupils may:

- have difficulty following class routines;
- find it hard to concentrate;
- over-rely on looking at others to copy what to do or may need more gestures to understand;
- have difficulty in understanding abstract concepts (impacting on learning areas especially Mathematics and Numeracy & World Around Us);
- need instructions repeated many times or require them to be broken down and simplified;
- give inappropriate answers to questions they have been asked;
- opt out of tasks or withdraw from activities they don't understand;

- echo what has been said to them (echolalia);
- find it hard to learn new vocabulary;
- give irrelevant or inappropriate answers as they have not understood the underlying meaning;
- fail to read facial expressions and invade other people's personal space;
- take things literally; and
- present with behavioural difficulties.

Strategies to Support Children with Receptive Language Difficulties

The teacher should:

- have specific learning intentions which should be provided for the class;
- check that the pupil is listening and encourage active listening;
- state the pupil's name before giving an instruction or gain eye contact (if appropriate);
- use visual strategies and non-verbal cues to support what is being said;
- help the pupil to make links to previous knowledge and experiences
- emphasise key words with slight stress;

- think about the length of the instruction being given, it is useful to think in terms of whether it is a single or multi-command instruction, give one piece of instruction at a time to allow pupils to process this before adding more;
- consider the complexity of what is being said e.g. "before you go outside, you must finish your worksheet";
- check that the pupil has understood, observe their response and clarify any misunderstandings;
- encourage the pupil to use self-help strategies for example. Rehearsal or visualisation;
- encourage the pupil to let you know when they have not understood, this can be via verbal or non-verbal means, such as using a 'traffic light' system; and
- allow the pupil time to process the information, apply the '10 second rule' – the teacher counts silently to 10 to allow the pupil to formulate a response.

Expressive Language

[Expressive language is] a process of formulating ideas into words and sentences, in accordance with the set of grammatical and semantic rules of language.

(Cantwell and Baker, 1987)

Pupils with difficulties in expressive language may:

- use short/immature sentences;
- over-use pointing or gesture to convey meaning;

- be slow to express themselves;
- omit grammatical words such as 'is, a, have' or make mistakes with word endings for example -ing, -'s, -ed';
- struggle to retell events or a story in a meaningful sequence;
- be unable to form sentences/questions appropriately;
- put words in the wrong order, for example "go home me";
- be unable to retrieve the exact words they require resulting in frequent pauses or over-use of fillers such as 'you know, thingy'; and
- find it hard to contribute to class discussions, give explanations, or describe what they are doing.

Strategies to Support Pupils with Expressive Language Difficulties

The teacher should:

- give time for the pupil to think about what they need to say, find the right words and formulate the sentence;
- ask open-ended questions;
- give prompts if the pupil cannot think of the word, for example, what do you do with it? Where would you find it? What does it look like?
- use multi-sensory teaching methods to assist the child's storage and retrieval of the words in the future when teaching new vocabulary;

- repeat back what the pupil has said, but using the correct words and grammar so that they can hear the correct form;
- expand on what the pupil has said by adding new words or a new idea;
- avoid asking the pupil to repeat the sentence again after you; and
- avoid finishing a pupils sentences or saying the words they can't find as this can be frustrating for the pupil.

Pupils are also required to use language in a social context as well. They need to have an understanding of the rules of interaction. This is covered in the next section.

Pragmatic Language: Social Use of Language

Pragmatic Language involves three major communication skills:

Using language	Changing language	Following rules
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Each one will now be explained.

Using language is where the language is used for different purposes, such as:

- **greeting** (e.g., hello, goodbye);
- **informing** (e.g., I'm going to get a drink) ;
- **demanding** (e.g., Give me a drink);
- **promising** (e.g., I'm going to get you a drink); and
- **requesting** (e.g., I would like a drink, please).

Changing language is where the language is changed according to the needs of a listener or situation, such as:

- talking differently to a peer than to an adult;
- giving background information to an unfamiliar listener; and
- speaking differently in a classroom than on a playground.

Following rules is where the language is changed for conversations and storytelling, such as:

- taking turns in conversation;
- introducing topics of conversation ;
- staying on topic;
- rephrasing when misunderstood;
- how to use verbal and nonverbal signals;
- how close to stand to someone when speaking; and
- how to use facial expressions and eye contact.

Pupils may experience difficulty with:

- content and direction (despite having fluent/ articulate speech);
- being specific;
- comprehension;
- play skills;

- following unwritten rules of conversation;
- school routines and events;
- the use of jargon;
- understanding non-verbal communication;
- prosody (rhythm, stress, and intonation of speech);
- humour;
- appreciating other points of view; and
- generalisation, for example, learning set of behaviours for one situation but cannot carry over learning to different situation.

Strategies for Supporting Pupils with Pragmatic Language Needs

The teacher should:

- encourage the pupil to actively listen;
- encourage the use of greetings and goodbyes;
- encourage the pupil to maintain a conversation by eye-contact, or nodding;
- only accept language relevant to the conversation;
- encourage turn taking in games and in conversations;
- avoid being side-tracked by constant interruptions; and

- give the pupil time to respond.

Some pupils have global language disorder and experience difficulties with both receptive and expressive language. Global language disorders affect both the understanding and use of language.

All three elements of speech, language and communication are needed in order to get messages across. Each of the three elements (using, changing and following rules) is multifaceted and multi-layered. Without aspects of any one of these elements, what pupils say and understand can become confused. With all these elements, pupils can maximise their attainment.

Summary of Good Practice

Teachers should:

- ensure pupil does not have a hearing loss;
- use the pupils' name to gain attention;
- be aware of the complexity of the language you are using with the pupil, the language can be complex in terms of the length of the sentence, the structure (grammar) or the vocabulary used;
- start an activity by explaining each step using clear, simple language;
- be visual if possible, for example use real objects, pictures, photos, video and symbols;
- be aware of the benefits of using multi-sensory materials;
- give a sequence of commands to follow with a pause between each one to allow the pupil time to process the information;
- emphasize key words by using slight stress and appropriate non-verbal communication;
- introduce new vocabulary considering using visual strategies, for example attribute web, multiple meaning tree, spider-gram or a word map;
- consider using mind maps when introducing or discussing topics;
- back up auditory commands, where possible with visual cues, gesture and directionality;

- try to work out with the pupil anything they have said that not been understood through using pictures, objects and guesswork;
- avoid asking a pupil to repeat, instead restate to the pupil what has been understood;
- observe the pupil's response to check that the information has been understood, by his or her expression for example;
- have realistic expectations;
- give the pupil time to talk, the pupil may need more time to understand a question, think about a reply and then say it;
- avoid finishing the sentence for a pupil but repeat back what the pupil has said clearly and correctly so that he hears good examples; and
- try asking prompting questions if a pupil cannot think of a word, for example function, associations, similarities and differences.

Environmental Considerations

- Adjustments may need to be made to the classroom and school environment e.g. reduce background noise and distractions where possible. Be aware of the impact of visuals displays i.e. they may interfere with the pupil's attention and listening.
- Be aware of the language demands of a whole class activity. Understanding group direction and coping with the distractions of class situations pose particular difficulties for some pupils with language problems.
- Consider where the pupil is sitting in the classroom, and provide preferential seating to enable the pupil to have face-to-face contact with the teacher.

- Create distinct areas in the classroom for resources, for different areas of learning and clearly label equipment and containers.

Active Learning

- Encourage the pupil to use strategies to process information – repeating, silent rehearsal, identifying important words in the instruction. These may need to be taught or modelled repeatedly.
- Make the pupil aware of the teaching objectives.
- Make the pupil aware of good listening skills and promote active listening.
- Encourage the pupil to explain what they have heard. The pupil will know that his listening will be checked, but the adult can also monitor the level of language that is understood and modify it accordingly.
- Pupils should be encouraged to communicate their needs.
- Focus the pupil's attention before giving instructions and ensure eye contact.
- Encourage the pupil to tell you when he does not understand.

Summary and Conclusion

- Language is the key to communication, learning, thinking and remembering.
- There is a positive relation between the language spoken to children and children's language growth.

- The best outcomes for children are achieved through partnerships between parents and professionals.
- The environment plays a key role in the acquisition of language skills.

Effective early intervention allied to active parental involvement results in enduring benefits in academic attainment and social adjustment.

Dealing with parents and their children with honesty, sensitivity and competence will help develop trusting effective relationships between parents and professionals. The combined efforts, knowledge, experiences and motivations of parents and professionals help children to develop to their fullest potential.

(Buckley, 2006)

Resource Suggestions

Expressive and Receptive Language

Books

Locke, A.(1985) *Living Language and Teaching Talking*. Windsor: NFER Nelson

Martin, D. and Miller, C. (1996) *Speech and Language Difficulties in the Classroom*. London: David Fulton.

McMinn, J. (2002) *Supporting Children with Speech and Language Impairment and Associated Difficulties*. Birmingham: The Questions Publishing Company

Snowling, M. and Stackhouse, J (1995) *Dyslexia, Speech and Language: A Practitioner's Book*. London: Whurr Publications.

Turnbull, J and Stewart, T (1996) *Helping Children Cope with Stammering*. Sheldon Press

Resources

Elklan – Series of Language Builders. Resources to support children with speech, language and communication needs. <http://www.elklan.co.uk>

LDA – a wide range of resources to help with many areas of speech and language work, e.g. Language Cards, Listen and Do etc. LDA, Duke Street, Wisbech, Cambs. PE132AE

Speechmark Publishing – a range of books and products.

www.speechmark.net

Winslow Press – a range of resources such as Leap into Listening (photocopiable listening activities). Wimslow Press, Goytside Road, Chesterfield S40 2PH.

Social Use of Language Skills/ Pragmatics

Books

Bliss, T and Tetley, J. (1993) Circle Time and Developing Circle Time. Bristol: Lucky Duck Publishers

Gray, C (2000) The New Social Story Book, Arlington, USA: Future Horizons

Mildred, M (1989) Let's Play Together. London. Green Print

Mortimer, H (1998) Learning Through Play – Circle Time. Leamington Spa: Scholastic

Sher, B (1998) Self-Esteem Games. Canada. John Wiley & Sons

Resources

Mad, Sad, Glad game – 'emotions' photo-cards from Wimslow Press (also available from LDA)

Superstickers – have badges such as 'I listened carefully'. PO Box 55, 4 Balloo Avenue, Bangor, Co.Down BT19 7PJ

Social Skills Posters – Good Listening; Good Talking; Good Waiting; Good Asking; Good Thinking. Taskmaster Ltd., Leicester

Useful Contacts

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Belfast HSCT Speech and Language Therapy

Website: <http://www.belfasttrust.hscni.net/SLT.htm>

North and West Belfast 0845 606 6596

South and East Belfast 028 9056 5565

Northern HSCT Speech and Language Therapy

Website: <http://www.northerntrust.hscni.net/>

Ferguson House
57-59 Manse Road
Newtownabbey BT36 6RW 02890 341586

Southern HSCT Speech and Language Therapy

Website: <http://www.southerntrust.hscni.net/>

Child Development Centre
Lurgan Hospital
100 Sloan Street
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South Eastern HSCT Speech and Language Therapy

Website: <http://www.setrust.hscni.net/>

Scrabo Children's Centre
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Western HSCT Speech and Language Therapy

Website: <http://www.westerntrust.hscni.net/>

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Education and Library Boards – Speech and Language

BELB Comet Project

Website: <http://www.belb.org.uk/>
40 Academy Street
Belfast BT1 2NQ 02890 564252

SEELB ISACC Project

Website: <http://www.seelb.org.uk/>
Grahamsbridge Road
Dundonald BT16 2HS 02890 566200

SELB Language & Communication Service

Website: <http://www.selb.org.uk/>
3 Charlemont Place
The Mall
Armagh BT61 9AX 02837 517820

WELB Language & Communication Service

Website: <http://www.welb.org.uk/>
1 Hospital Road
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Multi-Disciplinary Support Teams to Schools

Belfast Health and Social Care Trust

Children's' Interdisciplinary Support Team (CIDS)

Everton Complex

2 Ardoyne Road

Crumlin Road

BT14 7AW

02890 510523

Northern Health and Social Care Trust

Multi-Agency Support Teams for Schools (MASTS)

Unit 1 Cornstore

Market Street

Moneymore

BT45 7PE

02886 747860

Southern Health and Social Care Trust

Action for Children in Education (ACE Team)

Pinewood Villa

Longstone Hospital

Loughgall Road

Armagh

BT61 7PR

02837 412830

South Eastern Health and Social Care Trust

ASCET Team

8 Moss Road

Ballygowan

BT23 6JE

02890 97520941

Western Health and Social Care Trust

Western Education Support Team (WEST)

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02811 865265/6

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