Developmental Language Disorder in primary school

This guide will explore Developmental Language Disorder in the context of transition to school, and the classroom, social, and academic expectations of primary and intermediate school. It will also describe how teachers can be empowered to identify and support these students.

What is Developmental Language Disorder?

In 2017, the term Developmental Language Disorder (DLD) was adopted as a way to understand how to identify and support individuals with challenges in talking, listening, and understanding. DLD is a language disorder with no known cause and can be identified by challenges in understanding and expressing language, with difficulties in core areas including phonology, grammar, language use, and verbal learning and memory. It often co-occurs with significant difficulties in reading and writing, attention, sensory processing differences, and other behavioural, emotional, and learning difficulties[1]. DLD is differentiated from the term 'language disorder', which relates to a child with a known biomedical condition such as autism, intellectual disability, or sensorineural hearing loss.[2] DLD is present in 7% of students and can be as high as 16%, so teachers are likely to have at least one child in each class, if not more, with challenges in their primary language development. DLD impacts a student's language journey from preschool through to secondary school and into adulthood.

DLD is often identified in primary and intermediate school-aged children with persisting language and literacy difficulties, and research shows that identifying and supporting students with DLD in primary and intermediate school can be a gateway for reducing further challenges across emotional, mental health, social, academic, and behavioural areas when they reach high school and into adulthood[3]. To read more about DLD, click here.

Teacher observation checklist

Given the prevalence of DLD, it is important for teachers to be aware of some of the signs that students may be struggling with understanding and expressing meaning through language. Students with DLD may present with:

- Limited ability to express thoughts and ideas

- Poor speech

- Less sophisticated vocabulary than their same-age peers

- Difficulties organising spoken and written thoughts

- Difficulty following verbal instructions, answering questions, and understanding what has been said to them

- Poor memory to learn new information or words

- Difficulty paying attention

- Delayed grammar skills in both speaking and writing

- Difficulty re-telling stories[4].

Language foundation prior to starting school

The foundation of a child's language and literacy learning begins in the first five years, as children build language competency in speaking and listening alongside social and emotional skills. Despite being born with the biological predisposition to learn language, children do not learn to read, write, and spell naturally, and early oral language foundations are essential precursors to the development of literacy skills. They facilitate later reading success and complement the prosocial and interpersonal skills needed to navigate everyday life, form social connections, and manage emotional and mental health. Studies have found that children who are identified in early childhood with DLD are over-represented in the number of students with reading difficulties and social emotional challenges, which highlights the need for early identification and appropriate support[5].

The classroom language and learning environment

School readiness supports children to thrive in the transition to formal schooling. School readiness encompasses several domains including academic competencies related to early literacy and numeracy, and social emotional factors such as social awareness, persistence, and self-regulation[6]. Students with DLD may experience more difficulties in their transition to primary school compared to their neurotypical peers, particularly in terms of oral language, social skills, vocabulary, and early literacy. Therefore, it is important to provide a strong transition-to-school programme for all students[7], but particularly those with DLD or comparatively low speech, language, and communication skills at school entry.

As students' progress through school, the learning demands change. Between the ages of five and eight, a student is immersed in the culture of learning to learn, following routines, adjusting to expectations, navigating social parameters, and wiring new knowledge with their existing understanding. To meet these expectations they need:

• Efficient language processing skills to follow verbal or written instructions

• A robust vocabulary

• The ability to participate in class discussions

• Active engagement in new curriculum learning

• Proficient expression of thoughts and knowledge, both academically and socially

These competencies link to literacy building blocks in phonology, vocabulary, syntax, non-literal language, and story-telling, all of which form a secure foundation for reading comprehension and decoding[8].

Learning expectations shift during the transition to upper primary and middle school years for 9- to 12-year-olds. Students require:

• A high level of literacy competency to use more complex sentences

• The ability to switch efficiently between topics and maintain connections with new information

• Increased vocabulary knowledge and the ability to retain new words

• Efficient transfer of new knowledge to literacy tasks like comprehension and sentence formation in oral and written language

Social communication also matures, and students' peer relationships require them to be able to understand and use slang terms, sarcasm, jokes, ambiguity, discussion, and debate[9].

Challenges meeting classroom expectations

As the language demands on students increase as they progress through school, students with DLD will struggle without appropriate support. Teachers may notice poorer outcomes in **behaviour**, **social interactions and educational progress**, all of which impact negatively on a child's wellbeing and quality of life[10].

Behaviour

Students with DLD may use strategies to try and mask their learning difficulties by mimicking their peers, procrastinating, and rushing through work, but these become less effective as the classroom language demands increase. Language challenges may also be hidden beneath negative surface behaviours. A student may be disengaged, disorganised, act out, misinterpret information, present poor written work, have inconsistent listening skills, and avoid literacy tasks in reading and comprehension. However, this may be because that they do not understand the task, are struggling to explain what they mean, are feeling anxious, or perceive the work to be too difficult[11].

Social interactions

Like oral language competence, early social competence is linked to later academic achievement[12]. Social-emotional problems become more evident in children with DLD as social experiences become increasingly challenging and more complex through the primary school years. When a teacher or parent can recognise these social-emotional difficulties and provide appropriate language and social skills interventions, this may help improve the student's quality of life as they progress through primary school[13].

Academic progress and achievement

Oral language and literacy skills are potential predictors of performance and provide access to learning opportunities across the curriculum at school[14]. Students with DLD may be at greater risk of academic failure compared with their typically developing peers as curriculum demands increase. While students who are reading well learn more word meanings and build their vocabulary, which in turn fosters more reading, students with DLD often start with inadequate vocabularies, will be slower to read, and will read less. As a result, they are slower to develop vocabulary knowledge and progress in reading[15].

Classroom strategies for primary and intermediate school

The following classroom strategies provide students with an opportunity for successful academic achievement in oral and written language-based activities, while reducing the likelihood of self-perceived failure and poor self-esteem. This facilitates positive social and behaviour skills, reducing disengagement and mental health factors[16].

Provide opportunities to understand and use curricular vocabulary

It is important to reinforce words that are essential for understanding a topic by:

- Selecting up to 10 words that are essential for understanding new topic content

- Prioritising vocabulary in each topic as 'must know' (essential and needs to be systematically taught), 'should know' (highly significant words to a topic), or 'could know' (low frequency or 'extension' words)

- Repeating the word multiple times, as students need between five and twelve repetitions to learn a new word

- Explicitly teaching or pre-teaching topic-specific words

Teachers can also use different approaches to supporting students' understanding of essential vocabulary. This could involve creating visual representations, such as symbols, pictures, word art, graphs, diagrams, and timelines, or providing topic related descriptions rather than definitions to give a better context about word meanings. For example, the word 'improvise' is defined as to 'compose, utter extempore, provide or construct extemporaneously', whereas a description of its meaning might be 'to make something you need by using whatever is available at that moment'.

Another way to support students to understand and use curricular vocabulary is to present new words in both spoken and written form across a range of resources, using video clips, text books, posters, poems, word walls, or audio clips. Teachers can also provide opportunities for students to make connections with new words in different scenarios using small group discussions, quizzes, worksheets, brainstorming, or word webs to find related words, concepts or semantic links.

Teachers can also use literacy strategies that connect vocabulary with oral language, phonological awareness, and writing by:

- Utilising tactile techniques, such as providing materials with texture so students can trace over or form letters (playdough, sand, finger writing, chalk on a blackboard)

- Using kinaesthetic techniques like whole-body movements to learn words and concepts (jumps for syllables beats, writing in the air, dancing to rhythms)

- Use concrete objects that involve manipulation like chunky letters or sticky notes

- Teaching aspects of sound (first sound, number of syllables, or rhyming words) as well as meaning when introducing new words.

Modify the teacher's use of written language when providing instructions and curricular information

Teachers can reduce the complexity of written language by:

- Using short sentences without embedded clauses or multiple ideas (one key idea per sentence)

- Simplifying the language but not the content

- Using sequenced steps with numbers or bullet points to reduce density of written text.

Teachers can also make vocabulary more accessible in task instructions and curricular materials by:

- Using familiar words where possible

- Providing descriptions for unfamiliar task-related words such as 'analyse'

- Explaining and expanding on the meaning of figurative or ambiguous language

- Highlighting key words so they are obvious for learning

When preparing handouts and PowerPoint slides or writing on the whiteboard, teachers can break up text using tables, headings, and boxes, adding visual aids and icons next to the text, and creating mind maps for ideas and associations. Written instructions for tasks, assignments, and homework can be made more accessible by:

- Giving a range of model answers to provide realistic examples of what is expected

- Simplifying written instructions, summarising main instructions at the beginning of a task, and avoiding multi-part instructions

- Including a written plan or outline, highlighting and assisting with the understanding of key words.

Maximise accessibility to the teacher's verbal instructions

One way to do this is to reduce the students' need to simultaneously write, listen, and read by providing written notes from the lesson, and repeat back the information more than once. Teachers can also adapt their use of nonverbal cues to improve students' understanding by:

- Using intonation, gestures, body language, and eye contact effectively

- Adjusting the rate and volume of speech delivery

- Facing the class while speaking to them.

When inviting verbal responses from the class or directly asking questions of individual students, it is very important to allow extra time to process and organise their response – at least 3-5 seconds. It can also be useful to encourage 'hands-down' thinking time for the whole class before asking for responses.

It is important to repeat instructions, using the same words to avoid confusion. It can also be useful to suggest that students repeat back the information to themselves or a peer. Teachers can encourage students to self-advocate if they do not understand the instructions, and allow opportunities for clarification or questions. Avoid using ambiguous and indirect language when explaining key terms or content, or when giving instructions. For example, using direct language such as 'put your hand up to ask a question' is preferable to more ambiguous language like 'I'm waiting to see those students using patient hands to ask a question'.

Visual tools and planners can also be used to reinforce verbal instructions and reminders. These could be used to describe daily routines, or set out the structure of lessons. Calendars can be used to remind students about due dates for homework and assignments, to advertise events and occasions, and to capture students' goals.

Encourage collaboration between teachers, families, and other professionals

Strong partnerships between teachers, the student's family and whānau, and professionals such as speech pathologists can strengthen support of the student's individual learning profile. Sharing information, ideas, and approaches:

- helps to develop a strong working relationship between professionals and families

- supports the transfer of key information about students' communication needs between the classroom and home

- leads to the development of content (vocabulary and curricular context) that is relevant to specialist therapy goals

- encourages new topics and vocabulary being revisited and reinforced at home, to consolidate learning.

Endnotes

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