



An tSeirbhís Náisiúnta
Síceolaíochta Oideachais | National
Educational
Psychological Service

Children with Language Difficulties in Primary School- Teacher Guidelines & Strategies for In-Class Support



This NEPS Good Practice Guide was developed by educational psychologists. It is based on current knowledge in this area. It is intended as a guide only. Not all the suggestions here will apply to any one student or situation.

Contents

Section

Page

Guidelines for teachers working with children who have language difficulties	3
Language difficulties- General strategies for the classroom	4
Strategies to help children who have difficulties with receptive language	6
Strategies to help children who have difficulties with expressive language	7
Strategies to help young children with have difficulties with expressive language	8
Suitable activities to develop language skills	9
Helping older children understand text (5 th & 6 th class)	10
Using Non-Verbal Strengths to Support Learning	11
Resources for Children with Language and Communication Difficulties	14

Other NEPS Resources in this series:

- **Activities to Develop Expressive Language Skills** (primary, 7 years +)
- **Activities to Develop Receptive Language and Comprehension Skills** (typically for children aged 7-12 years)
- **Language Group Activities** (typically for children aged 4-10 years and those at early stages of language development)

Guidelines for Teachers working with Children who have Language Difficulties

Children with language difficulties may have problems with expressive language (spoken words, articulation, word-finding, vocabulary, semantic confusions etc.) or with receptive language (understanding, recall etc.) or both. The following guidelines, many of which will already be part of everyday classroom practice, are presented as suggestions that should be adapted and modified as appropriate.

It is important that children are seated in places where it is easy for them to attend, away from distractions such as doors and windows and close to the teacher. Sitting alongside others who attend and participate well provides positive peer pressure and role models. Using individual children's names encourages concentration and participation.

As children with language problems often have poor attention and listening skills, it is essential to double-check their grasp of important class instructions. Information may need to be summarised, simplified or paraphrased. Directions should be broken down into steps and their understanding of key words/phrases should be reviewed.

When new class topics are introduced, children with language difficulties may need particular help with key vocabulary - in both spoken and written forms. Where possible, try to use pictures and concrete materials to explain new words and ideas. New vocabulary and concepts should be reviewed frequently and shared with parents for reinforcement at home, as appropriate.

Understanding and remembering what is read can be problematic for children with language difficulties, even when they are skilled at de-coding text. They should be encouraged to look back over text to support their comprehension and should be taught to identify and underline key-words.

Encouraging children to put into their own words, what has been said, taught or read develops their understanding and auditory memory. It can also extend their utterances.

Children with language difficulties have problems with time concepts and sequences. Today, yesterday, tomorrow, days of the week, months and seasons may be difficult to grasp and recall. Sequencing activities will be especially useful to them. They may have difficulty remembering the days and times of particular lessons/activities and will consequently often appear unprepared or confused. They should be encouraged to use class timetables and personal checklists to improve their planning and organisation skills.

Children need to know that it is alright to ask for help, even if they are not sure how to phrase their questions. They should be encouraged to give a visual signal to let the teacher know if they are confused.

Language Difficulties- General Strategies for the Classroom

- Recognise that a lot of the child's behaviours may result from their language difficulties and that the child may not be intentionally unco-operative or difficult.
- Aim for a short concentrated span of attention instead of a long period. A few short concentrated periods of attention are more beneficial than one long inattentive one.
- Speak slowly to the child, this allows more time for him/her to process the information. Give him/her plenty of time to follow the question and then to think of the answer. Don't put pressure on him/her to be quick.
- Get the child's attention before giving a general instruction to the class, e.g. preface the instructions by "listen" and establish eye contact with the language impaired child to make sure they are listening, or preface the instructions with the child's name.
- Have the child sit near you in the classroom to minimise distraction.
- Simplify general instructions given e.g. an instruction like a) "Take out your books and turn to page 20, do you see the top of the page? Do the questions in A", could be shortened to "Work books, page 20, questions in A".
- Use gesture to augment the language. This will help the language impaired child to follow instructions.
- Ensure he/she understands an instruction correctly before he/she attempts it, don't let it pass. Repeat the instructions slowly and work through it with the child. Alternatively, if the child is asked a question to which he/she gives an inappropriate response, again repeat the question, emphasising the important word, and also provide the answer, thereby providing the appropriate model. For example:

Teacher: "Who is bringing you to swimming?"

Child: "In the car"

Teacher: "Who is bringing you to swimming (pause) daddy is".

- If a child appears to have difficulty understanding a particular phrase or sentence for example ("Ann is as white as a sheet, she must be sick") rephrase it ("Ann is very pale, she must be sick"). Don't assume that children understand these types of phrases.
- Be aware of the language you use. Language impaired children have difficulty with comprehension concepts and quite often have poor vocabulary. When asked if they understand they will frequently reply yes, even though they are unclear.

- Be aware if a language impaired child fails to comprehend an instruction it may be that he/she a) does not understand one of the concepts in the instruction e.g. first, last, before, after etc. b) the instruction may be too long i.e. contains more information carrying units than the child is able to process and retain. Information carrying units are the bits of information that must be understood to comprehend an instruction e.g. in the following instruction “The children nearest the window go outside”, there are 3 information carrying units and the child would also have to understand the concepts of nearest and outside.

If you know what aspect of the instruction was not understood, work on that concept or vocabulary.

- Use visual material to help the child in language tasks

Represent new vocabulary and concepts using objects and pictures.

Show the child rather than only explaining verbally.

Use pictures to show the main point of a story. This will help the language impaired child follow the sequence of events, answer questions on the story and summarise it.

Use picture calendars to help the child remember the school routine, special events at school and home and general special days.

Encourage the child and parent to record messages, significant events in a diary, which is brought to school each day. This can be particularly useful if a child's speech is difficult to understand and can help the teacher understand the news the child is expressing.

Similarities and differences and categorisation – show the child the items to be compared using pictures when working on odd man out tasks. Extend the topic being discussed. Language impaired children do not generalise easily e.g. if discussing clothes – include descriptive words like silky, woolly, types of clothes – party, school, uniform etc. Relate these to weather, seasons, occupation etc. Approaching a task in this way extends the child's language experience. By using objects or pictures the language impaired child is more likely to retain the information.

Strategies to Help Children who have Difficulties with Receptive Language (understanding)

- Words such as “before, after, if, except”, may be very difficult for the child to understand. Demonstrate the meaning of these words in a simple fashion e.g. “We have lunch after our breakfast”, “We all go swimming except Mummy”.
- Following instructions: Before a child can comprehend an instruction such as “If you have not finished question 4 before the time the bells rings, you can finish it after the break”, he/she must first understand the concept of “before/after”.
- Check that the child can understand and follow simple instructions involving concepts such as 1st, 2nd, 3rd etc. left/right/ all, one of /except etc.
- Memory games: Ask the child to gather up some items from a different room, “Bring me a biscuit, a can of coke and a pen” and follow directions such as “Touch your nose, clap your hands and count to ten”.
- Passive sentences: Check if the child understands sentences such as “John was beaten by Peter” (who was beaten?), “The rat was caught by the mouse” (who was caught?)

Coping Strategies

Some children with language difficulties will improve significantly, while others may always have some degree of language difficulty. Therefore, it helps to promote ways of coping with the language difficulties at an early age. The following may help:

- a) Encourage the child to repeat the instructions quietly to him/herself as he/she hears it.
- b) Encourage the child to ask for repetition or request clarification.
- c) Teach them to indicate when communication has broken down e.g. by gesturing for the speaker to stop or by saying that they don't understand.
- d) People working with language impaired children should augment their verbal communication with gestures to help the language impaired child to understand.

Strategies to help Children who have Difficulties with Expressive Language

1. Some children need help to learn to adapt their speech to suit different situations. Drama sessions, circle-time, role play and social skills groups help to develop this skill. Involve the child in tasks with others where negotiation and co-operation skills are required. Practise turn-taking and conversational skills.
2. Encourage the re-telling of stories or events. Spend specific time asking them to re-tell a sequence of events. If they find this hard, talk it through with them first, perhaps with picture cues, and then ask them to tell someone else.
3. Stop half-way through a story and encourage them to predict what might happen next. Discuss the characters and the relationships "Who does he remind you of?" "What do you think he looks like?" etc.
4. Young children often need to develop their confidence in using language. Using a friendly puppet or familiar toy can help them make a start. They can be encouraged to tell the toy to carry out actions, perhaps with a lot of prompting at first. For example, "Where will I put the clown? On the bed or on the table?" "Will the train go under or over the bridge?"

A game where something is hidden from the puppet/toy and the child has to give directions to find it, is also useful. Once confidence is gained, this game can be played with a small group of children directing one-another to find the "treasure".

5. Books with pictures and photographs of familiar objects and activities from home give children confidence and remind them of things to talk about.
6. Play picture lotto or snap games in small groups where children take turns to call out the names of the cards.
7. As the child gains confidence, you can set up situations where the child needs to ask for something to carry out an activity e.g. organising a painting activity but not giving out paint brushes.
8. Taking messages to other classrooms/teachers/pupils builds up confidence and gives children opportunities to use their spoken language outside the classroom.
9. Story plans are useful for children who have difficulty composing essays and using an extended vocabulary. A format should be used that prompts children to think about who, what, where; beginning, middle and end and helps them to organise thoughts and words.

Strategies to Help Young Children with Expressive Language Difficulties

Expansion

The teacher expands on what the child has said, in a positive way e.g. if the child says “Man drive” the teacher responds, “Yes, the man is driving” or “The man is driving a car”. The idea is that if later the child is asked “What’s happening?” they may produce a better response.

Forced Alternatives

The child is given a choice of answering within the question, in the hope that they will give an answer.

E.g. “Is it a little brick or a big brick?”

“Shall we put it in the back or in the front?”

“Do you want orange juice or milk?”

Repetition or Elicited Response

The teacher models the required behaviour or response and asks the child to repeat it, perhaps after a delay. This may be useful when teaching new vocabulary.

Role Reversal

The adult and child swap roles, so that the child has a turn to “be teacher”. Young children find this quite difficult at first e.g. the teacher names a picture/object for the child to find and then the child asks the teacher to find another one.

Modelling

The teacher gives many examples of the required behaviour/word etc. in the hope that the child will assimilate it and later produce it spontaneously.

Sentence Closure

The teacher models a word or sentence and then tries to elicit it from the child by requiring the child to finish the sentence e.g. “I’m drinking tea, you’re drinking.....”

“WH” Questions

“WH” questions include what, when and why. They are useful for checking on a child’s knowledge but used too often can appear threatening, because they put a child on the spot. Often they are not true questions as the child has experienced them at home. At home a parent asks a question because they do not know what the child wants e.g. “Do you want a drink?” but at school the questions are rarely genuine. The child knows that the teacher already know the answer so, until they learn the rules of this new game, they may wonder why they are being asked.

Open Questions

Open questions and encouraging noises such as “Really?”, “mmmmm?” often produce more response than a closed question which allows the child to respond with just Yes or No.

Suitable Activities for Developing Language Skills

Sequencing

- Copying rhythms. Make simple rhythms using a musical instrument and ask the child to copy. Clap or tap-out a rhythm to copy
- Repeating digits, words or sentences. Send the child on errands that require him/her to remember and repeat instructions or lists.
- Revise days of the week, months, times-tables etc. Learn poems, songs, pieces of prose etc.
- Use sequencing cards to reinforce verb tenses i.e. she has eaten/she is eating/she will eat. Review irregular past tenses (drank, slept, ate, wrote, rode, swam, went etc.). Always encourage the child to put new words/verbs into sentences.
- Re-tell simple stories such as a visit to granny, try to get sequence of actions correct.
- Ask the child to sequence cartoon-strip pictures and then to tell their story.
- Have the child give running commentaries to real events on TV (turn down the sound on sporting events, news clips, cartoons, etc.) or to events that are mimed or acted out.

Verbal Reasoning

- Devising/re-telling instructions to explain how something is done e.g. to make a cup of tea; to clean your teeth; to get ready for school; to add two numbers.
- Games that involve identifying the “odd man out” in a group of words:
Dog, Cat, Angel (semantic)
Cake, Make, Trip, Bake (rhyming difference)
Ball, Bush, Bone, Toy (initial sound difference)
- Challenges and competitions to find the most words in a given category i.e. things we wear; animals in the zoo; things we eat; sports activities etc.
- Use pictures/story-boards to generate discussions to explore cause and effect relationships - encourage the child to fully verbalise their explanations.
- Games that involve discussing opposites, similarities, synonyms, superlatives: in what way are a wheel and a ball alike; what is the opposite of generous; tiny, tinier, tiniest etc.

Listening

- Tasks that require the child to follow verbal instructions to draw a picture/design.
- True/false statements, missing words and “silly sentences” – the child must listen carefully to decide/spot the mistake.
- Exercises that involve listening to a story, news report, poem etc., answering questions to test recall and/or recounting it to others.
- Describe an object without naming it and the child must guess what the object is. “I spy” type games. Odd man out games can be done with pictures or objects, similarities and differences

Grammatical Difficulties

If a particular point of grammar is constantly incorrect, put the child in the situation of hearing the correct word a few times in sequence, and then encourage him to make up a few sentences using the particular word.

Helping Older Children Understand Text (5th & 6th class)

Key Wording and Mind Mapping

A constant message given to those teaching the students with language difficulties is to focus on the core vocabulary. The key word approach and mind mapping provides a way of doing this.

Text can be prepared by **key wording**.

For example the pupils can be encouraged to:

- Read the simple sentences first then the whole text
- Underline the simple sentences
- Underline key words using a different colour
- Reading through the pre prepared text reading only the underlined words marked by the teacher
- They then read the full text

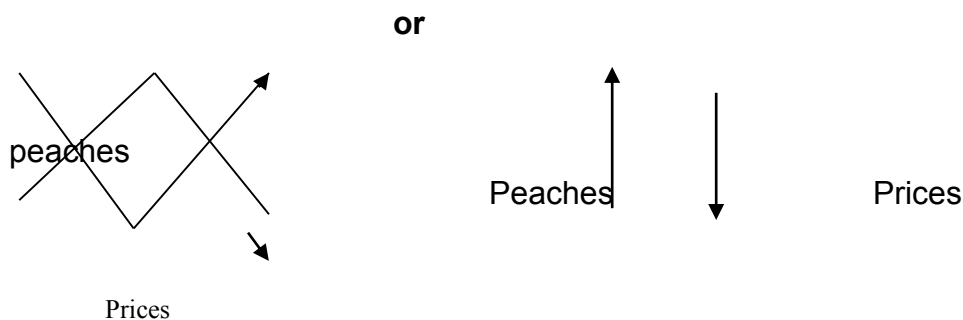
Pupils understanding can also be enhanced through **Mind mapping**.

For example, encourage pupils to:

- Draw a diagram of the text
- Identify the subject
- Identify a key point being made by the subject
- Continue to add key points made by the subject
- Link subjects by using a different coloured pen

For example:

When peaches first appear in the grocery shops, their price is quite high. At the height of the season, their price actually decreases. As the season nears its conclusion, their price increases again.



Using Non-Verbal Strengths to Support Learning

The key approach to supporting children with language impairments is using the visual to support the verbal. There are rough estimates that 46% of our brain capacity is used in visual processing. We are more visual than we realise. Teachers and parents will often say that the pupil understands everything they say, but in fact, the child is using little information from the language, but a lot from the situation. These strengths should be encouraged and used in teaching and learning.

Always encourage **visual/verbal**

 looking/listening

 showing/telling

Visual approaches begins with objects. This is a teaching approach used by speech and language therapists and often called non-directive play therapy. This parallels the child's activity on pre-selected material (play figures and situation objects, i.e. those needed for a park scenario) with language that reflects back to the child what they are doing in their play, bringing the verbal back to the visual.

The child's abilities to recognise a more complex visual pattern such as a symbol opens up more possibilities as they get older. Their interest in pictures allows an expansion in the amount of visual referencing possible. Gestures and sign also, parallel the verbal and are used with the most severely language impaired.

The range of visual representations include:

sign

object

situation

image

scene

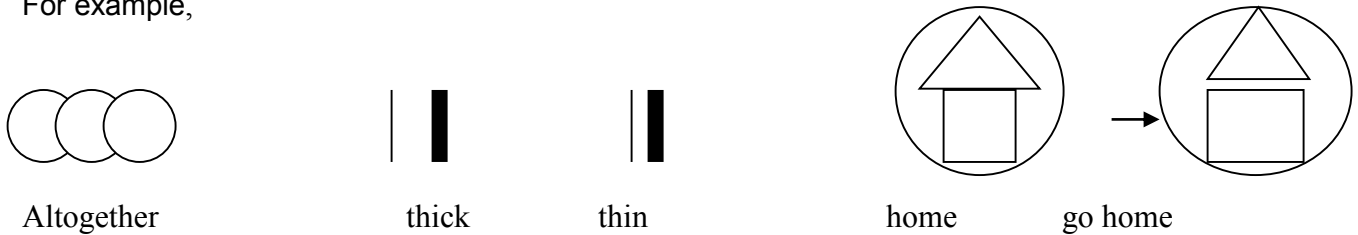
symbol

diagram

Visual Symbols

Ideally all schools would benefit from a Makaton book of symbols to help children by using visual prompts, cues and giving visual reminders.

For example,



Images and symbols are being used more widely. They are now increasingly combined in computer software which extends into secondary school.

Visual teaching programmes include:

- Speech viewer
- Letterland
- Nuffield dyspraxia programme
- Cued articulation
- LDA cards

Support approaches include:

Work space	Symbol labelling of containers Grid on table Time line for the day's activities
Task	Physical arrangement of materials Cards that symbolise materials needed Cards that give the order of the activity Cards that give a picture of the activity

Example of Worksheet, supported by visuals/ symbols

Task: Make a collage in the shape of a bird.

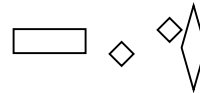
1. Draw a bird



2. Cut it out



3. Using material cut pieces and stick to the bird



4. Glue it onto the bird



5. Stick it on the page

6. Put on drying table and read a book



Use of colour

The use of colour can also be powerful. Words can be emphasised through colour, onsets and rimes of words can be colour coded, words can be segmented into syllables, onsets and rimes can be segmented by using coloured lines (an/im/al).

Resources for Children with Language and Communication Difficulties

1. **Black Sheep Press** – this is a resource and has sections on speech and language, it is available on CD Rom and is bought directly from Black Sheep Press.
2. **Listening Comprehension Series**, Lower, Middle, Upper – this can be used to develop listening and attention. It is available through Primary–Ed.
3. **Oral Language Series**, Lower, Middle, Upper – can be used for facilitating expression and comprehension of oral directions – available from Primary–Ed.
4. **Practical Language Activities** and **Auditory Processing Activities** – Materials for clinicians and teachers, these two books are packed full of worksheets. They require some reading skills, but could be adapted and incorporated into games.
5. **Clinical Language Intervention Programme – CLIP** workbooks. There is a series of these books, each one focusing on a certain aspect of language e.g. syntax, semantics, pragmatics - can be used as homework sheets.
6. A series of activity books by **Jean Gilliam DeGaetano** focus on listening skills, auditory processing and direction skills. This may be especially useful for the older children in primary school.
7. **Visualise Verbalises** by Nancy Bell, this is a well- recognised programme for children that have difficulties describing items. It encourages the child to visualise the item first before attempting to describe it.