

Language Difficulties Explained

The table below outlines common areas of difficulty with understanding and using spoken and written language. It also covers understanding and using language in social contexts and associated cognitive difficulties.

Area of difficulty	Impact	Classroom Support Strategies
Instructional Language	Poor understanding of maths and science work.	Use visual support (i.e. pictures or written steps) or practical demonstration to support spoken instructions.
Understanding of complex directions including following instructions relating to time, condition, and sequence.	Appears lost or confused in response to instructions or copies what others do.	Use peer demonstration of complex instructions to model what to do. Use sensitive pairing of pupils with peers to discuss tasks.
Difficulty following instructions involving language concepts for example, <i>before</i> / <i>after</i> , <i>next to</i> , <i>either</i> / <i>neither</i> .	Finds some types of verbal/written questions difficult to answer.	Promote a classroom culture that welcomes questions.
Verbal reasoning / inference	Poor understanding of how time affects organisation, e.g., does not understand timetables or calendars.	Explicit teaching of concepts may be needed, e.g., concepts denoting direction, location, condition, etc.
Difficulty using language to reason, including making inferences, understanding cause and effect relationships, making predictions or drawing conclusions.	May miss out on implied meaning in conversation or discussion leading to exclusion or persecution from peers. May not consider the consequences of actions in decision making or problem solving leading to conflict or accidents e.g., may not make safe decisions, may not consider consequences of decisions for others.	Be explicit in communication; do not expect pupils to 'take the hint'. Some pupils may benefit from structured support at lunch time, e.g., film club, computer club etc. Explore the consequences of actions with attention to both the resulting events and feelings of others, e.g., Try drama techniques to explore feelings such as Hot-Seating, Tableau, Hassle Lines, Conscience Alley. Illustrate the process of problem solving by helping pupils think through the consequences of different courses of action, e.g., Try Fishbone Strategy for exploring cause and effect.
		In some cases students may benefit from Social Stories to raise levels of awareness of personal behaviour.

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Verbal reasoning / inference Cont'd	Difficulty with learning tasks that require prediction or inference to draw conclusions e.g., understanding narrative. Poor reading comprehension.	Ensure pupils understand lower order questions (i.e. who, what, when, where) before introducing the more challenging higher order questions that require inference, analysis, synthesis e.g., <i>What does that behaviour suggest about the character?</i> Encourage prediction skills by asking pupils 'what is likely to happen next' during stories, e.g., <i>'From what we have learned so far about these characters, how do you think they may react differently? Why do you think that?'</i> Support pupils to make clear links between their existing knowledge and new information being introduced.
	Lack of fluency in expressing ideas.	Use visual ways of representing information to make explicit the relationship between elements of information, e.g., Venn Diagrams – support comparison, Flow charts – support cause/effect etc. Give the pupil extra time to formulate responses (Try out the 10 second rule – give 10 seconds to think before you expect a response).
Word finding difficulties	Reluctance to participate in whole class discussion or avoids speaking in groups.	Use sensitive peer pairing to enable students to discuss answers with partner before sharing answers with the wider class group.
	Uses incorrect words or coined words to name items e.g., <i>windmill – 'big wheel thingy'.</i>	Use word banks/word books to support descriptive writing.
	May find it difficult to give specific answers/ opts out of answering or overuses ambiguous language, e.g., <i>'Don't know,' 'Yeah me too' 'It's that thing'.</i> May call-out in discussion, failing to wait turn because of fear of forgetting word names.	

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Poor vocabulary	Poor understanding of topic vocabulary affects academic attainment.	Use a working word wall with key topic vocabulary, or a personalised key vocabulary book encouraging active participation in word learning, e.g., word-definition matching, fill in the missing words etc.
	Understanding of vocabulary appears to worsen over time.	
	Finds it difficult to learn new vocabulary.	Use mind-maps to depict relationships in meaning between words.
	Poor reading comprehension; may read words but not understand the meaning.	Introduce and sign-post new words at the beginning of lesson and discuss meaning in context. Check pupils' understanding of vocabulary used in teaching e.g., What does evaluate mean?
	Over-use of basic verbs (e.g., went, walk) and limited use of descriptive words in writing.	Provide a glossary of key subject vocabulary linked to topic of study. Use word banks/word books to support descriptive writing.
Spoken language Difficulty using and understanding sentence structures (grammar)	Appears literal; fails to interpret double meaning of words.	Explain multiple meaning words, and be aware of their use in lessons.
	Poor understanding of idiomatic language or language-based humour.	Take opportunities to explore the meaning of figurative language (i.e. idioms and jokes).
	Uses short sentences and has difficulty using language forms which require more complex sentences, e.g., explanations, persuasion.	Use writing frames or speaking frames to support speaking and writing.
	Persistent grammatical errors in written work.	May need explicit teaching of key linguistic devices, e.g., connectives; <i>therefore, so, although etc.</i>
	Presents with difficulty understanding the meaning of particular sentences in both listening and reading including negatives, reversible passive sentences and ellipses.	
	Reluctant to participate in whole class discussion or avoids speaking in group.	Use sensitive peer pairing to enable students to discuss answers with partner before sharing answers with the wider class group.

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Social understanding	Responds well to predictable routines and may get anxious in the face of change or transition from one activity/environment to another.	Some students may benefit from a timetable of weekly lessons indicating any changes to usual routines. Student may benefit from Visual Lesson Planner that sign-posts the sequence of learning activities in the lesson.
	May not understand that opinions are not necessarily 'right' or 'wrong.'	Encourage use of role play/debate to explore different points of view e.g., hot-seating.
	Rigid thinking restricts flexibility in problem solving.	Use visual representations such as flow charts or decision trees to consider and evaluate different actions and their consequences.
	Appears vulnerable due to failure to recognise intentions/motivations of others, e.g., deception.	Use comic strips or story boards with thought bubbles to explore the possible motivations of characters in literature or meaning of jokes/comments made by peers.
	Struggles to understand difference between banter and bullying.	
	Literal understanding of double meaning e.g., idioms, sarcasm or humour. This can lead to misunderstandings between the student and adults and peers.	Take opportunities to explore the meaning of different figures of speech /sarcasm used in coursework and discussion; be aware that your own use of these will need explanation.
	May not understand implied meaning or indirect requests, e.g., 'That phone is <i>probably</i> for you' – to request the person answer the phone.	Be direct and explicit in your communication. Do not assume pupil has the skills to 'read between the lines' or 'take the hint'.
	May appear 'rude' due to failure to recognise expected/appropriate behaviour in the situation.	Some pupils may benefit from social stories for situations that are causing difficulty. Some drama techniques may be helpful to illustrate how others think/feel in a given situation, e.g., Freeze Frame.
		Make explicit the unspoken rules of new or unfamiliar situations.

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Social use of language	Presents with difficulty knowing how to join in group discussion/conversation.	Make student roles explicit during group work (e.g., scribe, interviewer, etc). Assign roles according to student's strengths.
	May not wait turn in discussion; talks over others OR may not participate at all.	Provide clear 'rules' for effective discussion. Assign specific roles in group work to ensure all pupils have an equal opportunity to contribute.
	Lacks awareness of the non-verbal cues that reflect the interest or understanding of listener in conversation.	Use role play as an opportunity to explore the emotional meaning reflected by facial expression and body language.
	Poor interpersonal negotiation skills e.g., resolving conflict or reaching compromise.	Use small group work to teach the skills needed for negotiation
Non verbal communication	Fails to modify manner of speaking or behaving according to audience or situation i.e., speaks to head teacher and mate in the same way.	Make explicit the unspoken rules of new or unfamiliar situations.
	May not interpret meaning of emotions conveyed using tone of voice, facial expression or body language.	Use role play (with attention to both words and body language) to explore appropriate ways of responding in different situations.
	Poor understanding of the meaning of non-verbal communication may lead to miscommunication, e.g., laughs when peer shares sad news.	Use small group interventions to explore understanding of emotional vocabulary and emotional meaning conveyed using non-verbal communication, e.g., identify meaning of facial expressions and body language.
	Limited use of non-verbal communication to convey emotional meaning.	Use Social Stories to explore non-verbal behaviours in response to different situations.
	May not use appropriate interpersonal space (i.e., too close or awkward distance) or eye contact (i.e., too much / too little).	Use role play and drama to identify the meaning of non-verbal communication to convey emotion, e.g., *Hassle Lines, Tableau, Freeze Frame.
	Vulnerable to bullying due to failure to interpret or use appropriate non-verbal skills in interaction.	Use small group intervention to explore meaning and appropriate use of non-verbal communication.
		Some pupils may benefit from structured support at lunch time e.g., film club, computer club. Provide a mentor to discuss problems that may arise.

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Auditory memory Memory for what we have just heard, for example in a lesson, in conversation with a friend etc.	Frequently 'forgets' instructions or only completes part of instruction or task. Unable to retain relevant information leading to poor deductive reasoning skills.	Present instructions in small steps with visual support (diagrams or written steps) or practical demonstration of complex instructions. Support the content of lessons visually (i.e., PowerPoint).
Speed of Processing How quickly we can process information coming in, e.g., class instructions, delivery of teaching, peer discussion, reading. The impact of problems with working memory capacity and a pupil's speed of processing information become more apparent during secondary school.	May not follow lengthy verbal instruction /whole class delivery. Loses track when reading. Finds pronouns particularly difficult to follow. May find it hard to learn rote sequences of information e.g., days, months, seasons. Loses interest or appears inattentive on account of forgetting.	Create a classroom culture where 'asking' is welcome. Use questioning to check understanding. Explicit teaching of rote sequences e.g., days, months, seasons. Use sensitive peer pairing to enable pupils to discuss tasks with partner before starting.

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