Module 5: Classroom Strategies for students with DLD

In module 2 we developed an understanding of Language Disorder and the implications for student learning. We will now focus more closely on supporting students with Language Disorder in the classroom setting.

There is a close relationship between language and school success. Language is needed to follow instructions, express ideas, and build relationships with peers. For students with Language Disorder, these everyday classroom experiences can feel daunting and become a roadblock to success.

Students with Language Disorder present with a range of difficulties that impact on their participation within the classroom. These also limit access to the curriculum and academic outcomes.

In this module we will examine a range of strategies for students with Language Disorder, which can be grouped into three main categories:

- Communication
- Curriculum, and
- Environment

Communication

Effective teacher communication is necessary for students to succeed in the classroom. Students with Language Disorder can have difficulties understanding, processing information, or keeping up with communication in the classroom. This section of the module will outline explicit verbal, non-verbal and 9 written communication strategies.

Verbal Strategies

Giving Instruction

The majority of communication in the classroom is verbal. It is important to match classroom instructions with the student's level of understanding. Gain the student's attention first, particularly when they are concentrating on a task. They are more likely to follow instructions that are explicit and concise. Breaking information into manageable chunks can also support understanding, while pauses, volume and intonation can emphasise key words. The number of steps in an instruction may need to be reduced to help the student successfully complete the task or activity. When possible, use a visual to support the verbal instructions. For more information regarding visual supports, please see our SALDA handout at the end of the module.

Questioning

Questioning is a key technique to support learning. It enables educators to check a student's understanding and encourage them to be actively involved in the learning process.

Whenever possible, provide students with the questions or type of questions they will be asked. This gives them additional time to process the information and formulate a response. If the student doesn't understand the question, rephrase the question so it matches their level of understanding. The question may need to be shorter, simpler or broken into chunks. Some students may start to answer before listening to the whole question. Provide a cue to indicate they need to wait and listen before answering.

Pre-teaching

The speed of classroom activities can be challenging for students with Language Disorder. Pre-teaching concepts help students prepare for discussions and participate more actively. Consider teaching key vocabulary where possible. For more information regarding pre- teaching vocabulary, please see our SALDA handout at the end of the module.

Non-verbal Strategies

While communication is often considered to be what we say, it is also how we say it. Non- verbal communication provides additional information the spoken message and aids understanding. When speaking with the student, position yourself in front of the student. This may need to be at their eye level. Gain and maintain the student's attention and give them eye contact when speaking. Sign language and gestures can also be used to support learning and language development. They should always be used with spoken language to reinforce what is being said.

Written Strategies

Like verbal communication, it is often necessary to adjust written communication for students with Language Disorder. Large amounts of information can be chunked into smaller, visually distinct sections. Reduce visual clutter, increase the amount of white space, and ensure the information is concise and essential to the task. Borders and colours can also act as signpost for relevant information. Alternatively, highlight key information or questions. Graphics and visual icons can also be added to support the text.

For more information on written strategies, please see our SALDA handout at the end of the module.

Curriculum

This section of the module will highlight curriculum-based adjustments that teaching staff can make to support students with Language Disorder. Some of these may already be

utilised in the classroom and reinforce or support current practices. While others may be new and challenge how adjustments could be made for students with Language Disorder.

These strategies will focus on teaching tools, modifying tasks and organisation.

Teaching Tools

There are more ways to structure teaching than anybody could count. Below is a selection of strategies that support the strengths for students with Language Disorder to learn in the classroom.

Peer Collaboration — strategically pair students that will encourage students with Language Disorder to brainstorm and contribute ideas. Peers can often communicate and interact on a level that is easier to understand. Consider using a "think-pair-share" model for increased class participation.

Think Aloud — teacher modelling is beneficial for students' language expansion, reading comprehension and increased engagement. Teacher modelling allows students to hear examples of different language structures in their correct form and context. It also assists in supporting students to make inferences.

Multisensory Instruction —Providing information through different sensory input reinforces learning and strengthens students' understanding. Include concrete materials to provide further visual and tactile information.

Give choices - wherever possible, give choices for students' own learning such as working alone or in a group. Giving students ownership and responsibility for their own learning increases motivation and independence. Incorporating students' interests, strengths, skills and gifts also encourages participation and engagement.

Notetaking – Explicitly teaching notetaking skills, including filtering, classifying and organising information assists consolidating lots of information. If writing is difficult, allow students with Language Disorder to record the lesson or use a notetaking app.

Asking for help - Asking for help is important for positive academic outcomes. Try using levelled questions or visual prompts, such as flipping a token, to indicate when a student needs help. Remember to reward each attempt.

Task Modification

Students with Language Disorder may require significant adjustments for assessments and exams. This could be due to difficulties with their language, literacy, numeracy or other developmental domains. It's important to remember adjustments are a legal requirement for all schools when supporting students with disabilities.

Due to difficulties with reading and writing, students may require a staff member to read aloud printed text and transcribe oral responses where possible. Alternative modes for assessment should also be considered, such as adapting a written task to a video response or allowing students to pre-record oral presentations so that they can be

broken down and recorded in chunks. It may also be helpful to modify the number, type and complexity of questions on written assignments.

Consider the types of questions included in assessment tasks. Closed type questions make question-answering easier, as they narrow the depth of curriculum and enable students to better identify the focus. Open-ended questions can be more difficult to answer, although the student with Language Disorder may understand the content. Visual organisation strategies, such as sentence starters or cloze exercises provide students with an understanding of what type of answer is expected.

Multiple choice questions can be helpful as students select their answer from a range of choices. This supports the recall of information. Students with LD often struggle with recall of long definitions and will perform better on a matching type task to convey their understanding. Students with significant difficulties can be provided with a limited number of choices

Organisation

Many students find it difficult to stay organised. Below is a selection of strategies that support the strengths for students with Language Disorder to stay organised.

Colour Coding—Colour coding provides additional meaning to otherwise abstract symbols or confusing environments. Colour coding is commonly used in reading, writing and numeracy tasks to provide another layer of meaning to support comprehension.

Visual timetables – Using a visual or icon for each component in a student's timetable supports students who have difficulties with reading and assist their memory.

Graphic Organisers—Graphic organisers that can be used to visualise and organise information. They can be used to express knowledge, concepts and thoughts, or ideas and the relationships between them. Creating a graphic organiser such as a mind map, word web or Venn diagram, conducting this as a whole class is an excellent way to introduce new topics, elicit prior learnings or explore new vocabulary.

Timetable Display – Place an additional copy of a student's timetable somewhere that is easily accessible such as inside the door of the student's diary or locker.

Environment

The classroom environment is one of the most important factors affecting student learning. It should provide clear structure, build opportunities to interact and include strategies to help students succeed. Students learn better when they view the learning environment as positive and supportive. This section of the module will investigate the classroom setting, visual supports and use of assistive technology.

You may like to take a minute to consider your classroom layout. Think about where you stand or sit in relation to the students who show need additional support. If possible, consider placing students needing additional support near your desk or the front of the room.

Distractions – minimise distractions by removing unimportant information from the desk or the classroom.

Sensory Needs – also consider individual sensory needs particularly in relation to movement and noise. Fidget toys can also help some students with Language Disorder to sit and engage for longer period of time. They allow movement without needed to stand up and can be calming

Personal Space – some students may need additional personal space or benefit from a private workstation to use at different times throughout the day. However, it is important to discuss this with the student to ensure that this wouldn't make them feel excluded and that it could be used for all students.

Quiet Area – quiet areas are helpful to have for all students particularly for those with Language Disorder when they require a short break

Structure – Additional structure when sitting can provide clear expectations and enable the student to concentrate on the task at hand. For example, carpet squares or hoops can provide clearer boundaries and expectations about where to sit. Some students may prefer a choice of a chair during that time to help them better attend. Social stories, photos or video modelling will also support the seating expectations such as crossed legs, hands in lap and quite lips

Furniture – Labelled desks and chairs often help students with Language Disorder predict seating expectations. This can be used for regular seating but can also be used to introduced varied seating arrangements. Explicitly teach this change by placing their name or picture on different desks or chairs.

Peer Models – When working in groups consider appropriate peer models. Grids labels or other visuals allow students to quickly identity group compositions and changes an easily be made by moving names or photos.

Classroom Setting

When possible, seat students with Language Disorder close to the main source of information during the lesson, while also easily accessible to support. Minimise distractions by removing unimportant information from the desk or even the classroom. Also consider individual sensory needs, particularly in relation to movement and noise. Fidget toys can also help some students with Language Disorder sit and engage for longer periods of time. They allow movement without needing to stand up and can be calming. Some students may need additional personal space or benefit from a private workstation to use at different times throughout the day. However, it is important to discuss this with the students to ensure this wouldn't make them feel excluded and could

be used for all students. Quiet areas are helpful to have for all students, particular those with Language Disorder when they need a short break.

Providing additional structure when sitting can provide clear expectations and enable the student to concentrate on the task at hand. For example, masking tape, carpet squares or hoops can provide clearer boundaries and expectations about where to sit. Some students may prefer a choice of a chair during mat time to help them better attend. Social stories, photos or video modelling will also support the seating expectations, such as crossed legs, hands in lap and quiet lips.

Labelled desks and chairs often help students with Language Disorder predict their seating expectations. This can be used for regular seating but can also be used to introduce varied seating arrangements. Explicitly teach this change by placing their name or picture on different desks.

When working in groups, consider appropriate peer models. Grids, labels, or other visuals allow students to quickly identify group compositions and changes can be made easily by moving names or photos.

Remember, positively reinforce all improvements with seating in the classroom.

Visual supports enable students to learn, understand and use language more easily. Visual supports may be used at a whole class level or individualised for particular students.

Incorporating visual supports in the classroom can assist behaviour management, reinforce structures and routines, and promote greater independence.

Visual schedules are particularly useful for structuring tasks and managing time. A visual schedule can reduce students' stress, anxiety or confusion when working in unfamiliar environments as well as to increase their independence and task initiation.

When implementing visual supports, it is important to use consistent symbols, pictures or icons. Remember these need to be individualised for the student and specific to the classroom setting. Many uses for visual supports have been discussed in this module, however there are lots of other types of visual supports to help students with Language Disorder.

For more information on visual supports, please see our SALDA handout at the end of the module.

Assistive Technology can be critical for students with Language Disorder to be able to understand and express their ideas.

Text-to-speech software – For students who have difficulties with reading, text-to-speech software enables them to access information that would otherwise be inaccessible. This is particularly beneficial during research tasks. Many internet browsers have built-in text to speech functionality, as do devices such as computers and iPads.

There are also a number of apps and software programs that can be purchased to support text-to-speech. Electronic scanning pens quickly decode text and are easily portable.

Speech-to-text software – For students who have difficulties with writing, speech-to-text software enables them to dictate information which is then converted into typed text by a computer or device. Students require training to use this software successfully and it may not be as appropriate for students with speech sound disorders.

Predictive writing software – Predictive writing software can be extremely helpful for students who have difficulties with spelling and/or sentence generation. There are many commercial apps available for devices, in addition to computer software programs. There are also some free options available within internet browsers. Some programs enable customisable word banks and topic dictionaries to further support writing.

Augmentative and Alternative Communication - Augmentative and alternative communication (AAC) is an umbrella term to encompass communication methods used to supplement or replace speech or writing. These systems are very diverse from low tech to high tech and individualised for the student. For more information on the students augmentative and alternative communication please speak with a speech-language pathologist.

Reflection

I invite you to take a minute to reflect. Consider the content covered so far. How has your understanding of the implications of Language Disorder changed? Could you identify a range of communication, curriculum and environment strategies to use at school? What strategies could you put in place for the students in your classroom?

When you're ready to move on click the next button.

Conclusion

We hope you have a greater understanding of classroom strategies for students with Language Disorder and have some practical ideas you could put in place. While these strategies will support students with Language Disorder, they also have the advantage of benefiting all students in the classroom.