

## Expressive Language: Talking

The ability to talk during class time is a basic skill that enables students to be effective learners and to participate fully in classroom learning situations. Students with receptive and/or expressive language difficulties may experience major challenges when it comes to participating verbally in school. This may be due to a variety of reasons, including:

| LANGUAGE DELAY OR DISORDER  | OTHER FACTORS  |
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| <p>Gaps or delays in <b>receptive language development</b>. If a student doesn't understand the language of a discussion, he/she is at a disadvantage when it comes to participating in classroom talk. Think about what it's like to be in a room surrounded by people who speak a foreign language. All of the student's mental energy is being spent on trying to <b>understand</b> the discussion, and little energy may be left for formulating and expressing his/her own thoughts.</p> | <p><b>Auditory Attention, Auditory Memory, Auditory Processing, and General Attention.</b> Disruptions in any of these areas will have an impact on the ability to participate effectively in verbal exchanges.</p>  |
| <p><b>Expressive vocabulary</b> issues, due to either:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• lack of vocabulary knowledge</li> <li>• difficulty with retrieval of words that are known</li> </ul>  | <p><b>Speech Sound Production (Articulation).</b> An inability to produce clear speech can interfere with effective communication. Students with this issue may feel frustrated and embarrassed when others don't understand them.</p>   |
| <p>Difficulty formulating <b>sentence structures</b> that express the student's intended meaning adequately and effectively.</p>  | <p><b>Dysfluent Speech (Stuttering):</b> Students who stutter may feel too embarrassed about their stuttering to participate actively.</p>   |
| <p>Difficulty with <b>higher level language (discourse)</b>, which affects the ability to relay a sequence of events, tell a story or convey more complex and abstract information in an organized manner.</p>  | <p><b>Cultural issues:</b> Cultural background can influence the student's comfort and willingness to participate in classroom talking situations.</p>   |
| <p>Difficulty in the <b>social aspects of talking</b>, such as:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• participating in the communicative exchange</li> <li>• responding on topic</li> <li>• looking at the listener while speaking; waiting one's turn to speak</li> <li>• interpreting facial expression, body language and tone of voice</li> <li>• generating a balance of questions and comments (i.e. using language to inquire as well as to inform)</li> </ul>                  | <p><b>Emotional issues:</b> Students with communication disorders sometimes feel too embarrassed to raise their hands and attempt to communicate for fear of displaying their shortcomings. They may avoid participation in class. It also might seem more acceptable to say "I don't know" than to produce an incorrect response.</p> <p><b>Second Language Learning:</b> During the initial phases of second language learning, there may be a silent period. This normally lasts for 2 to 6 months for someone who is immersed in their second language full-time. If the student is only exposed to his/her second language during part of their school day, which is the case for students in</p> |

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| Quebec, the silent period can last longer, but should not persist too much beyond 6 months. |
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A student may present with any of the above difficulties in isolation or in combination. For example, some students may only have difficulty with word retrieval. Other students, such as those with autism spectrum disorders or global developmental delays (i.e. delays affecting many areas of development, including cognitive, motor, social-emotional, etc.), may be affected by a number of elements listed above.

It can be very difficult to determine why a student is not participating in classroom talk, particularly if they rarely do! The following are strong indicators that a student is not participating in class discussion because of a language-based problem, particularly when these are observed **consistently**:

- The student's answers to questions are frequently incorrect. The student does not produce the expected vocabulary or proper names in his/her answers. The student frequently uses nonspecific words, such as *thing*, *stuff* and *whatever*, even in academic situations.
- The student seems to get blocked, gropes around for the word, appears frustrated and says things like: *I know it but I can't think of it right now* or *It's on the tip of my tongue*. This is evidence of word retrieval difficulties.
- The student's answers are less elaborate than expected. When asked to define, explain or describe a concept, their verbal output is inadequate. For example, if the teacher asks a Secondary 1 student to talk about the Holocaust, he might say something like: *There was a war and a lot of people were killed*. This answer is nonspecific and could apply to any war in history.
- The student's answers contain grammatical errors when his/her answers are expressed in sentences.
- The student's answers seem disorganized and are difficult to follow if he/she attempts to produce a longer, more elaborate response.
- The student is frequently off-topic in his/her responses.
- The student invariably responds with "I don't know" or doesn't respond at all.
- The student sits quietly at the back of the class and hopes you will not notice him/her. Look out for secondary students wearing hoodies over their heads!
- The student acts out or deliberately provides an incorrect response to provoke a reaction from peers. This may be to distract everyone, including the student him/herself, from the inability to produce a correct response.
- The student will do anything to avoid giving an oral presentation, even feigning death, if need be.

Most students are very aware that they are having difficulty expressing themselves verbally and this is a source of distress to them. After all, speaking in front one's peers is like being on stage, especially during the mid-elementary years and beyond, when classmates' opinions matter very much.

The ability to answer questions and to be articulate is a sign of intellectual competence. It allows a student to show what he/she knows....or doesn't know. Out of compassion, many teachers tend to develop the habit of not including these students in discussions. Their purpose is to avoid putting the student "on the spot." However, as with listening difficulties, it is critically important to identify and acknowledge the difficulty and work with the student to develop compensatory strategies so that the student can feel more successful about his/her communication abilities. Once students stop participating in classroom talk, they begin to lose out on learning opportunities and may soon disengage from learning altogether.

## **CLASSROOM STRATEGIES and ADAPTATIONS**

### **Addressing Language-Based Expressive Challenges**

Classroom teachers may implement a variety of strategies to facilitate oral communication in the classroom when a student may be having language-based challenges. For example the teacher may:

- Incorporate "wait time." Allow the student a few seconds (three to five seconds is recommended) to respond. Many students, especially those with language disorders, will appreciate having some time to process the question and formulate their response. These students do not perform well under time pressure.
- If the student doesn't respond after three to five seconds, or provides an incorrect answer, be prepared to repeat your question, and if required, reduce its grammatical complexity. There is a developmental sequence for the understanding of *wh*-questions (see [http://www.emsb.qc.ca/centreofexcellence/pdf/childdevelopmentinfo.com-Language\\_Development\\_In\\_Children.pdf](http://www.emsb.qc.ca/centreofexcellence/pdf/childdevelopmentinfo.com-Language_Development_In_Children.pdf)). The student may not be successful in answering the question(s) because he/she does not understand the vocabulary or sentence structure of the question. For example, "How many years will elapse before the next lunar eclipse?" is more grammatically complex than: "When will the next lunar eclipse occur?" This makes a big difference to an individual with language delays.
- Pay close attention to the types of questions you are asking. Questions can be closed in the sense that there is only one answer, usually a fact or a detail (e.g. *What color is the main character's hair? Where did the dog go after his bath?*). Questions can be open in the sense that the answer may not be simple or concrete (e.g. *Tell me about.....; Why did he think.....; How do you know that.....*). Open questions are extremely difficult for students with language difficulties as they tend to be abstract and require more sophisticated language skills. Many of your students will need to be supported to answer them effectively. The support could include:
  - Modeling a response.
  - Modelling the *process* of generating a response. In this case, the teacher thinks aloud every step of formulating an answer. It would be beneficial to have the whole class

participate in the process, and even better, if this is done on a daily basis so that students may have adequate exposure to this type of question and the manner in which it could be answered.

Try not to shy away from asking open-ended questions, even for students who have significant difficulties with language functioning. High expectations coupled with appropriately supported responses can lead to better outcomes for all students. Also, bear in mind that open-ended questions come in varying levels of difficulty.

- In addition to repeating the question, you may assist the student with generating a correct response by using the following prompting techniques:
  - Forced choice alternative: *Dylan, which planet is closest to the sun, Mercury or Pluto?*
  - Provide sound (phonemic) cueing: *Jackie, the planet that is closest to the sun is M...*
  - Show the student a picture that is associated with the subject matter in some way. (e.g. show a picture of the solar system and point to the planet in question if needed).
  - Simply provide the answer and move on. You may then decide to ask the student the same question at some later point in time to provide a second opportunity to respond.
  - A combination of the preceding techniques may be necessary. For example, you may pair a visual with a sound cue.
  
- If the student's answer contains grammatical errors, provide a corrected response naturally and move on. This gives the student the opportunity to hear the sentence structure in its correct form. For example, if the student says "The dog eated three cookie," the teacher may respond with "Yes, Frankie, that's right, the dog ate three cookies."
  
- If the student's answer is incomplete or unelaborated, model the process of generating a more complete answer so that he/she can have a sense of what is required.
  
- Let the student know in advance that you will be asking him/her a question about a certain topic to allow the student some time to prepare a response. You can even print the question out for the student if he/she is a reader.
  
- Have students discuss questions with each other in pairs or small groups. This eliminates the pressure to perform in front of the whole class.
  
- If the student is avoidant of oral presentations, allow the option to present to a smaller group of friends, you (the teacher) or have a friendly peer sit or stand near the fearful presenter. You may have to focus on one goal at a time with the student over the course of the year, starting with standing in front of the class and showing his/her pre-recorded presentation, then one sentence per slide/visual, etc. Pedagogical flexibility will sometimes help the student experience success in small steps and overcome his/her fears.

The preceding strategies and techniques are meant to address the expressive communication needs of students with language difficulties. They will also be helpful for students with auditory memory, attention and processing issues, as well as those with attention difficulties. All of the strategies above serve to facilitate correct responding in a natural and supportive manner.

### **Addressing Speech Errors and Dysfluent Speech**

Students with unclear speech and dysfluent speech (stuttering) also require special care in classroom speaking situations. In these cases the following is recommended:

- If the student's speech contains errors, provide a corrected model in a natural manner. For example, if the student says, "Yook at the wed cow!" the teacher may respond with "Yes, I'm looking at the red car. It's a beauty." If your student is over the age of 7 and still producing speech sound errors, he/she should be referred to a speech-language pathologist for evaluation. Please see the developmental chart on this website for guidelines:  
[http://www.emsb.qc.ca/centreofexcellence/pdf/childdevelopmentinfo.com-Language\\_Development\\_In\\_Children.pdf](http://www.emsb.qc.ca/centreofexcellence/pdf/childdevelopmentinfo.com-Language_Development_In_Children.pdf).
- For students who stutter, there are many general strategies that may be employed, including:
  - Allowing wait time.
  - Not speaking for the student.
  - Not looking away while the student is in a moment of stuttering.
  - Expecting the student to participate in classroom speaking situations to the best of his/her ability.
  - Focusing on **what** the student says not on **how** he/she says it.
  - Sensitizing classmates to the issue of stuttering.

The following websites may be consulted for more strategies to help students with fluency disorders function well in your classroom:

- <http://www.stutteringhelp.org/notes-teacher-child-who-stutters-school>
- <http://www.mnsu.edu/comdis/kuster/InfoPWDS/studentwhostutters.html>

### **Addressing Cultural Factors**

As for **cultural** issues, it is important to be aware of the student's background to better understand his/her communication behaviours. For example, in some cultures, it is unacceptable for children to speak to adults. It is important to be sensitive to the possibility that specific cultural issues may be at play. The student may adapt to the culture of the classroom over time. In the meantime, it is advisable to use the scaffolding strategies described above and be vigilant in observing the student in all settings to determine if the he/she might also be experiencing issues relevant to second language

learning, as well as language delay. It is always possible that all three are impacting on the child's communicative performance, as well as other factors, such as attention problems.

**Addressing Challenges Associated with Second Language Learning**

Related to the cultural factors is the issue of second language learning. Typically developing second language learners pass through a series of stages that last approximately 5 to 7 years. This is the length of time it takes to achieve the ability to communicate effectively for academic purposes. Additionally, it must be remembered that not only is the student learning a second language, he/she is learning academic skills and knowledge in that second language. In Quebec, this may apply to a third language as well. If the child's development in his/her mother tongue is proceeding in a typical manner, this should not be problematic. However, difficulties with language acquisition in the students' mother tongue guarantee difficulties in the acquisition of a second and third language. In these cases, students will certainly require extra support to communicate to the best of their ability at school.

If classroom teachers implement the strategies described above in their daily teaching practices, they can be confident that they're providing a learning environment for optimal language growth and learning.

**Online Speech-Language Resources for Teachers**

The speech-language pathologists of the English Montreal School Board have compiled a list of online resources that provide quality information about instructional and/or intervention practices that address the needs of students with speech and language challenges. These websites are not listed in any particular order. You are encouraged to explore them with a view to choosing the ones that serve your particular needs. The lists will be updated on an ongoing basis, so keep visiting our site!

**ONLINE SPEECH AND LANGUAGE RESOURCES**

| DESCRIPTION           | WEBLINK  |
|-----------------------|--|
| General Language      | <a href="http://www.speechlanguage-resources.com/">http://www.speechlanguage-resources.com/</a><br><a href="http://www.languageisheartosay.com/resources/">http://www.languageisheartosay.com/resources/</a><br><a href="http://www.speech2teach.com.com/p1.htm">http://www.speech2teach.com.com/p1.htm</a><br><a href="http://www.teachersites.schoolworld.com/webpages/TSantore-Goodman/index.cfm">http://www.teachersites.schoolworld.com/webpages/TSantore-Goodman/index.cfm</a><br><a href="http://www.speech-language-therapy.com/">http://www.speech-language-therapy.com/</a><br><a href="http://www.talkingpoint.org.uk/Parent/Directory/Free%20Resources%20for%20Professionals.aspx">http://www.talkingpoint.org.uk/Parent/Directory/Free%20Resources%20for%20Professionals.aspx</a><br><a href="http://www.mnsu.edu/comdis/kuster2/sptherapy.html">http://www.mnsu.edu/comdis/kuster2/sptherapy.html</a><br><a href="http://www.minedu.govt.nz/~media/MinEdu/Files/EducationSectors/SpecialEducation/PublicationsResources/MuchMoreThanWordsFA5.pdf">http://www.minedu.govt.nz/~media/MinEdu/Files/EducationSectors/SpecialEducation/PublicationsResources/MuchMoreThanWordsFA5.pdf</a> |
| Language Difficulties | <a href="http://www.speech-language-therapy.com/pdf/aPatchellHand1993.pdf">http://www.speech-language-therapy.com/pdf/aPatchellHand1993.pdf</a>  |

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| at the Secondary Level  |   |
| Social Language   | <a href="http://www.jillkuzma.wordpress.com">http://www.jillkuzma.wordpress.com</a>   |
| Second Language Acquisition   | <a href="http://www.asha.org/public/speech/development/second.htm">http://www.asha.org/public/speech/development/second.htm</a>   |
| Website for emergent language development (toddler level)                 | <a href="http://www.teachmetotalk.com">www.www.teachmetotalk.com</a><br>N.B. Although this website targets early language development, the information and strategies may also be applied to young school-age children with severe language delays. |
| List of 100 best websites in the area of speech-language                  | <a href="http://www.onlinespeechpathologyprograms.net/speech-sites/">http://www.onlinespeechpathologyprograms.net/speech-sites/</a>   |
| Speech-Language Therapy Materials (many can be adapted for classroom use) | <a href="http://www.mnsu.edu/comdis/kuster2/spttherapy.html">http://www.mnsu.edu/comdis/kuster2/spttherapy.html</a>   |