ITA
International Teachers Association

Module 13: Language and Literacy

This module explores language and literacy as it relates to children and young people with SEN

What you will learn in this module:

13.1. Language Acquisition Issues

13.2. Language Acquisition Intervention

13.3. Literacy for Students with Special Needs

13.4. Literacy Skill Building

13.5. Interaction Between Reading and Writing

13.1 Language Acquisition Issues

Those with Special Educational Needs may have issues with language acquisition. For some children, language acquisition difficulties will be at the core of their impairment rather than stemming from another disorder. This is known as a primary impairment. Other children will experience difficulty with language acquisition as a result of another disorder or condition. This is known as a secondary impairment.

The difficulties experienced in language acquisition are differentiated into the categories of speech, language, and communication as defined below.

- Speech – the ability to enunciate the sounds that are the building blocks of verbal communication.
- Language – the ability to comprehend words and meanings when arranged in sentences.
- Communication – the ability to use language to facilitate interaction with others. This category may be further broken down into:
  - Expressive communication – the ability to form sentences that make sense to others.
  - Receptive communication – the ability to understand language used by others.

13.1.1 Examples

Those with SEN may experience difficulties in one, some, or all of the categories outlined in the previous section.

Example 1

Adam is a non-verbal child on the autism spectrum. He is able to communicate via the written word and responds to verbal instruction. He may have issues with speech and expressive aspects of communication, but not language or receptive communication. Adam's issues are part of a **secondary impairment.**

Example 2

Sophie, a child with Down Syndrome, has trouble with constructing grammatical sentences. She speaks in what are known as telegraphic utterances e.g. 'went shop Mom' instead of 'I went shopping with my Mom on Saturday', which shows a difficulty with expressive communication. Her slow vocabulary development illustrates issues with 'language' and difficulty with clear pronunciation is a 'speech' issue. Sophie's issues are part of a **secondary impairment.**

Example 3

Talia, a child with no other known SEN, uses cluster reduction in her speech. Saying 'sock' instead of 'shock' and 'sash' instead of 'splash', reducing a cluster of sounds 'sh' or 'spl into a single sound 's'. This continues beyond early childhood, highlighting the possibility of a phonological process disorder. Talia's issues are part of a **primary impairment.**

13.1.2 Effects of Language Acquisition Issues

The effects of language acquisition issues are wide ranging and can affect all aspects of life. Here we explore the difficulties children with SEN might face as a result of these issues.

Educational Effects:

- An inability to comprehend or follow instructions may lead to disciplinary measures against the child or poorly or incorrectly completed work; decreasing educational outcomes.
- An inability to express ideas or understanding makes accurate assessment of knowledge problematic for teachers.
- A difficulty with mastering grammar may lead to lower educational outcomes.

- A difficulty with phonics, decoding and comprehension will lead to problems when trying to learn to read successfully.
- A difficulty with decontextualized language – language which is not connected to physical objects in the room but to more abstract or remote concepts – becomes more of a problem as education continues.
- All the difficulties listed above might lead to continuous experiences of failure, a misjudgment by educators of the child's understanding and capabilities, and disciplinary action. Low teacher expectations and negative experiences can cause students with SEN to consider themselves as 'dumb' or 'stupid', affecting their perceptions about their ability to achieve. This might lead to academic disengagement.

Social Effects:

- Speech and language difficulties can lead to problems with self-expression, which in turn may lead to social problems. A study in the Encyclopedia of Language and Literacy Development found that many children with language issues felt insecure about expressing their likes and dislikes to their peers. This leads to a decrease in social activity and an increase in isolation.
- Children with language issues are more likely to show signs of aggression in social interactions, causing harm in the development of personal relationships.
- Communication and comprehension issues will hinder a child's ability to understand conflict, verbalize their feelings and experiences, and become proficient in conflict resolution. This hinders social success.

Cognitive Effects:

- Short term memory function is based on 'silent speech' (verbal thought) and depends on language development. Thus, short term memory is likely to be less developed in those with language acquisition issues.
- Long term memory functions such as recall and storage depend on grouping items into similar categories, and concepts which are in turn dependent on meanings that language communicates. Long term memory issues are likely to be less developed in those with problems acquiring language.
- Memory impairments such as these can affect social relationships, and especially educational outcomes.

13.2. Language Acquisition Intervention

This section will discuss interventions and strategies used by educators, parents and therapists to aid language acquisition in children with SEN.

13.2.1 Speech and Language Therapy

Speech and Language Therapists (known as SALTs or SLTs) work in a wide range of settings to assist children with speech, language, and communication either on a one-to-one or group basis. These include school settings, such as mainstream schools (taking children out of lessons or breaks for therapy sessions), and special schools. Therapists are also known to work in hospitals providing services for inpatients and outpatients. Other common workplaces include community health centers, children's centers and assessment units. Speech and Language Therapists might also offer therapy to children in their homes.

The therapist is tasked with creating a program for the child to improve their communication skills and language acquisition. To devise the program, and to incorporate relevant activities, SALTs will begin by assessing the child's existing skills. This will allow them to identify strengths and weaknesses in speech, language, and communication.

Examples of Speech and Language Therapy Activities

Example 1

Adam, from section 3.1.1, can communicate via the written word, and respond to verbal instruction; but does not talk.

A Speech and Language Therapist might engage him in the following activities:

- Using a written text as a starting point to help Adam begin to talk.
- Developing a series of hand signals or using Makaton or sign language to help Adam communicate when there is no opportunity to write.

Example 2

Sophie, from section 3.1.1, has slow vocabulary development, and difficulty with clear pronunciation. She uses telegraphic utterances rather than correct grammar.

A Speech and Language Therapist might engage her in the following activities:

- Teaching Sophie better pronunciation by modeling effective mouth movements to elicit clear sounds.
- Working on vocabulary development by introducing new words and learning them through repetition, and playing matching games with pictures.
- Teaching correct grammar by using sequencing exercises to tell stories.

3.2.2 Family Intervention

Some general recommendations are made for parents of children between birth and four years old to encourage language acquisition.

Birth to Two Years

Most recommendations during this phase focus on imitation. Parents are advised to imitate their baby's facial expressions and laughter. Also, try to elicit imitation in the baby for behaviors such as clapping hands, playing finger games such as peek-a-boo and pat-a-cake, blowing kisses, waving goodbye, and producing sounds such as 'da', 'ba' and 'ma'. Parents are also advised to imitate their baby's vocalizations with varied pitch and elaborations, turning 'Mama' into 'Mama is here with you', for example.

Acknowledging and encouraging social contact is also emphasized. Parents are encouraged to respond to their baby's eye contact with speech, to reply to any babbling or vocalization, and to talk to the baby whenever possible. Reading to children is also advised.

Two to Four Years

The advice given to parents of children in the two to four year age range is primarily focused on developing verbal skills, and using words to construct sentences.

Parents are encouraged to model proper speech for their young children, using complete, adult-level sentences wherever possible, even in conversation with their young children. Using baby talk is discouraged unless it is accompanied by an adult alternative.

Parents can expand single words or phrases said by their young child to create complete sentences. A child who says 'want to go' will be responded to by their parents in a full sentence, for example, 'Do you want to go over there?' Parents can also encourage their young children to develop sentences by providing pictures, and asking the child to tell them a story using the pictures.

Vocabulary can be expanded through games, word activities, books, audiobooks and even movies. Learning songs is also encouraged to foster language development.

13.3. Literacy for Students with Special Needs

13.3.1 Differentiation

The Training and Development Agency for Schools defines differentiation as:

'*The process by which differences between learners are accommodated so that all students in a group have the best possible chance of learning.*'

Children with Special Educational Needs are likely to have a statement prepared by the local educational authority that details how their differences will impact their education and what supports need to be put in place for each child to learn effectively.

It is up to teachers to use this information, in conjunction with their own knowledge of the child, to create differentiated materials and instruction. This means that all learning resources and teaching methods must be tailored to ensure that effective learning takes place. They will also need to differentiate task, pace, outcome and assessment.

Differentiated Instruction For Literacy.

In mainstream schools, the wide requirements of children with Special Educational Needs are usually overseen by a Special Educational Needs Coordinator (SENCO).

SENCOs are responsible for coordinating SEN Assistants and Teaching Assistants who support children with SEN. Classroom teachers are responsible for providing differentiated materials and instruction, and directing the activities of SEN and Teaching Assistants within the classroom.

Differentiated instruction might be delivered in a number of ways:

- The class teacher delivers instruction at every level of understanding.
- A SEN Assistant is assigned to a child with SEN, and becomes responsible for one-to-one instruction.
- The class is divided by ability into small groups, and receive separate instruction given either by a teacher, a SEN, or Teaching Assistant.
- The instruction is offered through a computer program or software package set to their ability level.

Differentiated Materials For Literacy

Materials such as worksheets, homework materials, and instruction materials should be differentiated to become accessible to students with SEN. The way they are differentiated depends on the particular difficulties, and strengths of each child. Text, imaging, presentation, color, font, format, wording, and content can be changed to facilitate an optimal learning experience.

For example, it is common practice to provide materials of a highly visual nature to learners on the autism spectrum, because of their strength in visual processing. White sheets of paper are often substituted for colored sheets in the case of dyslexic learners as the harsh contrast between black print and white paper is known to decrease readability.

13.3.2 Encouraging Reading In SEN Students

The National Literacy Trust says that:

Developing fun, multisensory activities that are based on the pupils' interests is key to encouraging inclusivity and making reading enjoyable and memorable.

In addition to offering differentiated instruction, the Trust tells schools that encouraging reading, for enjoyment among SEN pupils, should be part of educational provision in order to break down barriers to literacy that SEN can create. It offers the following practical ideas:

- **Create 'buddy' relationships** whereby an older child with reading difficulties helps a younger child with their reading.
- **Provide multisensory activities** that utilize props, visuals, and active participation in order to tell stories. Dressing up, acting out stories, and interactive quizzes are popular choices.
- **Ensure that all SEN pupils have clearly defined roles** in reading activities and events.
- **Ask SEN pupils to become reading role** models and carry out reading activities to encourage other students to read for enjoyment.
- **Create opportunities for SEN students** to link their skills, interests, and talents with reading. This might involve them painting a picture for a book report, reading about a special interest topic or creating worksheets for younger students. Creating positive associations with literacy can improve learning outcomes.
- Many children with dyslexia can be involved in creating ideas for events and activities as they are skilled at seeing the 'big picture'.

13.4. Literacy Skill Building

13.4.1 Handwriting

Difficulty with fine motor skills (small movements that use the small muscle of the fingers, wrists, toes, lips and tongue) is a common struggle for many children with Special Educational Needs. ADHD, Down Syndrome and Autism are all connected with poor fine motor skills. For children to master handwriting, teachers may have to implement additional activities and strategies to improve fine motor skills to a sufficient level.

These can include activities such as action songs that use fine motor actions such as waggling of the fingers or precise finger movements in order to 'warm up' the fingers in preparation for writing. This has become known as 'finger gym' and may include diverse activities which promote fine motor skills and hand-eye coordination. Such activities may include threading beads, pegging clothes pegs on the rim of a cup, popping bubble wrap, and joining paper clips together.

These activities might be undertaken before writing, at another designated time of day, or at both times.

13.4.3 Comprehension

The Rose review in 2006 that triggered the widespread adoption of synthetic phonics (as discussed in 3.4.2) read:

It is an obvious truth that the goal of reading is comprehension and that skilled reading involves understanding as well as decoding text. In short, learning to read progresses to reading effortlessly. The teaching of beginner readers requires an understanding of the processes that underpin this progression.

A 'star' tool with the five points: Visual, Relevance, Creative Development, Organization, and Emotion is used to teach comprehension skills. Each of these points can be utilized with SEN learners to ensure comprehension of text, and reading in the following ways:

Visual – Drawings may be used to present a text in a pictorial or even comic form to help the student understand the order of events. These may be drawn by the teacher or by students. Puppets or plays can be used.

Relevance – Three steps are used to identify inferred information and deductive text.

Creative Development – Learning is mapped in a creative form, giving a visual representation of progress and understanding.

Organization – The six questions what, who, where, when, why and how? are answered using flow diagrams, sticky-notes and mind maps.

Emotion – The emotions of the characters and the student as the reader are identified, discussed, and explored using emotions charts or pictures.

13.5. Interaction Between Reading and Writing

It has been found that reading instruction and writing instruction are more effective when delivered in tandem.

13.5.1 Skills Overlap

Many of the skills that are used in reading are used in writing and vice versa.

- Phonics skills are improved through writing and reading, one reinforcing the other, illustrating that these processes are intimately connected. Phonics skills such as decoding and chunking are used in both reading and writing, though in different ways – writing requires construction of words through phonics blending while reading requires breaking down words.
- Writing reinforces a left to right reading direction, something which can be problematic for some children with SEN to grasp.
- Writing, and particularly the large motor movements e.g. drawing letter in sand, that come before fine motor writing, introduce the letter to the child's motor memory which improves sound-letter recognition.
- Writing, especially when the content is provided by the student, requires an understanding of meaning before the technical aspects of phonics are explored. This can promote reading comprehension.

13.5.2 Expression And Comprehension

The basis of using the written and printed word as a communicative tool includes both expression, or creating meaning through writing, and reading or receiving meaning through comprehension.

Even if children with SEN are unable to read and write in conventional ways, offering them tools that allow them to create meaning and expression, and opportunities to receive meaning and develop comprehension, can enhance their depth of experience with literacy.

Tools for expression and creating meaning include:

- Making books. These could be picture or comic books accompanied by simple dictated text, text composed by the student, or printed text. This is recommended by the Northern Ireland Department for Education. 'It provides a wealth of opportunities to further explore concepts about print… Bookmaking provides opportunities to consolidate many early reading behaviors.'
- Using existing pictures to create sentences.

Tools for developing comprehension include:

- Reading picture stories and comics, and discussing what was read.
- Reading traditional books in one-to-one, individual, and group settings then discussing what was read.
- Listening to audiobooks.

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